

Broomfield



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God in the Hands of Frightened Sinners

1 Samuel 6:21-7:2

When last we examined this passage, God's people had been terrorized by the Lord. Recall, when Israel loved their sin more than they loved God.¹ The people of the Lord forsook a love-relationship with Christ in favor of religious pretense.² And on account of Israel's lawlessness, "God's name was blasphemed amongst the Gentiles."³ The Ark of the Covenant — the single most important religious symbol in Israel— was lost to the Philistines.⁴ And yet the Lord — without the aid of His people — conquered the Philistine nation by which He proclaimed to the world the fact that He alone is

1. The only wise God- the King of kings⁵
2. A Glorious and Victorious Warrior⁶
3. A Jealous and yet Merciful God⁷

So the Lord —via the Ark — terrorized the Philistines for seven long months only to bring the Ark back to His people who obviously hadn't learned a thing. Recall that when the Ark arrived in Bethshemesh on that spring day, the people of God immediately broke into celebration. They undoubtedly would have covered the Ark according to the law of God⁸ — as Bethshemesh was a city of priests. They immediately sacrificed the cows and together with many more offerings, held a worship service that would have lasted the remainder of the day.

But then somewhere along the way 70 men, who presumably, hadn't seen the Ark, but had heard of how wonderful it was — its weight, beauty, craftsmanship, etc. — lifted the makeshift veil and immediately were struck dead on account of their irreverence.

Well one can imagine at this point that the music would have stopped along with the dancing and singing. The only sound that would have been heard was the crackling of the fire. And then corporately in a whisper the assembly would have begun wondering "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?"

¹ Compare 1 Samuel 2:12-17

² Compare 1 Samuel 4:4

³ Compare Romans 2:24

⁴ Compare 1 Samuel 4:11

⁵ Compare 1 Samuel 5:1-5

⁶ Compare 1 Samuel 5:1-12

⁷ Compare 1 Samuel 6:1-18

⁸ Compare Numbers 4:5

(1 Samuel 6:20).

Family of God let me ask you this: What do you do with a God like this? How would you proceed?

It wasn't but seven months ago that the Lord allowed over 30,000 Israelites to be slaughtered on the battle field on account of irreverence.⁹ The high priest and his sons died in one day. The Ark was captured.¹⁰ And the main sanctuary in Shiloh was yet to be destroyed.¹¹

And now that God has returned the ark, the slaughter has picked up right where it left off! So what do you do with this God?

Our passage gives one possible answer as it details the response of a group of sinners frightened by God.

Admittedly, the title that I have appended to this text comes from a sermon that Jonathan Edwards preached on July 8, 1741. While, his sermon was titled, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, clearly our text is about God in the Hands of Frightened Sinners.

Coping Through Superstition

Notice the first inclination of a people terrorized by God — they resort to coping through superstition.

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.”

This was the first reaction of the people of God to the Lord — move Him to a safe place.

Yet what is the significance behind “Kirjathjearim?” Why this city and not another?

To answer this I want to begin with a geography lesson.

The city of our text is Bethshemesh. It lay on the boarder of Israel and the Philistines on an open plain. Now as an Israelite city, we know that it had a large concentration of priests.¹² I have suggested that some could have been Kohathites — an order of priest charged with the care of the Ark. However if they were not Kohathites [which there is no way of telling], as priests they still would have understood full-well that the Ark was not to be seen by the human eye and therefore ought to be covered.

Bethshemesh was also a frontier city, we also know that it had Philistine inhabitants — as in fact this was where Delilah was from.¹³ Well — if one looks at a map — directly northeast of Bethshemesh up in the hills was the Israelite city of Kirjathjearim (a city eight miles west of Jerusalem).

Formerly this town went by a variety of names, all associated with Baal.

- Kiriath-baal, Joshua 15:60.

⁹ Compare 1 Samuel 4:10

¹⁰ Compare 1 Samuel 4:11-18

¹¹ Compare Psalm 78:60; Jeremiah 7:12

¹² Compare Joshua 21:16 and 1 Chronicles 6:59

¹³ Compare Judges 16:4

- Baalah, Joshua 15:9.
- Baale-judah, 2 Samuel 6:2.

Now as this city was a religiously significant place (as evidenced by the fact that Baal was closely associated with it), it is not surprising that when Israel conquered the land they transformed this city. It was transformed from a center for pagan worship to a center of worship for the Lord — we'll talk about this next time.

Accordingly, Kirjathjearim had become a holy place in the mind of the Jews.

Yet why was that? What constituted it as such? In fact, why was Baal closely associated with this city? And why now is God?

To answer this is to understand the first inclination of frightened sinners.

While I've already made reference to the fact that Kirjathjearim was a city located in the mountains, the text bears this out.

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.”

Whereas Bethshemesh sat at 917 feet above sea level Kirjathjearim sat at 2,385 feet above sea level. As such, Kirjathjearim was a “high place” in the ancient world — which would have had great significance. For at this time, it was believed that “high places” were inhabited by the gods.

For example, think of Greek religion and Mount Olympus — a mountain range just outside of Thessalonica. This was the home of the Greek pantheon as it was one of the highest places in Greece.

Also, think of the many references to the “high places” during the Kingdom Years of Israel.

1 Kings 11:7, “Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon.”

1 Kings 14:23, “For they also built them high places, and images, and groves, on every high hill, and under every green tree.”

2 Chronicles 21:11” Moreover he made high places in the mountains of Judah, and caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to commit fornication, and compelled Judah thereto.”

Truly there are many references to “high places” in the Old Testament. Typically these were make-shift altars erected for the purpose of worshipping false gods. Again because it was believed that the gods dwelt on high, if you wanted to worship a deity, you went up into the mountains/hills.

Now to be sure, there was something to the belief that the gods inhabited high places — superstition doesn't arise in a vacuum. Recall that it was on a mountain that Abraham was to sacrifice his son, Isaac.¹⁴ When God met with Moses, the Lord called him up to Mount Sinai.¹⁵

¹⁴ Compare Genesis 22:2

¹⁵ Compare Exodus 3:1; 19:2-3

Why?

Listen to the statement made by Amos:

Amos 4:13, “For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.”

As an apologetic against the notion that Baal owns the high places, Amos here proclaims that he doesn't. Truly, everything is in the dominion of God! In fact, it is because of this notion that God's people — in disobedience to God as we'll see — often times took over the high places of Baal and claimed them for God (this is what happened at Kirjathjearim).

And so, early in redemptive history God chose to sanctify high places as the place where He met with His people. This in fact was where the idea of an altar came from — it lifted the offering up high before the gods. Thus, if you were living in a town on a plain, so long as you had an altar, you had a “high place.”¹⁶

And so the concept of a “high place” in association with the worship of Yahweh was common. And yet, with the coming of Moses — this is important — it all changed.

When Moses brought God's people to Sinai and the nation beheld the awesome presence of God which shook a mountain, they were frightened.

Exodus 20:18, “And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.”

Consequently in their fright, they made this request:

Exodus 20:19, “And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”

In other words, no more mountains! Just you, Moses!

And this is how God responded:

Exodus 20:20-21, “And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.”

So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was”- and so was instituted the formal office of “Prophet” in the Old Testament.

Don't miss it! God replaced the quaking mountain, thunder, lightening, and smoke into this HIGH PLACE — the still, small voice of the prophet!

This has grave implications when it comes to our theology of the Word of God. If God took away the

¹⁶ Compare Ezekiel 16:24-31

word, the prophet, and the preacher and we were to go back to the days of Sinai, we would have a very frightening experience! And this ought to change the way we approach the word of God.

With the coming of Moses and the formal institution of the Prophetic office, the place of fellowship shifted — don't miss this — from high places to the Word of God! In fact, Moses went to great lengths to condemn the use of high places in connection with the worship of God.

Deuteronomy 12:1-4, “These are the statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the LORD God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it, all the days that ye live upon the earth. Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. Ye shall not do so unto the LORD your God.”

In other words, no more high places for the people of God! The Harper Bible Dictionary wrote this:

“From the OT denunciations, it is clear that the high places had a central part in popular religion and, before the Deuteronomic demand for their destruction and the centralization of worship at a single sanctuary, they were considered a legitimate feature of the worship of Yahweh... [Yet on account of its association with] Canaanite fertility religion and the worship of Baal (Jeremiah 19:5; 32:35), ...it [was] strongly condemned, especially in Deuteronomic passages in the book of Kings, in Chronicles, and in the Prophets...(2 Kings 18:4; 23:8, 13, 15, 19).”¹⁷

And thus, by the time of Samuel and the Kingdom years, God appeared to His people NO LONGER in a high place or upon a mountain but in and through the prophetic word.¹⁸

1 Samuel 3:21-4:1, “And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.”

By the time of Samuel and the Kingdom years “high places” were superstitious.¹⁹ Oh to think that God could be confined to a mountain, did not dwell with His people, and was limited in space and time verged not only on the foolish, but the reprehensible!

The Samaritan woman highlights this in John 4.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* under the heading, “High Place” (Achemier, Paul J., Th.D., [San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.] 1985).

¹⁸ As well as the Ark and the Tabernacle/Temple compare also Deuteronomy 12:5

¹⁹ Some might reference 1 Samuel 9:12ff as support to the contrary. However, this text does not indicate an endorsement of “high place worship.” Rather, it simply states that on this particular circuit-ride of Samuel (cf. 1 Samuel 7:16-17), the prophet participated in a worship service which was held in a high place. This hardly constitutes an endorsement.

Furthermore, there are other passages which speak of a high place with apparent endorsement (cf. 2 Chronicles 1:1-13). Scholars have much to say about this, but in a nutshell it is generally accepted that Israel, upon conquering the land, took over many high places for the glory and honor of God (as opposed to destroying them as they ought to have done). Consequently, certain key “high places” (like at Gibeon) became well known and were used for good in God's economy. With this however, it must be stressed that while God causes all things to work together for good... (Romans 8:28), that doesn't mean that all things are good. Likewise, while God may have used a high place, that does not constitute a reversal of what the Lord told Moses in Deuteronomy 12.

John 4:20, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”

In essence, she is asking, “In what High Place ought we to worship?”

And the Divine response was this:

John 4:21, “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.”

John 4:24, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Truly when we think of high places at this time in redemptive history²⁰ the thought that ought to come to our mind is that of a pagan and darkened culture. It is that of a backwards religion and superstitious approach to God.

In light of this, let us once again read the text and consider the first response of frightened sinners to God.

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.”

In other words, move the Ark of the Covenant to a high place, that will solve the problem. In fact, notice this:

1 Samuel 7:1, “And the men of Kirjathjearim came, and fetched up the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD.”

It wasn't just any family that the Ark went, to. It was placed with a family whose house was built on a hill — this was a high place upon a high place!

So what was the first inclination of these frightened brothers and sisters?

It was to move God to a high place — it was to move Him to a manageable location. And so, rather than repenting of their sin, crying out for forgiveness and mercy, submitting to His word, serving God alone, and relying upon the Messiah, they succumbed to the Superstition of their day and sought to move God to a place where He would be happy and could be controlled — a high place.

And this constitutes the first response of frightened sinners to God: They cope through superstition.

And yet let's be very clear. What are we talking about here? Of what am I accusing the people in this text? What do I mean by “superstition?”

Superstition Defined

Superstition simply defined is the attempt to influence a god through one's actions, behavior, and or a ritual. And thus since the fall, this has been our primary modus operandi when it comes to God. If we're

²⁰ Especially their creation — for as many already were being used as centers for the worship of God.

not fleeing from Him, we're endeavoring to manipulate Him by our actions.

And that's what's going on in our text. In 1 Samuel 6:1-16 we read of the Philistines fleeing from God. In 1 Samuel 6:21 we read of the Israelites endeavoring to manipulate God by bringing the Ark to a high place. And that brings us to a very important question, brothers and sisters:

- What is your high place this morning?
- What act, behavior, or ritual do you believe is necessary in order for God to bless you?

If you're honest with yourself and care to embark upon the difficult journey of self-evaluation, you will discover “high places” in your life. In fact, redemptive history is filled with them.

- Prayers.
- Religious activities — like circumcision.
- Holy places — like a temple.
- A mantra.
- The word of God.
- A relationship with one deemed holy.
- One's faith or belief.

All these have become — at times — high places in the lives of God's people!

In fact a study of Scripture reveals that “high places” typically are created from something that God has given to His people that they might know, love, and serve Him. And that is why they are so hard to root out.

- Who would speak against Bible study?
- Who would down-play the importance of the Lord's Supper or Baptism?
- Prayer... Fellowship... Scripture memory- there is nothing wrong with these things!

And yet, if we think that thereby God will bless us, be more pleased with us, and that God's anger will be assuaged by our doing these things, shockingly we have developed a high place in our lives.

From this I want you to see that God would have us as children satisfied only with Christ. He wants us living exclusively in dependence upon Him. He wants us to cling to the cross. And any thought or action to the contrary is hostility and open warfare against God.

Now I know that most if not all of you have heard this message before. You know that if you are relying upon anything other than Christ for God's satisfaction, you have gone astray in your walk. Or if you are clinging to anything other than the cross, you are in rebellion. Thus when it comes to the message of this text I do not anticipate that you will have heard anything new. Rather, I would anticipate that on account of this text all of us together would renew our vigor to discover and so root out the high places in our lives.

God's Command

It's what God commanded in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the

weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”

Clearly in this text Paul is pitting a genuine relationship with God against high places — “...lofty things raised up against the knowledge of God.” Accordingly, like Hezekiah or Josiah before us — godly Kings who were known for having destroyed the high places during their regency²¹ — we are charged with the same task in our own lives! Any thought which might replace Christ's sacrificial atonement, any activity which completes our service and thereby making it acceptable, any ritual upon which we might rest in order to secure divine blessing must be challenged, attacked, and crucified.

Truly, God would have us to be content with nothing less than a love-relationship with Christ! And thus as David before said, “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17).

Truly that we might be freed from “morphing” any gift that God has given into an high place, let us heed the example of David. God is not impressed by our offerings, sacrifices, or acts of devotion. What God wants, and what we need in our walks, is a broken and contrite heart.

Now don't miss it. When such is the case, all that remains is a love-relationship with Christ. Now this doesn't obviate the need for service, devotion, or obedience in the Kingdom of God. Rather, it places these things in their proper context.

I close with these words. Family of God, a relationship with Christ is not easy, nor is it a cake walk. It means walking with a loving Lord who will discipline and correct us unto our ultimate good. Now when the hand of God is heavy upon us such that we feel His reproof the answer is NOT superstition — resorting to some religious act or attitude to assuage His anger. The answer is a broken and contrite heart whereby we say to God, give me neither poverty nor riches, do not give me ease of days, and give me nothing less than Christ!

²¹ Compare also 2 Kings 18:4; 23:8

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About the Preacher

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