

The Ark Comes Home – 1 Samuel 6:1-7:2

Introduction:

What a disaster! The armies of Israel have fallen to the armies of the Philistines. The priests of the temple are killed in the battle, and their father, the High Priest, dies shortly afterwards. Worst of all, the Ark of God is captured and taken to Philistine cities to be gloated over. Their god, Dagon, must be more powerful.

But what the Philistines did not know, and the Israelites needed to be reminded of, is the fact that the God of Israel is the true God who holds all power in His hand. This is the God who created all things and sustains them by His mighty power. This is the God who sent the plagues on Egypt, parted the Red Sea and led a nation of slaves to freedom.

The Philistines first encounter the wrath of God. The statue of their god, Dagon, falls to its face in the presence of the Ark of God. A plague of tumors and death breaks out in the Philistine cities that tried to “control” the God of Israel by holding captive His Ark. A great cry goes up to the heavens as the people are in dread of the God of Israel. They must get rid of the Ark of God or else all will die.

Chapter 6 tells the tale of how the Ark finds its way home to Israel. God’s hand is all over this story, and in the end, God’s people learn some valuable lessons.

The Report of the Diviners – 1 Samuel 6:1-6

1. How long did the Ark of God remain in the possession of the Philistines (v.1)?
2. Who did the Philistines call to advise them about the Ark of God (v. 1)? Can God speak to or through people who are not following Him?
3. What do the Philistines want to do – safely – with the Ark of the Lord (v. 2)?
4. The advice of the diviners is to offer a gift. Who is the gift for? What is it for (v. 3)? What does this tell us about what they feel has happened when the Ark was taken? What will be the sign that the right course of action has been taken and the gifts accepted?
5. What was the guilt offering in Israel?(cf. Leviticus 5:14-16) What do the diviners suggest the Philistines offer as a guilt offering (vss. 4-5)? Why these? Why five?

6. The diviners remind the Philistines of what event in verse 6? What do the diviners suggest the people are doing? What information in our passage might support this? According to the diviners, who was the source of the plagues in Egypt?
7. It appears the pagan diviners remember what the God of Israel did and feared Him more than the Israelites did. Can it happen today that non-believers fear God more than Christians do?

The Ark of God Goes Home – 1 Samuel 6:7-12

8. In verse 7 the diviners start to detail the plan to get the Ark out of the land of the Philistines. How will the Ark travel? What will pull the cart? Why choose cows with calves and that had never been yoked? What else were they to do to make Divine intervention necessary?
9. Along with the Ark of God, what else is to be placed in the cart (v. 8)?
10. The plan is to let the cows pulling the cart go where they wish. They are pointed towards which city (v. 9)? Why this city? (cf. v. 12) What will be the sign that the plagues were from the Lord, and not from something else?
11. The people decide it is a good plan and a good test. The odds were against the Ark going back to Israel. These cows did not know how to pull a cart, little own do it together. And behind them was the cry of their calves. Yet what happens when the cows are let loose with the cart carrying the Ark of God (v. 12)?
12. We must conclude God's hand was in this all the way. Why, then, do you think the cows are lowing all the time they are walking down the road (v. 12)?
13. Watching the cows make their journey straight to Beth Shemesh what must the Philistines conclude?

The Ark in Beth Shemesh – 1 Samuel 6:13-18

14. What were the people of Beth Shemesh doing when the Ark was returned (v. 13)? What was the response of the people when they saw the Ark coming on the cart?

15. Where did the cows go once in Israelite territory (v. 14)? What happened to the cows at this point?
16. Where does the Ark of God end up (v. 15)?
17. What is the response of the five kings of the Philistines (v. 16)? What do you think they have concluded?
18. Verses 17-18 are verses of explanation. They answer these questions:
 - Why five golden tumors and five golden rats?
 - Why the mention of the “big rock” in Joshua’s field?

What are the answers?

Disaster in Beth Shemesh – 1 Samuel 6:19-7:2

19. According to verse 19, what happens in Beth Shamesh? Why?

NOTE: Some of the texts read seventy men were killed, which many modern translations use here. It is suggested the village of Beth Shemesh would not have anywhere near 50,000 people. Yet there are many Hebrew manuscripts that mention 50,000 (plus the 70). So some texts simply say there were 50,070 men killed that day. The literal text that includes the 50,000 says “70 men, 50,000 men.” Some suggestions to what that might mean:

- 70 men from Beth Shemesh and 50,000 from the Philistines
- 70 men which felt like 50,000 in that small village
- 70 men were smote, which is 50 out of 1000 (village of 1500 men?)
- 70 men of the elders and 50,000 of the common folk

20. No matter how you solve the number dilemma, the effect of the deaths was devastating on the people. How did the people feel God had acted towards them (v. 19)?

21. We have talked of the fear of the Lord. We have seen two definitions of fear: one is to mistrust and desire to run away, while the other is to humbly bow down in worship. Which kind of fear are the people of Beth Shemesh displaying?
22. What do the people want to do with the Ark of God (v. 20)?
23. Who do the people of Beth Shemesh turn to for help (v. 21)? What do they tell these people? What does it appear they do not tell them?
24. How do the men of Kiriath Jearim respond to the call for help (chapter 7:1)? What do they do to protect themselves and the Ark?
25. How long will the Ark stay at Abinadab's house? Where might we think it would go? (cf. 1 Samuel 4:4)

Conclusion:

Israel has forgotten her God. Her enemies remember. They cite the stories (not always correct) of Israel's deliverance and how it was the God of Israel that rescued the people. But we find Israel, or her representatives, lacking in respect and awe of who God is. From Shiloh to Beth Shemesh we see a disregard for the things that are holy. Sadly, this disrespect of the sacred things of God indicates a deeper problem, a sin problem. God's people had drifted away from their Redeemer. Now they treated the Living God like one of the gods of the pagan nations around them. They see His sacred vessels, like the Ark of the Covenant, as good luck charms and tokens of power. They violate the holiness codes established by God with their forefathers, and then wonder why they must endure punishment. Though it would be over one thousand years later these words would be penned by the Apostle Paul, the truth was evident even in Samuel's time: "The wages of sin is death."

Nonetheless, God has not given up on His people. God is raising up a leader who will help the people repent, and find their way home to Him. God is faithful, even when His people are not. Praise God this is true, for therein lies our hope. God is faithful and lovingly, patiently calls the lost back to Himself. This is the theme of 1 Samuel.