

7. Return of the captured ark

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In last chapters 4 & 5, we found the Philistines who captured the ark of God were enjoying their victory over the God of Israel. They thought their god Dagon defeated the God of Israel. The Israelites believed that the glory of God left from Israel. What was the problem with both of them? They extremely underestimated the God of Israel who created heaven and earth and everything in between and including their lives.

Consider yourself at the bottom of the Niagara Fall, and you are trying to block the water coming down with a five gallon water bucket. A fat chance, huh? That is like these Philistine people against God.

A. ADMITTING THEIR INFERIORITY

1 Sam 6:1 Now the ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

Why did they keep it seven months at all?

Because they were reluctant to give up such a wonderful "trophy" of what they at first felt was such a victory over the God of Israel. It can take a long time before we realize the futility of resisting God!

Just like us, they tried every possible way to beat the hands of God with their own efforts. But they were useless. Instead of simply repenting and submitting to God, we will do everything we can to make our own results which bring ourselves down deeper into trouble.

1 Sam 6:2-4 And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it to its place." So they said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return it to Him with a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you." Then they said, "What is the trespass offering which we shall return to Him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden rats, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines. For the same plague was on all of you and on your lords.

The specific offering recognizes that it was the Lord who brought the plague upon the Philistines.

1 Sam 6:5 Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and images of your rats that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten His hand from you, from your gods, and from your land.

The Philistines are admitting that the God of Israel is judging their gods, and has jurisdiction over their lands. They are confessing that He is the Almighty God, yet they will not worship Him instead of their own silly gods!

1 Sam 6:6 Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?

These Philistine people have learned a valuable hind sight from their hind problem. They remembered what happened to the Egyptians when they tried to hold back the Israelites against God of Israel.

It is always a great thing to have hind sight. Past is something we cannot do anything about it. We cannot change anything, but we can learn from our past. Someone who is very intelligent said once, "The people with a good hind sight will learn from their own mistakes. But the people with a better hind sight, will learn from other people's mistake." This is the case in point. The Philistines diviners were advising their people to use their brains and not go through any more problems than they were already in.

Even though they were telling another Philistines not to harden their hearts against God, they were not considering worshiping this mighty God. We are often like these Philistine people. Our hearts get hardened because of sins in our hearts, yet we talk about God and His forgiveness. Hardness of heart is a terrible place for any Christian. We should have soft hearts to receive His instructions for our lives.

Hosea 10:12 Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the Lord, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.

B. AN EXPERIMENT AGAINST THE GOD OF ISRAEL

1 Sam 6:7-9 Now therefore, make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. Then take the ark of the Lord and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us--it happened to us by chance."

Here, the Philistines are conducting an experiment against the God of Israel. They think all the calamity of the plagues has been from the Lord God of Israel. But they are not 100% sure. So, they devise another test. After all, no need to repent perfectly bad sins unless it is absolutely necessary.

The test was simple, and the odds were stacked against God. By nature, two milk cows which have never been yoked should not pull a cart at all, but they should have resisted their yokes. Additionally, they decided to take their calves home, away from them. The "maternal instinct" of the cows would have drawn them not towards the land of Israel, but back home to their own calves. What do you know, the animals obeyed God better than human.

Some of you remember an Israelite, Uzzah who got killed by God from touching the ark of God. Because he thought it was going to fall from the cart they were using to transport the ark to Jerusalem by king David's order in 2 Samuel 6:6-7. How come didn't God kill the Philistines here for carrying the ark in this manner?

God never wanted the ark to be transported by a cart. He wanted it to be carried by the poles that were set in it (Numbers 4:15). The ark didn't have "handles" and was not to be carried by lifting it directly in one's hands. Instead, it was to be carried by inserting gold-overlaid wood poles into gold rings at each corner of the ark. The poles were to remain inserted in the rings, and to be the source of contact with the ark. Apart from touching the poles, it was forbidden to touch the ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:12-15).

C. CHANCE OR INTENTION?

The Philistines were wondering, "Was it by God of Israel or was it by chance?" They still were hoping to get an upper hand over the hind situation.

Let's talk about if there is such a thing is chance or coincidence.

Many people think things happen by chance. Some say the world was created by chance. People who are otherwise intelligent often fall into this delusion. Jacques Monod, a biochemist, wrote: "Chance alone is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution."

But assigning such power to "chance" is crazy because chance has no power. For example, when a coin is flipped, the chance that it will land "heads" is 50%. However, "chance" does not make it land heads. Whether or not it lands heads or tails is due to the strength with which the coin is flipped, the amount of air currents and air pressure as it flies through the air, where it is caught, and if it is flipped over once it is caught. Chance doesn't "do" anything other than describe a probability.

When someone says that the universe or anything else came about by chance, they are extremely ignorant, superstitious, or just parroting a line they have heard before and have unthinkingly accepted. Chance makes nothing happen. It is merely a way of described statistical probabilities. We live in a cause and effect world, and chance is not a cause, but God is the great cause.

D. AGAINST ALL ODDS

1 Sam 6:10-12 Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. And they set the ark of the Lord on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors. Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh.

God wasn't leaving this up to chance. The cows didn't wonder around. They went straight where they were supposed to go. Since these cows were doing what God wants, I guess we can call them "Holy Cows."

They were lowing while they were traveling from the Philistine country to the Israelite territory. They were not happy to leave their little ones at home, they didn't care to have the yokes on their backs, they didn't have time to grab a few bites of grass on the sides of the roads. They just went on, led by the Spirit of God to the Israel territory.

E. RETURN OF THE CAPTURED ARK

1 Sam 6:13-14 Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord.

The Philistines were hoping that it was chance, not the God of Israel. The Israelites were depressed because they thought the glory of God left Israel. But the ark of God came back without anyone leading. There were no Green Beret Special Forces or Hostage Rescue Unit from Police Dept.

1 Sam 6:15 The Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone. Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices the same day to the Lord.

In a strict sense, their offering was against the Mosaic law. First, they offered female animals to the Lord, which was forbidden (Leviticus 1:3; 22:19). Second, they made a burnt offering to the Lord away from the tabernacle, which violated the command in Deuteronomy 12:5-6 (though, since the Ark of the Covenant was there, it might be said that the holy place was "there"). Yet, God knew both their hearts and the remarkable circumstances and was no doubt honored.

1 Sam 6:16-19 So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day. These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the Lord: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; and the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel on which they set the ark of the Lord, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh. Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the Lord had struck the people with a great slaughter.

God surprised the Philistine lords who put out a fancy test against God.

We notice God is dealing with the Israelites more strictly than He dealt with the Philistines, who just transported the ark by a cart. God does this because the Israelites, who had His law, should have, and did know better. Even so, it is sad to consider that the Philistines showed more honor to the holiness of God than the Israelites.

As I said before, we will get punished more severely for what we do wrong against God by Him than non-believers. Because we should know better.

The ark of the covenant represented the place where man met God. The golden cherubim were carved above the ark of the covenant. It was a representation of a place where man met God. Sinful man couldn't meet God. That's why the ark of the covenant was always to be covered when they carried it. Which is why they weren't to touch it.

In v 19, *"He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people"*

The manuscript evidence is pretty clear that the number recorded originally in the text was seventy, not fifty thousand and seventy. Seventy men dead in such an incident is still a great slaughter. Basically, the Hebrew grammar can mean that out of fifty thousand men, God struck seventy of them. NIV & New Living Translation made a proper translation for this.

1 Sam 6:20-21 And the men of Beth Shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? And to whom shall it go up from us?" So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark of the Lord; come down and take it up with you."

The people of Beth Shemesh acted in irreverence to God by looking inside of the ark. Instead of repenting, they chose to push God away. It is better for us to repent from what we did wrong than pushing God away. They acted no different than the false-god-serving Philistines.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) There is no such a thing is chance or coincidence.

Everything is planned and permitted by God. Nothing catches God by surprise.

Pr 16:9 A man's heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.

2) Don't mess with God.

Hophni and Phinehas thought they could win victories by trusting the ark when their lives were wicked, and God killed them. Eli died because he had not disciplined his own sons who were dishonoring the Lord. The Philistines died because they treated Jehovah like one of their own gods. The men of Beth Shemesh died because they presumptuously looked into the ark. It does not pay to mess with God.