

LIFE LESSONS – 1 SAMUEL: Battle of the Godsⁱ 1 Samuel 5-6

INTRODUCTION:

Good morning, Trinity! It is good to see you here this morning. If you are a guest with us, thanks for joining us on this Lord's Day. We would love the opportunity to get to know you more. You can help us connect with you by texting the keyword, TBCMP, which stands for Trinity Baptist Church Mount Pleasant, to the number 94-000. When you send that keyword, a link will be sent back to you and that will take you to a short form. When you submit that form, it notifies me, and I look forward to following up with you.

Or feel free to swing by our information center located in the fellowship area. There we have a gift we would love to put in your hands as a way of saying thank you for being our guest today. We are thrilled you have chosen to worship with us today.

SERIES OVERVIEW:

We are in the middle of a teaching series we have called "Life Lessons." We are looking at the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. We are studying a time period in Israel's history where the people were living in spiritual darkness, doing what was right in their own eyes. In this time, God answered Hannah's prayer for a son. He gave her Samuel. She made good on her vow to give him back to The Lord. Samuel was different from the evil spiritual leaders of the day in that he pursued holiness. God was raising up a generation to bring the people back to Him. Severe punishment was in store for the evil spiritual leaders. But Samuel had learned to hear God's voice and be obedient to it. Last week, we saw how the people had turned to spiritual superstitions and that the Philistines defeated the Israelites in a devastating battle. But they had captured the one item that was the most significant to the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant. As a result, Eli and his sons died.

Today, we are going to pick up in our study by looking at two chapters, 5 and 6 of 1 Samuel in a message I've titled, "Battle of the Gods." I want to invite you to turn with me in your bibles to 1 Samuel chapter 5.

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Cruise Control

We recently purchased a new vehicle, well, it is new to us. We actually purchased the SUV from my parents. And when I say purchased, it was more

of a gift from my parents than a purchase. They cut us an amazing deal. We bought their 2020 Hyundai Palisade. This vehicle is the nicest thing we've ever owned. I'm so very grateful for their gift.

But one of the features of this car is the coolest cruise control I've ever seen. When you put the Palisade on cruise, it not only manages the distance between you and the car in front of you, but it also steers the car for you. This is the craziest thing I've ever seen!

We were going somewhere, and I put it on cruise control, and I started to feel the steering wheel turn itself. I thought, "This car is fighting me!" I thought something was wrong with it. Turns out, it is steering itself! And I did something you should never do, I took my hands off the wheel and said, "Cathy! Look at this. It's steering itself!" It took a big turn by itself and everything. It's amazing.

But after a little bit, an alarm started going off and the dash told me to put my hands back on the wheel. I'm thinking, "How'd it know that?" Now I'm a little freaked out. But I put my hands back on the wheel.

I started thinking, in that moment, that is how we often approach our spiritual lives, isn't it? We have a tendency to put our faith in cruise control. We think, man, things in my life are smooth, things are going well, I'm enjoying church, so forth and so on. And we do that until alarms start sounding. Then we put our hands back on the steering wheel. We need to avoid cruise control when it comes to our spiritual lives. In other words, we should be intentional in our faith development, not complacent.

What we are learning about the Israelites in our study is how they've gotten to a place of cruise control. They are just going about their everyday lives as they see fit. Alarms are beginning to sound off. They are seeing the results of spiritual drifting into darkness that have led to a significant defeat and the capture of their most sacred symbol, the Ark of the Covenant.

In chapters 5 and 6 we are going to see the final warnings of approaching spirituality this way. Then next week we are going to see the revival that comes from being intentional in our spiritual development.

Today we are going to look at the Ark's route, it's journey, then the Ark's recovery, and then the Ark's respect. And then we will discuss a couple life lessons we learn from this passage.

Let's first look at...

1) The Ark's Route

Following the battle we looked at last week, The Philistines take the Ark. Let's begin in verse 1 of Chapter 5 of 1 Samuel.

*1When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to **Ashdod**. 2Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into **the house of Dagon** and set it up beside Dagon.* There were 5 major Philistine cities located in the Promised Land at this time. Ashdod was the religious center of the worship of their prominent God, Dagon.ⁱⁱ

Now, mythology was a common religious belief system in those days. And the Philistines believed Dagon to be the father of the storm god, Baal Haddu.ⁱⁱⁱ Dagon was depicted by a statue that was half man and half fish.^{iv} So, he wasn't a mermaid, he was a manmaid. And their placing the Ark, the symbol of Israel's God, in the house of Dagon reflected their understanding that Dagon was superior to God Almighty.^v However, this is going to prove to be faulty thinking because The Lord God is not superior to anyone. Amen? Check out what happens next. Verse 3.

3And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. Poor Dagon. This supposed superior god couldn't even pick himself back up. He had to be reset by the Philistines. Verse 4. *4But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, [but this time] the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. 5This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.*

So, Dagon was lying headless and handless before the Ark of the Covenant. Head is a symbol of wisdom in the Bible and hands are a symbol of power.^{vi} So, The Lord God Almighty was communicating that there is no god that rivals Him.

Now, you would think that seeing this play out the way it has would be enough for the Philistines to say, "The Lord God is greater than any god." But these prideful people just don't get it. Look what happens next. Verse. 6.

*6The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with **tumors**, both Ashdod and its territory. 7And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god." 8So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" They answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to **Gath**." So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there.*

They didn't learn from the defeat of their god, so The Lord God afflicted the people with tumors. When we get to chapter 6, we are going to see that rats are associated with these tumors. As a result, scholars believe what they are afflicted with is the bubonic plague.^{vii} So, think that when you read tumors.

Finally, the people are like, "This isn't going well, let's send the Ark somewhere else." And this begins the Ark's tour through Philistia. It leaves Ashdod and goes to Gath. By the way, do you recognize the name of the city of Gath? That's where Goliath was from. So, the Ark goes to Gath. The battle of the gods is not looking good for the false gods. Look what happens there. Verse 9.

*9But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing **a very great panic**, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that **tumors** broke out on them.* [The people of Gath start having anxiety and start breaking out in tumors] *10So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people."* So, word is getting out about what is happening.

Verse 11. *11They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "**Send away the ark of the God of Israel**, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people."* For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. *12The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.*

So, the Ark's route when from Shiloh into battle at Ebenezer. Then captured, it was taken to Ashdod. From Ashdod it went to Gath, and from Gath to Ekron. It was at Ekron that they determined to send the Ark back to Israel. This leads us to our second point...

2) The Ark's Recovery

Chapter 6 tells us about the Ark's return and recovery back in Israel. Let's begin reading in verse 1.

¹The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months. [People are slow on the uptake. 7 months?! Talk about gluttons for punishment. I'd be like get that thing on the next truck outta here!] ²And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." ³They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." ⁴And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice [Who's the guy that is tasked with making golden tumors? I don't want that job! And here is the mentioning of the mice that leads scholars to believe it was the bubonic plague], according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. ⁵So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. ⁶Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed? The philistines knew what had happened in Egypt and how God led them out of the slavery there. They didn't want any part of that. God has proven Himself as a stand alone God. There is no one that rivals Him.

So, the Ark is headed back to Israel. Look at how that happens. Verse 7 of 1 Samuel 6. *⁷Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. ⁸And take the ark of the Lord and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way ⁹and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh [Bet Shem-ish], then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence."*

What's happening here? Well, while they had an idea that it was God causing all these tumors and pain, they wanted to make sure that was the case. So, the

take two cows who have just calved. Now, what is the natural tendency for cows in this situation? They don't want to be away from their calves. So, the Philistines are trying to stack the deck against God. They took the calves from these cows, placed a yolk on them and hitched them to a cart with the Ark on it. They then sent them on their way toward Israel.

Now, the cows' maternal instinct would have been to turn around and look for their calves. But look what happens. Verse 10. *¹⁰The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹And they put the ark of the Lord on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. ¹²And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, **lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left,** and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh [Bet Shem-ish].*

It was obvious that God was directing these cows. Lowing carries the idea of being guided. Typically, nursing cows would have turned around to their young. But these cows didn't. God passed the test that the Philistines put Him to.

What's more, God's GPS on these cows led them to the perfect spot. Verse 13. *¹³Now the people of Beth-shemesh [Bet Shem-ish] were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. [So, this would be around May or June]. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. [Can you imagine?] ¹⁴The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. [Just so happened stopped right at that spot. Hm.] And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. ¹⁵And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. ¹⁶And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron. ¹⁷These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon [Ash-Ka-Lon], one for Gath, one for Ekron, ¹⁸and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwallled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh [Bet Shem-ish]. The Ark's Route and The Ark's Recovery. Thirdly, ...*

3) The Ark's Respect

The presence of God was something that was to be cherished and treated with reverence. The Israelites learn this, but at a great cost. Verse 19.

*19And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the Lord. He struck **seventy men** of them, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow.* Now, maybe your bible says a different number. Some translations have 50,000. What's the difference? Well, numbers to the Hebrews are seen differently than the way we see numbers in the West. In the original manuscripts it is literally, "of the people, 70 men, fifty thousand men." So, I think what the author is trying to say is that of 50,000 men, 70 were stuck dead. Either way, the point is that it was a devastating amount. Verse 20. *20Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" 21So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you."*

After the devastating loss of 70 men for irreverently handling the Ark, the Hebrews finally begin respecting God. And this respect is going to spark a revival in the nation of Israel. We will see that next week.

LIFE LESSONS:

I want to mention two major life lessons we learn from this passage of study today.

1) God has no rival.

I think one of the obvious themes in chapter 5 is the fact that The Lord God Almighty is supreme. There is no other god that can rival our God. He stands alone. The Lord is in a league all to himself. Isaiah 44:6 says, *"6Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."*

What causes God to have no rival? Well, God is not surprised by circumstances. He is sovereign over them. God is not threatened by competition. He is not served by human hands. He is self-sustaining. God will ultimately judge the world. And every knee will bow, and every knee confess Jesus as Lord. Our God is limitless. He is so great and mighty that there is no limit to His being or power. He is not limited by our thoughts. He can do

immeasurably more than we can think or imagine. There is no end to His power or glory.

This truth is profound. It means that there is nothing in your life or in our world that could possibly surmount the limitless nature of our God. The things you and I battle, God is greater. The challenges facing our world, God is greater. The darkness you feel you are in, God is greater. Therefore, beloved, we must invite the limitless power of God to work in and through our lives.

So many times we rely on our own strength and power to conquer the giants in our lives. When we do that, we place God in the pantheon of our own abilities. But God has no rival. If we rely on our own strength and abilities, we will always be defeated. But there is a source of truth and power that stands taller than our giants. His name is Jesus who has defeated the greatest giant of sin, death and the grave. Coming to the realization that God has no rival in our lives means that we allow Him to tear down the little gods we have erected and place Him on center stage of our lives. God has no rival, will you give all of yourself to Him?

There have also been some, under the banner of tolerance, that have suggested that there are many gods that all lead to the same place. The post-modern worldview of pluralism has placed The Lord God as equal to all other gods. But what do we see in 1 Samuel 5? That cannot be the case.

Yahweh God, the God of the Bible, is the only true God. He is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. In John 14:6, *"6Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

God has no rival. Allow Him to reign supremely in your life. The second life lessons is...

2) The Fear of God is a good thing.

The bible says in Proverbs 9:10, *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom..."* This, of course is not fear the way we often understand fear. The fear of The Lord that I am talking about is a respect for God and His holiness. And that kind of respect creates a desire to be close to God.

In 1 Samuel 6, we see that the Philistines never got to a place of respect. Oh, they were afraid of God's presence. They understood the power of God. But their fear, their terror, resulted in them pushing God away. They did not want God, nor the Ark that represented His presence. So, they sent it away.

Then, the Israelites that received the Ark back, some of them demonstrated a lack of respect for the Ark as well. The one people that should have known the power of God chose to mock God by looking into the Ark and treating it in ways that was opposed to God's instructions. That resulted in more destruction.

But then there were those that demonstrated a biblical fear of The Lord. These were the people that noticed the arrival of The Ark, stopped what they were doing, rejoiced, and took care of The Ark. Then they made a sacrifice to God, they desired to demonstrate reverence by approaching God through sacrifice.

This is what it means to fear The Lord. It's not being afraid of God. It's drawing near to God in reverence by giving Him all of our lives. God did not care for the guilt offering the Philistines made. While they may have desired to pay honor to God through the golden images, God doesn't want that. God desires sacrifice and worship.

When King David was repenting from his sin with Bathsheba, he gave us a glimpse of what it means to fear The Lord, to demonstrate respect for God. Psalm 51:16 and 17. *"For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

Those who have a true reverence for God gladly receive Him. Even when it means conviction and repentance. You see the difference. The people that were afraid of God, the Philistines, pushed God away. The people that did not respect God went against His Word. But those that embraced God repented, demonstrated respect, and welcomed God into their lives.

The example of these set before us in this passage begs the question as to which camp we find ourselves. Are we pushing God away from our lives? Are we living in a way that is opposed to God's Word? Or are we welcoming God into all areas of our lives?

The spiritual renewal we all desire in our day and time begins with a fear, a respect, for God and His Word. It requires that renewal to begin first in us expressed in repentance of sin. It requires a humble submission to Jesus as Lord of our lives.

CONCLUSION:

I'm going to invite the band to come back up and lead us in a time of response.

Perhaps you are here today and you have never begun a relationship with Jesus. You might be saying, "What does that mean? What does that look like? Why is that important?" Well, to see a move of God in our lives first begins by placing our faith and trust in Jesus as the Lord of our lives. It is there that we are saved and forgiven of our sinfulness. If that's you, our elders will be here at the front and we would love nothing more today than to tell you how you can have a relationship with Jesus. Simply come during this time of response and take us by the hand and say, "I need Jesus." We would love to walk you through what that looks like.

Maybe others of you are here today and your response is that of surrendering to God. Maybe you've attempted to place God among other gods in your life. Maybe you've drifted and have pushed God away. You're in need of repentance and surrender to God in all areas of your life. We would love to come alongside you as you walk that road.

Maybe for others, it's a burden you are carrying. A fear of the future, a concern that has you worried, or even a relationship you desire to be better. Whatever it is, you can give that to The God of the universe. You need prayer. Our elders are here to join you in that prayer and to pray over you.

My desire for our times of response each week is simple. I simply want you to have the freedom to be obedient to the promptings of The Lord on your heart. We make ourselves available to you. No manipulation. We're just here. There is freedom in this place. I'm going to pray, and I want you to just respond.

[PRAY]

ENDNOTES:

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- ⁱ Works consulted in preparation for this message: Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel, Vol. 7*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1996; Heath Thomas and J.D. Greear, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel*, Holman: Nashville, 2016; Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003; Enduring Word Commentary, “1 Samuel 5 – The Ark of the Covenant Among The Philistines,” accessed online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/1-samuel-5/>; Enduring Word Commentary, “1 Samuel 6 – The Ark of the Covenant Is Returned to Israel,” accessed online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/1-samuel-6/>; Troy Rackliffe, “Life Lessons Message 3,” Sermon preached at Glade Community Church in Daniels, WV; Ray Fowler, “God Can Take Care of Himself,” published by Ray Fowler Ministries, accessed online: <https://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/1-samuel/god-can-take-care-of-himself/>; Ray Fowler, “Respecting God’s Holiness,” published by Ray Fowler Ministries, accessed online: <https://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/1-samuel/respecting-gods-holiness/>; Skip Heitzig, “Expound: 1 Samuel 5-6:9,” message taught at Calvary Church on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, accessed online: <https://calvarynm.church/connectwithskip/teachings/#/series/314/sermon/4573>; Skip Heitzig, “Expound: 1 Samuel 6-7,” message taught at Calvary Church on Wednesday, June 2, 2021, accessed online: <https://calvarynm.church/connectwithskip/teachings/#/series/314/sermon/4575> .
- ⁱⁱ Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel, Vol. 7*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1996, page 97.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003, page 117.
- ^{iv} Skip Heitzig, “Expound: 1 Samuel 5-6:9,” message taught at Calvary Church on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, accessed online: <https://calvarynm.church/connectwithskip/teachings/#/series/314/sermon/4573>.
- ^v Bergen, 97.
- ^{vi} Heitzig.
- ^{vii} Ray Fowler, “God Can Take Care of Himself,” published by Ray Fowler Ministries, accessed online: <https://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/1-samuel/god-can-take-care-of-himself/>.