

## **The Hand of the LORD**

1Samuel 5:1-12

Any student of even the most basic World War II history will be familiar with the date December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941.

It was the day that Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's plan to attack the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor was carried out.

According to the fact sheet from census.gov the Japanese launched 353 aircraft along with 61 naval vessels (not including aircraft carriers) in order to attack the American base.

The losses were heavy for the Americans. They lost 165 aircraft, 16 ships were significantly damaged, 3 ships were destroyed, 2403 people were killed with another 1178 wounded.

It was a terrible day, a day President Roosevelt famously said, "would live in infamy."

It was a day of seeming defeat. I would have been hard to see it any other way with so many lives lost and so many military assets either destroyed or seriously damaged.

When Winston Churchill (who was the Prime Minister of Britain at the time) heard the news his reaction was not one of defeat.

England had been under attack from Germany (an ally of Japan) for over a year.

While the Americans had been supplying the British with military aide, the odds were still very much against England prevailing in a prolonged conflict.

When news came to Churchill about Pearl Harbor he said this,

"No American will think it wrong of me if I proclaim that to have the United States at our side was to me the greatest joy. I could not foretell the course of events. I do not pretend to have measured the marshal might of Japan, but now at this very moment I knew the United States was in the war up to the neck and in to the death. So we had won after all! England would live; Britain would live; the Commonwealth of Nations and the Empire would live. How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end, no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. Once again in our long Island history we should emerge, however mauled or mutilated, safe and victorious. We should not be wiped out. Our history would not come to an end. We might not even have to die as individuals. Hitler's fate was sealed. Mussolini's fate was sealed. As for the Japanese, they would be ground to powder. All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force...United we could subdue everybody else in the world. Many disasters, immeasurable cost and tribulation lay ahead, but there was no more doubt about the end."

Churchill was proven right in the course of time.

What was on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 a victory for Japan, in the end turned out to be the cause of their defeat.

[We see that same kind of circumstance happen in the Bible on a number of occasions. We see it in the text that we are looking at this morning **1Samuel 5:10-12**. The Philistines had just

come from what appeared to be a great victory. They had killed 34,000 Israelites and had taken the Ark of the LORD away from Israel and brought it back to their own land as a trophy of war. They quickly learn, however, that they are not quite as victorious as they first thought. Right away they are confronted by the power of the LORD. Four times in these twelve verses the writer makes a reference to “The Hand of the LORD.” That is not a literal Hand as God is an infinite Spirit Who is not confined to a finite body as we are. “The Hand of the LORD” is the Bible’s way of referring to the power of God. In this text we see the Philistines up against the power of God and what happens to them shows us some important lessons. Number one is this...]

**Point #1 – It is impossible to subdue the LORD. (Verses 1-5)**

Many people have thought and do think that God can be defeated, but that will never happen.

*It is important to appreciate that in the ancient world most people associated success in warfare to the strength of a nation’s gods.*

Prevailing in a conflict said something more than just how good your army happens to be, it proved that your god was superior to the other nation’s god.

We can see that thinking here amongst the Philistines in **verses 1-2.**

“They carried the ark.”

According to the Law of Moses only the priests were permitted to carry the ark and they had to do so with long poles.

It is a picture unapproachable holiness.

Here people who do not even worship the LORD are carrying the ark.

Having won the battle against Israel, they have no concern for reverence towards what God calls holy.

*They carry it and they take it to the temple of the god they worship called Dagon and “set it beside Dagon.”*

We are likely supposed to see this as the Philistines presenting the ark of the LORD to the idol Dagon as a trophy.

They thought they had won and they thought they had won because of Dagon.

They thought they had overcome the power of Israel’s God.

Then we read this in **verses 3-5.**

We are not told here the size of the statue, but it is safe to say that it was substantial.

The upper part of the statue, according to commentators, had the head and arms of a man and the lower part had the body of a fish.

After one night of the ark being in the idol’s temple, Dagon is face down “before the ark”.

*The Lord could have pushed it over on its side or back, but He instead puts him face down.*

That is a position of submission. It is a way of saying, “You think your so called god is powerful? It has nothing on the LORD.”

It is important to point out a major difference between Dagon and the Ark here. Dagon was a statue of a so called god an object that people worshipped. The Ark was set apart by God as an instrument of worship not an object of worship.

There is no power in the ark itself it is the power of the infinite God of the universe who cannot be represented with an object man by human hands that is being contrasted with an idol.

*We can see the powerlessness of Dagon when he has to be picked up by his worshippers.*

He is merely a lifeless statue conceived in the minds of idolatrous people who can do nothing for them.

They refuse to see that so they stand him back up and this time God takes off the head and arms of the statue and has them fall into the doorway of the temple.

The head and arms representing the authority and power of this false god broken off and put in a place to be trampled on.

God is very clearly saying to them, “You think you have overcome my power? Not by a long shot.”

[Our society is not so different. Most don't worship at the altar of a statue but there are many idols to which people ascribe supremacy over the God of the bible. In fact one philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche famously said “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” What I think he meant is that our modern understanding of the world has eliminated the possibility of God's existence.]

*I'm sorry to say that many have taken up Nietzsche's thinking in this regard.*

Many think and live like they have put God into submission.

I'm happy to report to you, however, that the promise of Jesus Christ still stands.

He has, He is, and He will build His church until He comes.

Philosophy and science have not killed God at all and they never will, because He is God Almighty the creator of the heavens and earth, He is infinite in all His perfections and power.

Every day He is proving Himself true, the fact that we are gathered here for the worship of His Name is a glorious example of that fact.

God the Holy Spirit calls people from spiritual death to new life in Christ and no power of hell can keep Him from that.

Amazing.

[I know that things in our culture seem as though they are stacking up against the church. I know godless people are growing bolder and more confident thinking that they are winning, but don't be fooled by these things. Just like the ark coming into the hands of the Philistines happened because God allowed it, so to our present circumstances are the way they are because of God's direction. He is not defeated, it is impossible to subdue Him. Here is another important lesson for us...]

**Point #2 – Living in opposition to God always brings trouble. (Verses 6-7)**

By far the biggest problem humanity has is going about life from day to day in godlessness.

*It is often the case that people fail to pay attention to God's initial efforts to get their attention.*

When the fallen over and busted up statue fails to give the Philistines reason to change course we read this in **verses 6-7**.

There are some different ideas as to what is intended by the word "tumours" in verse six.

I don't think there is enough information for us to know for sure, but whatever the official diagnosis should be we can say some things for certain.

I must have come on fairly rapidly and significant number of people had been affected.

It must have been fairly fast following the arrival of the ark because the people are quick to make the connection between the ark being there and their becoming sick.

These tumours were likely externally visible and very painful.

There is also an excellent chance that whatever these tumours were they likely brought with them a significant amount of fatalities as verse six describes this as the Lord bringing devastation upon them.

*To say that the people of this city were experiencing trouble is an understatement to say the least.*

It is somewhat ironic that the name of the city is Ashdod.

It is probably the capital city of the Philistines and its name means "powerful".

They had thought that it was by their own strength that the Israelites were defeated.

They had thought they had won the battle because their god Dagon was stronger and better than the God of Israel.

They had thought that because they had captured the ark that they could treat it however they wanted and for all of those reasons we are told here that the "LORD's hand is heavy upon them."

In other words they had come to understand at least on some level that the power of God was causing them this harm.

That always happens. When people reject the true and living God. When people live in a way that is contrary to His moral will, they eventually suffer the consequences.

[Not too long ago I was chatting with a business owner and in the course of our conversation he was telling me about some of the struggles that he had with an employee. This particular company has a particular way they want things to be done, but the employee decided that he knew better and would do things his own way. It didn't work and jobs ended up having to be redone because of it. The boss talked with the employee, explained why things had to be done a certain way, and gave him another chance. The employee did not listen and kept doing things his own way which lead to more problems and eventually ended up with that person losing their job.]

Most of us will shake our heads at that kind of behaviour. We ask, "Why not just do things the way you are supposed to do them?"

We can see it so easily in a situation like a job, but often we can't see it at all when it comes to disobeying God.

Think of all the crime, heartache, and dysfunction that happens in our world on a daily basis.

Why does that happen? Because most people living in the world are godless.

Please listen! Some of you think that you can do whatever you like and everything will work out just fine.

No you can't! If you set your face against God, His hand will end up heavy upon you and your life will end up in a giant mess.

[That is what happens to these Philistines. They end up in some serious trouble, but they are somewhat slow to change their course of action. They do not want to let go of their war trophy, so instead of submitting to God and returning the ark, they come up with another idea. What they do here shows us another important lesson. God shows them and us very clearly that...]

### **Point #3 – The hand of the LORD is inescapable. (Verses 8-12)**

There is no time or place in all of creation where the power of almighty God cannot reach.

*Things are clearly bad in the capital city of Ashdod, so they get together and ask a good question, but at first they have a really bad answer (Verses 8-9).*

So we know we can't keep the ark as a war trophy in the capital city, let's move it to another one of our cities.

The word "Gath" means "Winepress".

I'm guessing the reason it is called that is because it produced a significant amount of the Philistine wine supply which was a tremendously important commodity during that time period.

Again they are turning to a symbol of their own strength and prosperity in defiance of the LORD and look what happens.

Again the hand of God is against them and the people of Gath suffer the same type of illness and the people of Ashdod.

*You would think that they might relent at that point. Nope, look with me at verses 10-12.*

Well it didn't work in Ashdod and it didn't work in Gath, let's send the ark to Ekron.

That city was the most northern city of the five most important cities in Philistine territory.

It seems like they are thinking let's move it as far away as we can, but still hold on to it.

By this time word had gotten around and the people of Ekron are rightly concerned about what is going to happen.

Sure enough God shows them again that they cannot escape the reach of his hand.

[We see this kind of thinking happen a few times in the scriptures. Remember Balak king of Moab? He was afraid of the Israelites and so he hired a guy named Balaam to put a curse on the people of God. When he tried the first time instead of a curse out came a blessing. Balak changed locations and asked Balaam to try again and again out came a blessing. He tried a third time from a different place and the same thing happens. Or think about Jonah. He thought he could hop on a boat and run away from the LORD.]

That is impossible. No one can escape God. God is no more or less powerful in one place or another.

If you think that changing addresses is going to solve your problems then you are terribly mistaken.

You may find new neighbors or a new circle of friends but the consequences of a godless living will follow you no matter where you go.

If that is you. If you have a habit of moving place to place, from job to job, changing your circle of friends, and you keep finding your way into trouble can I suggest to you that the problem in your life isn't the place where you live, the job you work at, or the circle of friends that you have.

The problem is you living a godless life and the only way to escape the consequences of that is through repentance.

*You have to acknowledge that you being in charge of your life is a terrible idea.*

You have to realize that God is right and you are wrong.

You have to make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life.

The good news of the Bible is that God is willing to forgive us for our godlessness.

That is why Jesus died on the cross. To take upon Himself the penalty of all our wicked ways.

Trying to run away from God is silly because there is no where we can go to escape Him.

We can however run to the LORD in repentance and faith so instead of the hand of God being heavy upon us in judgement, His hand comes upon us for healing and restoration.

*God is not dead! No one can put Him under their thumb. He bows to no one but is now and always will be the King of Kings and the Lord of lords.*

Because that is true living is opposition to Him will always lead to trouble.

Sometimes trouble comes right away like it does for the Philistines in this text and other times it takes a while but it always comes.

There is nowhere we can go where we can persist in a godless life and escape the Hand of the LORD.

There is only one place we can go to find deliverance from God's judgement and that is to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus.

There we find that besides being able to rebuke and destroy godless people, the Hand of the LORD is indeed mighty to save.

The choice is rather simple. Repent or perish. Be healed and restored by the hand of God or be destroyed.

There is no middle ground and there is no third choice.

The plea of this text is choose wisely.

Let's pray towards that end.