

Broomfield



# PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Victorious in Holiness

### Surprised by God

Apocalyptic Dualism, though a big term, nevertheless references the fact that regardless of the national boundaries that exist on our planet today, there really are only two kingdoms in this world, and currently they co-exist. On the one hand there is the kingdom of Satan under which and by which much of this world is governed. Yet on the other hand there is the kingdom of God which entered into this world with the coming of Christ, and will forever remain after the kingdom of Satan is destroyed.

Satan's kingdom, also known as the world system, teaches that in order to get ahead in life, step on the weak. If you want to excel, make sure you get yourself noticed. In this system money, fame, power, and good looks are what are important. It is the nice guy who finishes last.

However, in Christ's kingdom the error of the world is pointed out. If you want to be first, you will be last. If you want to be rich, you must become poor. If you want honor, you will be unknown. If you want to live, you must die.

Now though we are citizens of the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, nevertheless it is easy to think and live according to the kingdom of Satan. Paul aptly reminded us saying, "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:1-2).

Now don't miss it brothers and sisters! God's word exhorts us to think and live according to the kingdom of God. This means that until we die there will always be a struggle when it comes to understanding the kingdom of God, and living according to it.

That is why so often in Scripture we read of God's people being dumfounded before the Lord,<sup>1</sup> and shocked at what He is doing.<sup>2</sup> Then we find them struggling to understand why. And then we find them angry at His providence.<sup>3</sup>

Our passage is an example of God's people becoming angry at His providence. Because Israel rebelled

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<sup>1</sup> Compare 2 Corinthians 12:8

<sup>2</sup> Compare Jonah 1:3

<sup>3</sup> For example, think of David's response following the mishap with the Ark. Compare 2 Samuel 6:8

against God, the Lord ordained that His people would go into battle against the Philistines and lose. And in that process they would forfeit the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines. Now, it came to pass after this that the Philistines brought the Ark into their temple as an offering to the greatness of Dagon, their false god.

Well, God needs no defense; He can take care of Himself. Consequently, 1 Samuel 5-6 details the ravaging of the Philistine people by God in which the Lord demonstrated to this pagan nation that He alone reigns! Indeed, He reigns as the King of kings and Lord of Lords.<sup>4</sup> God is a glorious and victorious warrior.<sup>5</sup> He is also a jealous God that will not share His glory with another.<sup>6</sup> He is a merciful God who gives compassion not only to His people, but also to darkened nations.<sup>7</sup>

Now our text details the events following the return of the Ark of God to His people.<sup>8</sup> And talk about a shock! What should have been the beginning of a great revival amongst the people of God turned sour when God's glory devoured a large percentage of the population at Bethshemesh.

In fact at first glance, this text raised the question: “What kind of God is Yahweh that He would strike His children in the midst of a celebration of His victory?”

The answer is that God is a Holy God!

That we might understand this, let's examine this text in detail.

1 Samuel 6:19, “**And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD,** even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.”

Now there is a much debate surrounding this verse on the part of commentators. Bible translations render it primarily in one of two ways:

1 Samuel 6:19 (ESV), “And 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.”

**\*\*or\*\***

“Because they had **looked into** the ark of the Lord.” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, RSV)

In this case, the English Standard Version gives us the most accurate reading — they looked upon the ark of the LORD.<sup>9</sup> But this reading has its problems also. First, the Ark obviously had been gazed upon by all the Philistines, the Israelites who lost it in battle, and now the men of Bethshemesh when it arrived in their territory — AND YET NO ONE LOST THEIR LIFE. And now, suddenly God tightens the rules without warning and many die. This makes it appear that God is rather capricious!

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<sup>4</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 5:1-5

<sup>5</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 5:6-12; 6:1-5

<sup>6</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 6:6-12

<sup>7</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 6:13-18

<sup>8</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 6:19-21

<sup>9</sup> Some commentators explain this by saying that the people looked under the covering of the Ark.

Some, in dealing with this problem,<sup>10</sup> have opted to take the Septuagint rendering which says, “But the sons of Jehoniah did not rejoice with the rest of the men of Beth-shemesh when they greeted the ark of the Lord; and he killed seventy men of them” (1 Samuel 6:19 NEB). Yet this doesn't solve the problem since this reading is not attested anywhere else and creates an even bigger problem: The men of Bethshemesh were killed because they didn't say, “Yippie!”? Truly this is fraught with greater problems than the Maseoritic text rendering.

Now, others have opted to take a little looser approach to the Hebrew and translate the “at” as “into” rendering the verse the way most Bibles have it today, “because they had looked into the ark of the Lord.” While this makes better sense — of course if any man gazed into the Ark they would die. Nevertheless the problem here is that this translation is not what the Hebrew says. So how do we take this verse?

Actually the answer is not that difficult or complicated. Numbers 4 gives us the answer.

In Numbers 4 God gives Moses the rules for the priests. Listen to what is said regarding the Kohathites — the group of priests entrusted with the care and transport of the Ark.

Numbers 4:17-20, “And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Cut ye not off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites: But thus do unto them, that they may live, and not die, when they approach unto the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in, and appoint them every one to his service and to his burden: But they shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die.”

At face value this seems just as ambiguous as 1 Samuel 6. How could a Kohathite transport the Ark without at least someone seeing it? How could they care for the Ark without gazing upon it?

This seems impossible. But if we notice the context of Numbers 4 we will find the answer. Numbers 4 is dealing with the transportation of the Ark. When the time came for it to be moved the Kohathites had to follow this procedure:

1. Before any Kohathite approached the ark, “Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering veil, and cover the ark of testimony with it” (Numbers 4:5).
2. Then with the Ark and all the utensils covered, the Kohathites were then to transport the holy things to the next location **BEING CAREFUL NOT TO GAZE UPON — or peek at — THE ARK LEST THEY DIE!**

Numbers 4 was given for the purpose of teaching the people of God that God is Holy. It shows us that each and every element associated with Him is holy. Therefore no man ought to approach God with a cavalier attitude — one little look results in death.

And so if a Kohathite in the process of transporting the Ark was found curious, such that he took a look at the Ark, it would cost him his life!

Well brothers and sisters, this is exactly what is going on in our text. No doubt when the ark arrived in Bethshemesh the priests saw it and they would have covered it with a holy garment or veil. They would

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<sup>10</sup> Most specifically the New English Bible and the New Revised Standard Version

have done this because this was THE PROTOCOL PRESCRIBED IN Numbers 4.11

Well, sometime during the course of sacrifices, offerings, and worship of our text, a group of men approached the Ark and did the unthinkable. They violated Numbers 4:17-20. They lifted the garment which covered the Ark. And gazed upon the Ark of the Lord!

Why did they do this? Was it curiosity? Did they have a little too much to drink? Did they take God's grace for granted?

Ultimately we cannot know the individual motives of these men! But this we do know this: Just like Eli and his sons before them, they brought God down to their level and many died. In other words, the loss of over 30,000 men to the Philistines in battle,<sup>12</sup> the forfeiting of the Ark and with it the fellowship of God,<sup>13</sup> and living as a forsaken people for seven months<sup>14</sup> did not teach these men a thing. They are evidencing the same worldliness and selfishness which brought the Ark into exile in the first place. In fact, it would not be until chapter 7 that we see a genuine revival amongst the people of God.

## The Fall Out

1 Samuel 6:19, “And he smote<sup>15</sup> the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.”

Again we are confronted with a difficulty in the original — specifically the number 50,070. In the Hebrew, the number is not written correctly. What we would expect if 50,070 was the intended number — based on the rest of Scripture — is that the larger number would be written first, and then both numbers would be united with the copula —waw.

In contrast, here the text simply places both of these numbers side by side — which is unparalleled in Scripture. The smaller number — 70 — is written first and then the larger. And the copula — the waw — which should be between the numbers is missing.

Consequently there is no doubt that the Hebrew text here has been corrupted. However, we are glad to know that many other copies of/references to this passage in ancient writings reference seventy as the number.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the number seventy is almost universally accepted as being the correct one.

You say, “Oh, only seventy died! Well that's not such a big deal.”

In contrast to 50,000 that's right. But when you consider that the population of Bethshemesh was quite small this would have been a significant number.

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11. In fact that our text says some looked at the ark implies that it was not visible to all, but rather covered.

<sup>12</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 4:10

<sup>13</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 4:11

<sup>14</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 6:1

<sup>15</sup> נָכַח nakah literally rendered smitten (as with disease). The same word used in 1 Samuel 4:8. A variant of this word is rendered plagues in 1 Samuel 4:8 which is מַכָּה makkah.

<sup>16</sup> Josephus and the Septuagint both affirm the number seventy.

Now before we continue in our study of this text, I want you to notice the obvious truth that God is not afraid of challenging man and his sin. Time and time again, we read of the Lord raining on a sinner's parade. We read of God intervening at the most inappropriate times. And we read of His punishing with death a person's good intentions.

For example<sup>17</sup> think of the offering of Cain and Abel. On that beautiful day so long ago, God was being worshipped by these two lads. In the middle of the worship, God rejected Cain's offering because it was not appropriate. The Lord didn't wait until a quiet time away from everyone else. He stopped Cain on the spot!

Or think of the time when David was transporting the Ark to Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> In the midst of the celebration, worship, and devotion — all directed at God Uzzah reached out, touched the Ark and was killed on the spot.

Think of the time in Malachi. The people of God were flocking to the sanctuary. In fact, attendance was very good. Finances were great. The worship of God was undergoing a significant revival. But then God spoke, “Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand” (Malachi 1:10).

Listen Brothers and Sisters, if these texts teach anything they tell us that unlike us, God does not look lightly upon any transgression of His glory. Truly as He said to the people in Malachi's day, “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles” (Malachi 1:11). In other words, at every moment, at all times, and in every place GOD EXPECTS TO BE TREATED AS HOLY!

And thus gaze upon each of the preceding examples — gaze upon our text — and you will find the good intentions of man co-mingled with a flippancy which said, “I can serve and worship God as I wish!” “God's my buddy; he'll accept my offering; He's love!”

Oh let us never forget. In the words of the Hebrew writer, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). And our text bears this out!

Now in response you might be tempted to say, “That's heavy! I'm not sure I want to be around a God like this!”

And that is exactly how God's people in our passage responded.

## **The Fright**

1 Samuel 6:20, “And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?”

The key phrase here is “stand before.” It is used in a variety of passages<sup>19</sup> in reference to the service

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<sup>17</sup> Consider toward the end of this age when the typical message from the pulpit will be that of “Peace! Safety!” Don't miss it. At that time, God will not wait for a good time to intervene. No! In the midst of the false-worship, “...destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and [no one] shall not escape.” (1 Thessalonians 5:3b)

<sup>18</sup> Compare 2 Samuel 6

<sup>19</sup> Compare Judges 20:27-28; Genesis 19:27; Deuteronomy 10:8, 19:17

associated with worship — thus rendering the question of the men of Bethshemesh as who is able to worship the Lord appropriately. What priest can successfully represent us in His presence?

Now I want you to notice that while the question is understandable, nevertheless it is unnecessary. See these people were NOT ignorant or untrained Jews celebrating God's deliverance. (If they had been, I dare say they wouldn't have died.)<sup>20</sup> RATHER they were priests who knew how to worship God. They were familiar with the ceremonies. And they knew the commandments associated with the ark.<sup>21</sup>

And yet they opted to do their own thing here. In fact for you to see it, I want you to picture a large field. It is harvest time and so there are sheaves stacked here and there. As the Ark arrived in early summer, the field is half harvested. In the middle of this field is a large stone upon which was resting the Ark of the Covenant which now has been covered with the appropriate garment. And next to the stone, we behold a large fire with multiple sacrifices taking place. In and around this altar and the large stone are a couple hundred people — mostly priests and their families — rejoicing, singing, and celebrating the victory of God.

Now sometime during the festivities, a discussion begins on account of the eyewitness account of some who saw the Ark.

One said, "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

Another spoke, "When we lifted it from the cart to the stone, its weight was enormous. The gold shone bright. And the craftsmanship and detail of the Cherubim was incredible."

"Never have I seen such an image in my life; I'll never forget it," a third replied.

"What? You wish you could have seen it?" The first queried. "Listen! The Ark has been uncovered for seven months. We saw it and didn't die. And besides that God brought the Ark back to us is an indicator that He is pleased with us."<sup>22</sup>

So, the group went and took a look at the Ark. And in the midst of the singing, dancing, and sacrifices of the people of God, seventy men gathered around the stone slab to lift the covering. And then suddenly, as the birth pangs of a woman, all seventy fell dead, and a hush of silence descended on the assembly.

The music, dancing, and singing stopped. Mouths were open. All that could be heard was the crackling of the fire. And each began to think to himself in an audible voice, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?" (1 Samuel 6:20).

In other words, what kind of God have we been called to serve? What are we going to do with the Ark? Where ought we to place it?

## **The Flight**

And this brings us to the flight.

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<sup>20</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 6:12-18

<sup>21</sup> Compare Numbers 4:20

<sup>22</sup> Mary Evans wrote, "The sacrifices having been carried out, new blessings might have been expected from Israel, but it was not to be." (*1 and 2 Samuel*, NIBC, p. 34)

1 Samuel 6:21, “And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, and fetch it up to you.”

We're going to discuss the significance of Kirjathjearim in more detail at another time, but for now, notice the first inclination of God's people here is to run. They want to get away from God. They want to keep God at a safe distance!

Truly, before they would worship Him again, the people wanted to ensure that God was leashed and under control. When I read this I think immediately of Genesis 3 after the fall in which Adam says this: “I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10).

Or the description that Paul gives us in Romans in which he says that the non-Christian is not seeking after God, but instead has “changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things” (Romans 1:23).

And yet that this compulsion is here listed among God's people tells us that though we are saved nevertheless we still have the passion to manage God, flee from His presence, and keep Him at a safe distance.<sup>23</sup> A. W. Tozer put it this way:

“Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control.”<sup>24</sup>

Brothers and sisters, such was the passion and desire of the people of God in our passage. Having been terrorized by God, they call for the Kohathites of Kirjathjearim to come and get the Ark, and so they opt to move the holy vessel to a safe location where they can access it if they wish.

From this we observe the final characteristic about God that this text emphasizes: He is Holy!

Upon the return of the Ark, it would have been easy enough for Israel to conclude that Yahweh was their own, personal deity — in fact they would do this in the years to come. In fact they approached God with a familiarity and thus an “easiness” which would bring God down to their level. They thought that “God may ravish the nations, but not us; we're special.” Yet the events of this text shook them — and it should shock us!

Truly, no man, nation, or people own God. How can the finite own the Infinite? How can the temporal own the Eternal? How can the creature possess the Creator? As the Holy One of Israel, He owns us; we do not own Him!

And this is so important. In the United States, specifically in the church, there is a familiarity with God that is blasphemous. Our worship largely has become man-centered attention is given NOT to what God requires in worship, but what man desires. Our approach to ministry is moved by marketing. Evangelism centers on man's fulfillment. Today, God has literally become an idol that we have placed on a shelf and that we appeal to when we want/need Him!

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<sup>23</sup> Compare also the people of God before Sinai when they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19).

<sup>24</sup> *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1961, page 16.

What a contrast to the testimony of Scripture. God is the Holy One before whom the angels bow in constant reverence! His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His doings are not our doings. Listen again to the text. The people of Bethshemesh hit is on the head.

1 Samuel 6:20, “And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?”

The word *holy* does not primarily reference the fact that God is morally pure — without sin. Rather, it references the fact that God is completely other above and beyond creation. For example, this word is used by sinless angels in Isaiah who stand in awe, not over God's moral purity — for they themselves are without sin — but over the fact that He is completely unlike them.

Isaiah 6:3, “And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And thus, to a people who thought that because God brought the Ark back to them that He could be approached as a peer God is rebuking such thinking!

The fact that the Lord had given them the priesthood, sacrifices, and offerings, they — unlike the evil, pagan nation of the Philistines — knew how to worship God. But this does not mean that we can deal with God according to our whims. After Nadab and Abihu died on account of their familiarity with the Lord, this is what God said:

Leviticus 10:3, “Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.”

This is the God, whom we've come to serve! Who has saved us! Who demands our service!

But do you know what we've done in response to this frightening God?

Rather than approach Him on His terms and work out our salvation with fear and trembling<sup>25</sup> we've called for the men of Kirjathjearim to come down and move Him to a safe distance.

For example, we all know that the favorite celebration of the church in our day is not the Sabbath, or the Lord's resurrection, or the Lord's Supper but a manmade “holy-day” called Christmas. When we are given the choice to observe Christmas or the Lord's day, which celebration is selected by the church?

Look around! Today, Sunday, December 25, 2005 is the Holy Sabbath and many, many churches have closed their doors for the sake of Christmas. And yet I'm not pointing the finger of judgment — for this is the inclination of all of us! We love Christmas as a people. Not ultimately because of the presents, the celebration, etc., but I would suggest to you because God as a babe in a manger is safe, controllable, loveable, and manageable.

We love Christmas as a people because when Christ became an adult He traumatized us with His holiness.<sup>26</sup> Yet may I make the suggestion?

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<sup>25</sup> Compare Philippians 2:12

<sup>26</sup> Compare Luke 5:8; Revelation 1:17



While as sinners we should be traumatized by God's holiness, in Christ we ought not to be! Listen to the question raised by the men of Bethshemesh — it is quite revealing. “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?”

While indeed no sinful man is able to stand before the Lord on account of His holiness, there is a perfect Man who not only can, but does! On the Mount of Transfiguration, while Peter was babbling we read this:

Matthew 17:5, “While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.”

Romans 8:34, “It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”

Indeed! Christ — who was typified by the Ark stands as our high priest before God. He ministers on our behalf before the Lord. And God is pleased!

And thus, if you will have Christ as your High Priest, clothed in His garments you will be able not only to stand before the Lord, and gaze upon His greatness, but you will also fellowship with Him and walk with Him in eternity!

With this I close with a final observation.

When the priests of Bethshemesh suffered under the heavy hand of God on account of their irreverence, what ought to shock us is not that many died, or that they sent the Ark away, but that they didn't consider themselves as the ones to blame.<sup>27</sup> They just assumed that God was an unpredictable and ravaging Lord — like many have in response to our text this morning — and so sent the Ark away!

And yet this is the sad part. Had they accepted the Ark on God's terms and approached this place of fellowship as God prescribed — through the work of a sanctioned priest — they would have known great blessing.

After David mistreated the Ark and Uzzah died, we read these words:

2 Samuel 6:11, “And the ark of the LORD continued in the house of Obededom the Gittite<sup>28</sup> three months: and the LORD blessed Obededom, and all his household.”

So this Christmas day, let us flee from God no longer. Rather, let us — clothed in Christ — run to Him and we shall not be consumed. Rather we shall know the joy of fellowship with the Lord.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Bergen wrote, “In responding to the judgments inflicted on them by the Lord, the Beth Shemeshites behaved like the Philistines: instead of mourning penitently for their sins, they 'mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them' (v. 19; cf. 5:12) and then came up with a plan to remove the ark from their territory (cf. 5:8-9; 6:2). Thus they demonstrated the magnitude of their spiritual darkness and so confirmed the Lord's righteous judgments against them.” (*1, 2 Samuel*, page 103-104)

<sup>28</sup> A Gittite was a Philistine from Gath. From this we see that it is not that God hates Philistines; it is that He hates sin.

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 18, 2005. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.