

I Samuel

Lesson 9 - Chapter 6 and 7

When we finished up 1st Samuel chapter 5 last week the Philistine people were still in possession of the precious Israelite Ark of the Covenant; but by now they wished they had never laid eyes upon it.

No doubt the Philistines had confiscated many an idol or sacred artifact from a defeated enemy and brought it home to set in submission to its own gods whom they were sure were not only superior but also provided them with their victory; but this time something was going terribly wrong.

The foolish and apostate leadership of Israel, secular and priestly, had (without consulting the Lord) decided to take on the Philistines in battle near a place called Even-ezer and were soundly thumped, losing 4000 soldiers. Thinking they could reverse their fortunes and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by more directly involving their Israelite God, Yehoveh, they ordered that the Ark of the Covenant be brought from its proper resting place in the Tabernacle at Shiloh to the site of the battle. The presence of the Ark brought shouts of joy from the worried Israelite soldiers and moans of doom from the formerly confident Philistines who figured that with the unexpected arrival of the God of Israel the battle was as good as won for the Hebrews. They were all proved to be wrong.

The Ark was indeed a glorious sight, and it was also the Lord's footstool (when He chose to inhabit it). But God was hardly a genie imprisoned in a bottle who was shuttled around merely to do the bidding of his human masters. We have been advised in numerous Torah passages that WHEN God wished to speak to His people He would descend into the Holy of Holies and hover above the Mercy Seat, the lid to the Ark; apparently what arrived at the battlefield was a golden box devoid of the divine presence and so Israel was slaughtered to the tune of 30,000 dead. But even worse, the two priests sent to attend the Ark (the sons of the High Priest Eli, Hophni and Pinchas) were also killed. Yet that paled in comparison to the Philistines' capture of the Ark of God. The shock of that news was so great that it caused Eli to tumble over backwards from his chair and break his neck; and for his daughter in law to be suddenly seized with premature and abnormal labor and die in childbirth.

The nation of Philistia was characterized by a renowned 5 city confederacy, each city with its own Lord or King. The Ark arrived first at Ashdod where the Philistine Temple of Dagon stood, and there the Ark was unceremoniously deposited in a position of submission before the Dagon statue. The next day the statue of Dagon was found fallen over prostrate before the Ark. After re-erecting it the priests arrived the following morning not only to find the god-idol on its face again, but its head and hands severed from its body. Then a plague of some kind of

tumors or swellings (perhaps like boils) broke out among the people of Ashdod. The Philistine Lord of Ashdod thought it might be best to move this Ark to another city (away from Dagon) and so sent it on to Gat, where upon its arrival the same plague of tumors immediately began to afflict Gat's residents. By now the news had spread of what happened everywhere the Ark of God showed up and when the Ark was dispatched to yet a 3rd Philistine city the people howled in protest that they didn't want that thing anywhere near them.

It was becoming obvious to all that the only solution was to remove the Ark of the Israelite God from Philistine territory entirely, but that would have been the worst sort of humiliation for the Philistines to be forced into returning the Ark back to their enemy, Israel; thus they tried all manner of other options (by moving it from city to city) to avoid it. But the leaders of Philistia came to realize that even if it might have seemed so with their resounding military victory at Even-ezer they had in no way defeated the Lord God of Israel. There was little choice but to return it and see if they could find a way to appease this God who was doing to them at will what He had done nearly 4 centuries earlier to the Egyptian populace.

We're going to read 1st Samuel chapters 6 and 7 consecutively today to continue the story. But before we do that I would like to make a brief comment on very astute question that I was asked by a couple of people following last week's lesson. And the question was, "how is it that the Philistines were able to handle the Ark of the Covenant and not be instantly killed by God"? And of course the reason for that question is because in Leviticus Israel is instructed that only a certain clan of Levites is authorized to carry the Ark and only certain Priests authorized to pack and unpack the Ark can attend to it. Otherwise the violator will be instantly struck down dead and of course in a later story concerning the Ark and King David that is exactly what happens. How were the Philistines able to handle it and live?

The reason I want to address this issue is that it demonstrates a key God-principle that we and all of our Christian brothers and sisters would do well to apprehend. It is that **ONLY** those who are joined to Israel's covenants are subject to the **TERMS** of those covenants. In other words, the curses and the blessings that come with our membership in the Kingdom of God are only for we members and not for outsiders. The relationship between Yehoveh and His people is established through His covenants; those who have **not** signed on to those covenants have no relationship with the Lord and thus the terms of those covenants (both positive and negative terms) do not apply to them.

Here is one of the greatest of all Biblical principles: God's Laws are **ONLY** for God's elect. There is (generally speaking) no requirement for a pagan to abide by the 10 Commandments. There is no requirement (and thus no outstanding penalty) for the heathen to avoid worshipping the heavenly bodies; in fact the Bible makes it clear that the Lord put those luminaries in the sky just for that purpose. As I have proclaimed on scores of occasions the Torah, the Law, Jesus Christ (and all the covenants of God with humans) are **ONLY** for those with whom He has covenanted. And the **ONLY** people He has **EVER** created a covenant with were the Hebrews, but He did make provision that those gentiles (foreigners, **ger**) who wished to join themselves to Israel's covenants made with Israel's God would be accepted into the Kingdom of God. Until Yeshua's day that joining had to be a physical joining usually accompanied with a pledge of national allegiance to Israel, even involving circumcision if the

foreign convert was a male. But since Messiah the joining with Israel's covenants by an outsider is a better joining, a spiritual joining, by means of faith in the Jewish Messiah (Yeshua of Nazareth).

Without doubt there is a universal curse placed on all mankind that has NOTHING to do with any covenant: the curse of physical death due to mankind's inherent sin nature as originally caused by our common father Adam. That is something all men share without exception. But when it comes to eternity and spiritual death, there is a way out by means of God's covenants.

You know: a non-Believer is not automatically plagued by the Lord all of his or her days. A pagan is not automatically assumed to expect a worse earthly future than a worshipper of the God of Israel. The rain falls on the wicked and the good. There is NO EARTHLY PENALTY per se for remaining a pagan EXCEPT a) your spiritual destiny is one of assured destruction and b) you will have no relationship with the Godhead and thus you will not be eligible for the special blessings, comfort, direction, protection, and wisdom that such an invaluable relationship brings with it.

The Philistines by definition were pagans and thus not party to God's covenants with Israel. They were NOT among those who were prohibited upon pain of death from touching or looking upon the Ark; but the Israelites were. The Philistines weren't subject to the curses and penalties God ordained for violators of His Law, because they had never agreed to abide by His Torah. In fact, what the Philistines were about to do in returning the Ark was not a requirement of God resulting from any commandment of God; it was merely a pragmatic choice to end God's oppression on them.

Believers, worshippers of Yehoveh, hear me: you HAVE been joined to God's covenants with Israel (even if you hadn't realized it) and therefore you DO have obligations to the Lord. If you begin to be disobedient and it's causing harm to yourself or your relationship with God, you will be divinely disciplined (partly to try to get you back on track) because you are violating the covenant you signed on to. You WILL suffer consequences for violating His Law, because violating His Law was, is, and shall always be called "sin". What else is a sin than violating God's commands? Now as Believers you and I have the benefit of having a Messiah who pays the price for our violations of God's commands, but that doesn't mean it has no effect on us. The point is that a penalty is always due (and is always extracted) when a Believer trespasses (sins) against God; it's just that Yeshua takes our stripes instead of us so often times we don't even feel it.

Of course on this occasion in Samuel's era the Lord decided to show the Philistines His unmatched holiness and power. He is after all the God of all, not only the Hebrews. He displayed His authority not by killing all that looked upon or touched His Ark (because as pagans they weren't enjoined from touching it) but instead by inflicting Egyptian-style plagues upon those who thought they had captured and could subdue the God of Israel.

Let's read 1st Samuel chapters 6 and 7.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTERS 6 AND 7 all

The Philistines were in a panic; the Ark of God had been in their possession for 7 months and most of their nation had been seriously harmed by some mysterious and malevolent power that seemed to come from its mere presence. Because of how people have always operated you can be sure that the everyday common Philistine man and woman blamed these 5 kings for their misery. The number 7 is the ideal number, it means completion; so by saying it had been there 7 months indicated that all that God had intended to do to the Philistines He had accomplished, and largely by their refusal to take the needed action that could rid their nation of these plagues during that 7 month period. Thus verse 2 explains that the Philistine leaders (usually indicating the 5 Lords of the Philistine pentapolis) approached their priests and diviners and asked them NOT how or if to get rid of this thing, but rather in what MANNER it should be returned so as to give proper respect to Yehoveh in hopes He would call off His plagues. And interestingly, scholars note that these pagan priests and diviners seemed to discern just what to do and how to do it because as we read about their solution it generally follows the Levitical law on dealing with God in matters of trespass.

The religious professionals of Philistia advise the Philistine leaders that rule number one is that they can't just return God's footstool without an accompanying gift that is indicative of honor and submission and recognition that God is owed something. The word used for the kind of gift, or offering, that is owed is **'asham**. And if you'll recollect back to our studies of the Levitical Law you'll remember that there were several categories of offerings and sacrifices enumerated, each serving a specific purpose. Since there is no actual direct transliteration to any other language for the Hebrew **'asham**, there have been a number of dynamic translation attempts that usually can be summed up as guilt offering, or reparation offering, or sin offering. But the purpose it is used here fits well with the Torah description for its use, and it seems to revolve around the idea that someone is liable and responsible and therefore at fault in some matter and so a penalty or compensatory payment is due the one who has been harmed. And the one who has been harmed in this Ark incident is God. And the idea is that by paying reparations to God for the people of Philistia being at fault then the oppressing divine consequence is lifted by the properly compensated (and thus appeased) deity.

Thus the question the Philistine lords are asking of their top spiritual advisors is: exactly what penalty and in what form should we pay it in order to appease this god? The Philistines' goal is to be decontaminated by paying a ransom to Yehoveh. And the diviners say that they need to pay 5 gold tumors. Now the CJB and many others say that they need to pay 5 gold tumors AND 5 gold rats (or mice), and that is probably not quite correct. The Hebrew phrase being translated is **va-hamissah akbre zahav**. And the Hebrew word "**va**" can mean either "and" or it can mean "namely" depending on the context. The idea of a total of 10 golden items (5 gold tumors and 5 gold rats) being prepared as a conciliatory gift conflicts with what is actually said in verses 17 and 18 (that there were only 5 gifts total) and so there's been all kinds of interesting gyrations employed to try to reconcile these verses. Also recall from last week that the Hebrew word **ophel** is what is being translated as tumor, but it's more usual use is as mound or swelling or hilltop of some sort. Thus how this probably ought to be read when taken in context is, "5 gold mounds NAMELY 5 gold mice (or rats)". In other words the Philistine priests advise sending 5 mounds or substantial lumps of gold each molded into the shape of a rodent. So we have one very expensive gold item for each of the 5 kings of the 5 Philistine cities sent as reparation, which nicely solves the translation problem.

Thus we find out for the first time that in addition to the painful swellings of the body that we learned of last week, there was also an infestation of (probably) mice, not rats, because they are said to be ruining the fields. Mice infestations were an occasional but regular problem for these ancient cultures. They could multiply like mad seemingly overnight and eat enormous amounts of grain before the damage could be stopped; apparently the Lord attacked the Philistines' flesh and their food supply. It's no wonder they were willing to do anything, suffer any humiliation before their enemy, and pay any price to stop these twin horrors.

And as verse 5 shows, these religious professionals had a greater and more urgent respect for Yehoveh than did the 5 lords because they say that Yehoveh is not only oppressing the Philistine people and their land, but also their gods! They are admitting that the Philistine gods cannot stand up to the God of Israel. And we get a hint (in verse 6) that these spiritual advisors had probably been pleading with the 5 lords to listen to them for quite a while now but to this point it had fallen on deaf ears. After all, these two plagues had been going on for around 7 months (it kind of reminds us Pharaoh's stubbornness) and only now were the Philistine leaders ready to cave in. And so the diviners and priests invoke that same Egyptian memory and tell the Philistine leadership to stop being so hard headed because they can't win this battle against this irresistible god and they surely didn't want to wind up like Egypt did. It's pretty interesting, isn't it, that nearly 4 centuries after it happened, the Philistines (who were in no way involved in the Egyptian affair) were still acutely aware of that infamous happening that history proves put Egypt into a national tailspin for almost 150 years. These Philistine leaders were wise enough and pragmatic enough not to want to see their country decimated any further, and so were willing to concede.

So they've come up with the gift of reparation (5 lumps of gold shaped like mice) but what about the mode of returning the Ark? They were informed enough (and it probably fit with their own cultural concept of how to deal with gods in general any way) to have a new wagon or cart built that had not been used before so that Yehoveh would have no cause to declare it contaminated with uncleanness. Then they would use two milk cows to tow the new cart back to Israelite territory. The choice of two milk cows is interesting. We find in Numbers 19 that the Red Heifer that would be used for a ritual purification concoction had to have never been yoked, and in Deuteronomy 21 that a cow that had never been yoked was needed as a sacrificial beast to atone for an unsolved murder. So the idea that animal that had not been used for work and therefore in some way defiled was familiar to these pagan diviners. But there was yet another reason for this choice.

It is apparent that while the 5 kings and their religious professionals suspected that it was Israel's God that was causing all of these troubles (in an angry response to the Philistines confiscating His Ark) perhaps it was just a coincidence. But how do they go about proving it so they could be certain they were on their way to solving the problem? The cows were the answer. Having never been yoked means not only had these cows not worked, but that they had not been TRAINED to pull a cart. In addition the 2 milk cows that were chosen had young calves. The notion was that if they attached two untrained cows to the cart (meaning that the cows had no idea what to do), and (against nature) the two cows would also leave their nursing and bellowing calves behind and willingly walk away (as a team) pulling a cart along the main

road into Israelite territory, then it could not possibly have been coincidence; it had to be the God of Israel that was directing the whole situation.

Sure enough the cows went straightaway up the road towards the Israelite village of Beit-Shemesh, ignoring the pitiful cries of their calves. But the Philistines leaders were taking no chances, and so they followed the cart with its troublesome cargo from a distance to see what became of it.

Verse 13 explains that the Israelites of Beit-Shemesh (Beit-Shemesh means house of the sun) were in the fields harvesting wheat when they looked up and saw the strange sight of a riderless cart carrying some kind of chest and being pulled by dairy cows. Since it was the wheat harvest season it was around the time of Shavuot, May or June. And once they recognized it was their precious Ark that was being returned to them they were overjoyed. But these weren't just any Israelites; Beit-Shemesh is listed in Joshua 21 as one of the 48 Levitical cities. So at the least many of the residents were Levites. Since they were Levites their first thought was ritual, and so they chopped up the cart for firewood and offered the two milk cows as a sacrifice of thanks. The Philistine leaders watched attentively and when they saw the Ark removed from the cart and the smoke rising up they decided all was well and returned to their cities.

Now verse 18 speaks of this great stone in the field of Joshua the Beit-Shemishite that became a permanent witness (meaning monument) to this amazing event. But even though it doesn't necessarily change anything important in the story that we're aware of, I would like to offer a probable correction that is interesting. At the beginning of our exploration of 1st Samuel I explained that there are many problems with the surviving manuscripts and scrolls of the books of Samuel and Kings, and thus scholars and translators have taken some liberties to suggest that certain difficult renderings of the original Hebrew were misspellings and copyist errors and so they replaced portions of the narrative with what they thought it ought to be. However it seems that what they did was often just a convenient way to solve a problem using their academic credentials as the only proof that their own version was the correct one. We see just such a case in verse 18 about the so-called great rock. What is usually translated as the Ark being laid upon the great rock is literally, "the great platform of Abel". The Hebrew reads, '**ad 'abel haggedolah**'; but some scholars didn't think the word **abel** belonged there so they decided it was a spelling error and changed it to '**eben**'. Obviously Abel is a proper noun, a name, and so almost certainly the meaning of verse 18 is, "As for the **great platform of Abel** on which they laid the Ark of the Lord, it is in the field of Joshua, the Beit-Shemishite, until this day".

But what is also notable, it says in verse 19, is that it was here where Yehoveh struck dead many people of Beit-Shemesh. Again we run into some translation problems. The CJB and others say that 50,070 people died; but what Josephus says and what some manuscripts say, is that 70 people died. This makes far more sense. Beit-Shemesh was a relatively small village and there is zero possibility of 50,000 people living there let alone being killed. Since Hebrew doesn't employ numbers, but rather letters than can be used as numbers, there is no doubt that some kind of corruption has happened here in regard to amount of people who died. But the second issue is: WHY did God kill them? God made the Philistines sick, and he created

havoc with their food supply, but here we have God summarily execute 70 residents of Beit-Shemesh, some or all being Levites. For what crime?

Since we in some ways discussed the principle at work here earlier, let me just summarize by saying that the Levites (or even the regular secular Israelites) were held to an entirely different standard than the Philistines by God. These Levites had no right to even look upon the Ark unless it was fully covered in a protective cloth. In fact there's not even any mention of priests being present, and priests would have been necessary to cover (or uncover) the Ark as well as to offer proper burnt offerings. Further, there was only one clan of Levites permitted to carry the Ark, the clan of Kohath. Thus these enthusiastic Levites began dealing with God's Ark in thoroughly unauthorized ways and instant death for 70 of them was the result. So as you can imagine, they were more than willing to pass the Ark forward to somebody else to deal with, just as the Philistines had done.

So in light of the sudden slaughter of these joyous but careless people, the surviving residents of Beit-Shemesh posed this question among themselves: "Who can stand before Yehoveh, the holy God?" To "stand before" means to attend in an official capacity. In other words, who could attend to the Ark and not get killed doing so? And one has to seriously wonder at this point if so much time had passed since a proper priesthood had existed in Israel and since an era when people consulted the Torah to see what God's laws and ordinances actually were, that even the set-apart Levites didn't know (or care to examine the Law to find out) what priestly office COULD properly attend to the Ark of the Covenant.

There is a sobering lesson here but I hesitate to say it because I don't want to sound cynical or judgmental; but as I look back on my own church experiences, and as I listen to Christian television or read sermons on the Internet, I am flabbergasted at times at what passes for truth. I am still heartsick that I was so willing for so long to gladly gulp watered down and spoiled milk as though it was heavenly manna. All I hear are doctrines, doctrines, and more doctrines and most of them some strange mix of warm fuzzy emotions, current political correctness, and a little bit of Scripture. All I see are obscure bible verses, or parts of verses, lifted out of their context and patched in to a rousing speech to prove some pre-determined agenda of the speaker. Who consults God's Word anymore? And I wonder if God looks down upon His set-apart Church at times in the same way He looked down upon those set-apart Levites at Beit-Shemesh who had all but lost any true knowledge of God's laws and commands and preferred instead to just wing it; people who hope that God's mercy is sufficient to ignore their (our?) blatant lack of reverence, or passivity, or disinterest, or intentional ignorance of His commands, or casual disregard for the infinite holiness of Almighty God. Well I don't wonder any more. Holy Scripture makes it abundantly clear that He doesn't look the other way, He keeps a record of it all and some day we're each going to have to stand before His throne and answer for it. Thank God we have a Messiah to bear for us what those 70 Levites had to bear upon themselves for a cavalier indifference. But that doesn't mean that we have escaped accountability.

Let's move on to chapter 7.

The survivors of Beit-Shemesh decided to send messengers to a place called ***Kiryat-Ye'arim***

(meaning city of forests) and inform them that (hallelujah!) Israel had its Ark back; now come and get it! What made them think of the people who lived at **Kiryat-Ye'arim** as possibly those "who can stand before God"?

About 8 miles northeast of Jerusalem (and about a 2 days journey from Beit-Shemesh) arose a hilltop community that lay at a strategic convergence of the territorial boundaries of Judah, Dan, and Benjamin. Before Israel conquered Canaan this same place was called **Kiryat-Baal**, and still went by the alternative name of **Kiryat Baal-Judah** in Samuel's day even though here it is called **Kiryat-Ye'arim**. The point is that this was an ancient "high place"; a place that from time immemorial was a worship center to the gods. It was common then (and it still is) for the adherents of one religion to take over the worship center of another religion and destroy its gods and cult items, ritually cleanse the place, and then install their own new god or gods. That is what happened at **Kiryat-Ye'arim**; undoubtedly this particular hilltop had seen a number of gods and their cult centers come and go over the centuries. Thus at one time Baal was worshipped there but apparently some priests and Levites of Israel took over the place and set up Yehoveh worship and this is who the Beit-Shemeshites were insisting that they come and get the Ark of God.

While these verses don't specifically say that this man name Avinadav and his son El'azar were authorized Levite Priests, later biblical genealogies show that not only was Avinadav's son Eleazar a priest, but that he had two more sons Uzzah and Ahio who were also priests. There can be no doubt that Avinadav was a recognized Levite Priest at this time.

Avinadav and his family came and fetched the Ark and installed it somewhere at the community of Kiryat-Ye'arim where it would reside for 2 decades. Why didn't they take it back to Shiloh and the Tabernacle located there? There has been much debate about this and the bottom line is that obviously something catastrophic happened at Shiloh either physically or politically to make it unsuitable any longer as the Israelite's common center of worship. Some speculate that Shiloh was destroyed (and there is archeological evidence of that). Others speculate that the Levites and Priests moved out and simply abandoned the place after the Philistines took the Ark, and this could even account for the presence of the priest Avinadav and his family at Kiryat-Ye'arim instead of Shiloh.

Was there some kind of makeshift Tabernacle at Kiryat-Ye'arim or perhaps a common tent to shelter the Ark of the Covenant? Or did Avinadav place it in his own home?

We'll discuss this and more next time when we continue our study of the book of 1st Samuel and the odyssey of the Ark of God.