

A Holy God
1Samuel 6:1-7:1

Have you ever under appreciated the danger of something?

Many years ago when I had just finished Bible College and was living at home with plans to work for my dad for a year and learn about construction and in particular get a start as an electrician, my grandfather, who lived next door at the time called me and asked me for a favour.

He asked me to come and have a look at his garbage disposal switch to see if it was working.

I said, "Sure" grabbed a multi meter and headed over.

Now I had no idea how to use a multi-meter and I had no idea how dangerous electricity can be.

After all we normally don't see it, we only see its effect and that can make it easy to remain ignorant of the danger.

Now that I know a thing or two about electricity I shake my head at my younger self, especially when I think of how much worse things could have gone.

Thankfully, I just got a lesson in respecting electricity.

When I arrived I proceeded to take the switch cover off.

I can't remember what I set the meter too because I had no clue how to use it. (As a side note if you are ever using a multi-meter make sure you have fused leads and start out on volts)

Without removing the switch I touched the meter lead to the screw of the switch and as I did the lead also touched the side of the switch box which resulted in a significant arc which melted through three quarters of the meter lead.

To say the least I was startled and I was seeing red dots from the flash.

I put the switch cover back on and waited until my dad got home.

When I told him about it and showed him the lead he said, "Well, a little bit of instruction would have gone a long way."

Truer words have never been spoken.

[Electricity is wonderful. Life would be much harder without it. It is great, but it needs to be respected and if we don't respect it we can get hurt. The same thing is true about God. He is beyond compare in His goodness and absolutely essential for life, but we need to respect Him. We see that in our text this morning in **1Samuel 6:1-7:1**. Both the Philistines and the Israelites encounter the holiness of God and through their experience we are given some lessons for our lives about the holiness of God. Here is the first...]

Point #1 – God makes His holiness known. (Verses 6:1-12)

Whether through the outworking of everyday life (providence) or supernatural displays of power, God has constantly and consistently revealed Who He is to humanity.

We know from the previous chapter that the LORD had been getting the attention of the Philistines.

Having captured the Ark of the Covenant they did not want to let it go, but no matter where they put it they were suffering significantly under the hand (the power) of God.

Verse 1 of chapter six tells us that the ark had been in Philistine territory for seven months and after that long they are ready to relent according to **verse 2**.

Notice they call the “priests and the diviners” which means they understand that this is a religious matter.

They seem to get that the LORD has brought devastation upon them and any hope of their hardship being alleviated depends on them dealing with the God of Israel.

Even though they are idolaters they understand that an offense has been committed against the LORD, they understand the principle of having a debt of guilt and the need to try and deal with it.

They suggest an offering of five gold tumors and five gold rats, one for each of their major cities and according to the number of their rulers.

Multiple commentators think that this is an example of an idolatrous ritual designed to rid land of the actual plague of tumors and rats.

Of course God cannot be placated by gold or silver. He cannot be bought. Even though they do not realize it there only hope here is God’s grace rather than His being pleased with gold tumors and rats.

While they do not know how to properly relate to God, they at least remember from history how foolish it is to be hard of heart and ignore the affliction that God is pouring out.

They recall the experience of the Egyptians in verse 6. Pharaoh was stubborn in his heart and it destroyed his entire country.

“Don’t be like that” is their advice and it is good advice.

So they say send the Ark back with a guilt offering and then they add a whole process by which they can confirm that the God of Israel is responsible for their troubles.

Verses 7-9 describe how these “priests and diviners” suggest sending the ark back.

They suggest making a new cart for the ark (an attempt to avoid further offense), the cart is to be pulled by two cows that have never pulled a cart and have recently given birth.

On top of that they are to take the calves of the cows and pen them up. Once that is all set they are to let the cows pull the cart with no human direction and see where it goes.

What they are doing is setting up a situation where all the natural instincts of the cows would prevent them from taking the cart back to the Israelites.

Why do all of that? Verse 9.

If the impossible test doesn't work then it was all random chance!

So they set it all up and this is what we read in **Verse 12.**

The cows are "lowing" (mooing) probably for their calves, yet despite that natural instinct, despite never having pulled a cart they make a beeline for Israelite territory.

God had been making it clear for 7 months that the Philistines were under his judgment because of their disregard for his holiness, here He graciously satisfies the requirements of their unnecessarily elaborate scheme so as to say "Yes this is my power that is against you."

He makes Himself known.

[This past week in men's bible study we were looking at Romans 1:18-32. Those verses talk about how "God's wrath is being revealed from heaven against the godlessness and wickedness of men." One of the things the apostle says godless people do is "suppress the truth". He goes on to explain that God has revealed the greatness of who He is through what He has made. People, however, take that plain revelation and exchange it for a lie which leads to all kinds of devastation.]

People will say, "I don't believe in God because I can't see Him!"

It's true the visible presence of God at this stage in history is hidden from us.

Ever since human beings first rebelled against God His visible presence has been veiled from us to a significant degree.

Even though we do not see His visible presence yet, if we open our eyes we can see His glory everywhere in all of creation.

Whether we look into a microscope or a telescope we can see that the God of the Bible is real, is all-powerful, all-knowing, infinite, and holy.

[God makes His holy nature plain to the Philistines here in these dealings with the ark and to a reasonable degree He has done the same for all of us. No one here has an excuse for disregarding the LORD. No one here has an excuse for showing contempt for His holiness. God makes His holiness known. Now being aware of that is essential, but we need more than that. The Philistines encounter the holiness of the LORD and they just want to get rid of the ark, they just want God to leave them alone. That does them no good in the long run and it won't do us any good either. We need more than an awareness of God's holiness we need to see that...]

Point #2 – God’s holiness makes Him worthy of worship. (Verses 13-18)

The distinct and infinitely superior nature of the LORD is the very reason why it is right for Him to hold the place of our highest affection and praise.

Against all natural expectations the cart carrying the ark pulls up to Beth Shemesh and this is what happens according to Verses 13-15.

It is harvest time in Israel a time which is essential to their survival.

The fact that they are working on the harvest means they have something to harvest which is a blessing from the LORD.

As they are taking off their crops they see the ark returning and it says here at the end of verse thirteen “they rejoiced at the sight.”

Back in chapter four when the ark is captured everyone who hears it laments.

Why does the ark produce such dramatic reactions from the people?

On one hand it’s a box. A box of amazing craftsmanship, a box of intricate design that is covered in gold, but at the end of the day it’s a box.

What makes it so important is that God had set it apart as a tangible sign of His presence, it was a clear example of His holiness.

He commanded that the ark be placed in the Tabernacle and He promised that He would cause His visible glory to appear above it.

When the ark is captured it is a picture of God leaving the people.

When it returns, the people take it as a sign of God’s presence returning to His people.

They go from bitter defeat at the hands of their enemies, their army significantly weakened and no hope of taking back the ark by force, to seeing that God does not need an army to bring a nation to its knees.

The Holy One of Israel needs no defender, His power and might are unmatched.

Because that is true it is fitting that the cart arrives at the field of a man named Joshua a name meaning “The LORD is salvation.”

God alone has returned the ark and the people rejoice.

Where does their joy lead? It leads to worship.

They take the cart chop it up for firewood and sacrifice the cows as a ‘burnt offering to the LORD.’

It also says in verse 15 that it is the ‘Levites’ who take the ark from the cart and place it on a ‘large rock’.

The fact that Levites, the tribe set apart for service in the worship of the LORD, handle the ark says that there is at least some sense of God's holiness among these people.

It is likely the Levites are taking the lead in the offering of the sacrifices as well.

This shows they have at least some understanding that there is no one else like the LORD and that His greatness is worthy of worship.

[As human beings we seem to have at least some appreciation for unique and spectacular things. It is one of the things that drives the tourism industry. People travel to Egypt to see the pyramids, to Rome to see the Colosseum, to Ontario to see Niagara Falls, to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon, and so on. We understand that rare and impressive things are worth seeing and celebrating.]

How much more true is that of the living God?

Once we begin to see that there is nothing and no one else like Him we can begin to see that He is worthy of our worship.

That truth works in the other direction as well. When we fail to see or appreciate the unique greatness of our God our worship will be meager or we will offer it to something or someone else.

We see that here with the Philistines in **verse 16**.

They express no interest in worshipping God, they simply want Him to leave them alone.

They relent under the power of God and return the ark, but their hearts are unchanged, they refuse to give Him the praise that He deserves.

[Listen, it is a most grave danger to our souls to have a small view of God. We must have an incomprehensible view of the LORD fixed in our minds. A view that causes us to look past the things of this world and into eternity. A view that is so enthralled with the LORD that we can rejoice in all of life as we get closer to the day when we shall see Him. That brings us to one more lesson this morning. God makes His holiness known, God's holiness makes Him worthy of worship, and lastly...]

Point #3 – God's people must be serious about His holiness. (Verses 19-7:1)

If we understand Who God is (namely that He is holy) and who we are (namely that we are not holy), then we will clearly see the foolishness of being flippant about how we relate to Him.

Everything here is going along well with the return of the ark and the worship that is taking place among the people, but things take a drastic turn in verse 19.

It seems unlikely that ignorance is the issue here because at first they know enough to let only the Levites handle the ark.

It is probably a combination of curiosity and presumption.

The ark would have rarely if ever left the Tabernacle at Shiloh.

Even if these men had caught a glimpse of it on the battlefield seven months earlier it is very unlikely they would have had a chance to get close to it.

This is truly a once in a life time event and some of them were probably thinking, "I wonder what is inside?"

If that is why they have a look, I totally empathize with that.

I'm over forty years old and I still have a great compulsion to press buttons just to see what they do.

If there is a sign on a door that says, "Keep Out" the first thing that comes to my mind is "I wonder what is in there."

There has to be more than curiosity though.

For whatever reason they presume to be able to open the ark without any harm coming to them.

Maybe they thought the fact that it showed up in their town meant that they were especially blessed by the LORD and so there is no way anything bad could happen.

Maybe they thought, "It's just a box, a relic from an earlier time, so what could happen.

Whatever the case may be they show a disregard for the fact that God had specifically set this apart. Only the Levites could carry it and as far as I know no one had been given permission beyond the time of Moses to look inside of it.

They profane what God had set apart as Holy and God puts them to death.

Understandably this leads to mourning in the city and to this response in **verse 20**.

Who can stand in the presence of this Holy God?

No one can. That is one of the central lessons of Old Testament worship.

God's visible glory in the tabernacle is unapproachable and the closer someone gets the more his life is at risk.

Listen, the holiness of God is dangerous to fallen human beings who are NOT holy.

Worship is dangerous and we need to be serious about it.

The people of Beth Shemesh get a hard lesson towards that end which leads them to this in **verse 21-7:1**.

With the priesthood in shambles and the cost of profaning what is holy clear, the ark goes under guard.

They learn to take God's holiness seriously.

[I vividly remember being in my early teens working on a project and needing to a few 2x10s to a particular length. I did the first one with a handsaw. I did the second one with a skill saw. That was life changing let me tell you. I love power tools, but they are dangerous and if you don't respect them you can get really hurt.]

The same thing is truly with God.

Coming to know the true and living God is absolutely life changing.

He is wonderful beyond description, but He is also dangerous and if you don't respect His holiness it can bring tremendous pain even eternal consequences into your life.

It is only when we have a genuine appreciation for the holiness of God that we can begin to scratch the surface of the work of Christ on our behalf.

Remember when Jesus cried out, "It is finished" on the cross.

Do you remember what happened to the curtain in the Temple that blocked off the holy of holies?

It was torn in two which meant the way to being in the presence of God was opened through the death of God's Son.

Listen, Jesus did not die so that we would develop a flippant attitude towards the holiness of God.

Jesus died to make us holy. To give us the capacity through His righteousness to "stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God."

God is not changed one bit by the work of Christ on the cross, we are.

It is only when that registers in our hearts and minds that we can begin to see the true glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we can begin to see that, we can begin to see the LORD as He is, we begin to be awed by Him, and we begin to enjoy the irrevocable gift of eternal life.

Our God is a Holy God brothers and sisters, oh that we would see that, love that, and be changed by that.