

FALL OF THE GODS

1 Samuel 5:1-12

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When they arose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold (1 Sam. 5:4).

In Samuel 4 records Israel's defeat at the battle of Ebenezer, in which Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain and the Ark of the Covenant fell into Philistine hands. 1 Samuel 5 follows up by telling of the fate of the Ark among the Philistines.

Israelites feared that their beloved artifact had been lost forever or, even worse, that God's power might now pass to their enemies. But instead of God falling into their hands, those who possessed God's holy box discovered what the writer of Hebrews warns us: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

PHILISTINES TODAY

The apostle Paul informs Christians that the events of the Old Testament "happened to them as an example," and "were written down for our instruction" (1 Cor. 10:11). This says that the principles taught by this ancient episode are relevant for us today. Like Israel of old, the church in the West today is in a state of weakness, having apparently been routed in the battle for our generation. Anyone who doubts this need only stroll through a magazine shop or watch an evening of television: our land is dominated by Philistine powers with scarcely a hint of genuine Christian influence. In a 1953 address to an international congress of Reformed Christians, Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out the parallels between the situation in 1 Samuel 4-5 and the modern church: "Surely it is nothing but an account of religion in a state of declension... It is

God, and God's cause, apparently completely routed and almost, as it were, destroyed, by the great traditional enemy. The enemy is triumphant all along the line, and is rejoicing. That is the picture."¹

The Philistine enemy takes different forms at different times. At the vanguard of the unbelieving army today is secular philosophy and science. Philosophy has always regarded Christianity as foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), but of late the philosophers have gone further and pronounced religion in general and Christianity in particular as dangerous to the public good. Recent best-selling titles include Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Good: How Religion Poisons Everything* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. These books garner great public attention and shape the thoughts of many people.

If anything, the assault from science is even more intense. This week, the world observed the two hundredth birthday of Charles Darwin, father of the theory of evolution. It is now taken for granted in secular media and public education that Darwin's theory not only shook but destroyed the biblical account of the world, thus freeing enlightened minds from the shackles of religion. While passing through London a few years ago, I found it remarkable to see Darwin's picture on England's ten-pound note. In a country that once celebrated the cultural supremacy of such Christians as Isaac Newton and John Milton, England's pride is now vested in this Philistine giant who supposedly brought low the Bible. Lloyd-Jones commented that "on the surface we might very well come to the conclusion that the modern Philistines have been as successful as their ancient prototypes. Indeed, our contemporaries believe that the modern Philistine really has demolished the church and the Christian cause... the secularization of the whole of life seems to be almost complete."²

In our twenty-first century, things are much worse even than in Lloyd-Jones' time fifty years ago, an era when Christian morality still exerted a strong influence on society. Today, the postmodern Philistine looks even more triumphant than the modern Philistine in his battle over the church. Secular society has advanced from godless

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 60.

² *Ibid.*, 61.

rationalism to godless hedonism. Even the basic building blocks of human society – gender distinctions and the institution of marriage – are under ferocious assault. So thorough is the postmodern Philistine victory that a large portion of the Christian church has virtually given up even trying to influence the culture and frankly admits to adopting worldly, Philistine values such as pragmatism, relativism, and sensualism as being necessary to basic survival. In short, our situation is very much that of Israel under the heel of the Philistines; the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been for us a massive defeat not unlike the Israelite calamity at Ebenezer.

It is not that the Philistines want to do away with God altogether. The actions described in 1 Samuel 5:1-2 perfectly describe the attitude towards God today: “When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon.” They did not destroy the Ark, but instead they put it in their own temple on a shelf near their god.

This precisely describes the attitude of the Philistine world today towards God. It really does not want to eradicate God but only to domesticate him. We see this in the desire of non-Christian people to be married in a church. Even more, we see it in the use of a Bible and the invocation of God’s name when public officials are sworn into office. No one actually believes in the Bible or permits its teaching to be heard in public affairs, but if it can be taken off the shelf to lend a little sanctity to our government then that is fine. Our courts and legislative sessions open with prayers for God to bless America, so long as God does not try to tell anyone what to do. This is what the Philistines intended for the Ark: God could remain if he sat behind the Philistine god and stayed quiet.

HOW DOES GOD HANDLE THE PHILISTINES?

All of these observations could have been made at the end of 1 Samuel 4, as the surviving widow of Eli’s house dies with the word “Ichabod” – “the glory has departed” – on her lips. So what does chapter 5 have to say? We might put it this way: chapter 4 shows the weakness of a spiritually corrupt and fallen church against the Philistine powers. So chapter 5 asks, “What can God do about the

Philistines?” The Philistines are, after all, God’s enemies as well as his peoples’, so what will God do to the Philistines? The answer is provided in dramatic fashion: “when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place” (1 Sam. 5:3). This is what happens whenever the idols are exalted against God: he humbles the false gods before the world.

Lloyd-Jones compared God’s humbling of Dagon to the early decades of the twentieth century. The nineteenth century ended with an arrogant confidence. Writers spoke of a golden age of humanism: because of his science and knowledge, man was evolving into a self-made and self-glorying paradise. Now that religion was put on the shelf, education would eradicate war and poverty. But immediately the priests went into the temple to find Dagon fallen on his face. The Moroccan crisis of 1911 threatened to upend their political arrangements and cast Europe into war. But Dagon was put back up and the situation was controlled, so the people moved on. In 1912, Dagon fell on his face again. The Titanic, the ultimate naval achievement, a ship that, according to its designer, “even God could not sink,” sank in the cold North Atlantic. People aboard had been enjoying themselves, the band was playing on the deck, when news of icebergs surfaced. No one worried until the ship was struck and began to go down. The modern worldview was briefly shaken, but Dagon was put back up. Finally in 1914, the war that everyone said was impossible began: World War I. It was a terrible, bloody war, but when it was over the modernists declared it “the war to end all wars,” and Dagon was set back in place.

What was happening? God was humbling the idols of modernity. And when the people did not repent, God finally struck the idol a deadly blow. When Dagon fell, the embarrassed priests simple hauled him back up to his seat of sovereignty. But the next day, “Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him” (1 Sam. 5:4). This mirrored a common practice performed on the corpses of slain enemies: their heads and hands would be taken as trophies of their conquest. Dagon was conquered and slain by the God of Israel’s

Ark. Verse 5 tells us that years later Philistine priests still remembered the humbling of their god: “This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day” (1 Sam. 5:4-5).

Modernity was smashed by the coming of Nazism and World War II, then by the communism of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, and finally by the threat of planetary nuclear suicide. God does not leave the Philistine gods alone: he throws them to the ground. And when idolatrous man has put the idols back in place enough times, God smashes the idol, cutting off its head and hands.

The great tragedy of our era is that when God destroyed the idol of twentieth century modernity, the Western nations did not repent and turn to God but moved on to post-modernity. We have simply stepped over the threshold and adapted new strategies for rebelling against the Lord’s sovereignty. As a result, we can expect that in the years to come God will cast down the idols of postmodernity, in due time smashing them utterly.

At the center of post-modernity is the sexual revolution of the 1960’s and 70’s. Americans decided to put the Bible on the shelf and write our own rules for sex, marriage, and even gender. As a direct result, the breaking of homes through divorces sky-rocketed, as did the spread of pornography and sexual violence. Dagon obviously was fallen, but we put him back up and moved on. Next was the open advocacy of homosexuality and related sexual deviancies. What happened? However we choose to explain it, at the very moment when American culture was granting acceptance to sexual perversions denounced by the Bible as abominations (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), a mysterious virus appeared that spreads death primarily through sexually permissive behavior. One might think this would spur widespread national repentance. Instead, we have devoted ourselves to health solutions while utterly refusing the moral reforms that would practically wipe out AIDS. Dagon has been set back in place and our society has resumed its moral idolatry. What now? The example of Europe is telling in this respect. There, sexual immorality, coupled with the demise of marriage and a corresponding disinterest in children has produced a birth rate so low that numerous European

peoples are in danger of vanishing, as Moslems rapidly move to occupy the vacant space in the European terrain.

There is no other adequate explanation for the bloodbath of the twentieth century and the shocking collapse of Western society in the twenty-first century than God's judgment on our false gods and idols. What we have said about the idol of hedonistic sexuality, we could say about the gods of politics and government, of technology, and of military power. When Dagon has fallen, the lessons of the Bible and of history implore us to repent and seek the grace of the God who makes all the false gods to fall.

GOD'S HEAVY HAND

God not only humbles and slays the idols that are set against him, but he also judges the people who worship and serve them. The first Philistines to feel God's wrath were the people of Ashdod:

The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god" (1 Sam. 5:6-7).

Whereas Dagon's hands were cut off, the Lord's hand was heavy upon his enemies. It seems likely that God afflicted the Philistines with bubonic plague, the term "tumors" speaking generally about swellings and growths. This was a disease that frequented coastal regions, spread by mice and rats that came in on ships. We see a connection between the "tumors" and mice in 1 Samuel 6:4-5, when golden mice are offered in sacrifice. Kyle McCarter notes that "a connection between rats and pestilence was recognized in early times,"³ and it is possible that the Lord terrified the people by having swarms of infected mice and rats overrun their habitations.

The Ashdodites realized that Israel's God was the cause of their calamity. They summoned a council of all the Philistine lords and asked, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" (1 Sam. 5:8). God had gotten their attention, just as he seeks ours today. The Philistines agreed to move the ark to Gath, thinking that perhaps there

³ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 123.

were just local circumstances behind the apparent outbreak of divine wrath in Ashdod. But the same thing happened in Gath: “The hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them” (1 Sam. 5:9). So next “they sent the ark of God to Ekron,” but the people immediately rebelled. “They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people,” they cried (1 Sam. 5:10). The point is that God’s heavy hand against the worshipers of false gods is universal and constant:

They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.” For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven (1 Sam. 5:11-12).

This episode is not an isolated incident. Rather, it is a warning of God’s judgment on all idolaters. The experience of God’s obvious judgment on the false gods of our times makes a similar point. Lloyd-Jones asserts, “Everything that is happening in this century is, in the same way, pointing to the judgment of God upon rebellious man, and announcing the final destruction of all who do not submit to him.”⁴

WHY ARE CHRISTIANS DEFEATED?

The episode of the Ark in Philistia speaks powerfully to God’s people and to the Philistine world. What was the message to Israel and the church? The point for us is to understand rightly the cause of our defeat in the world. The fall of Dagon before the Ark of the Lord shows that we suffer defeat not because our enemy is so strong, much less that the Philistine god is stronger than our God. Rather, the cause of our weakness and defeat is our failure to trust and obey the Lord.

We frequently hear that Christianity is waning because today’s society is just too hostile to the gospel. We cannot expect educated people to seek truth from the Bible rather than from the certified results of science. We cannot hope to attract people who are drunk on

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, 69.

sensual pleasures to be interested in a church service – especially worship that fails to conform to popular tastes and demands. We cannot expect today’s people to give their video-short attention spans to serious Bible preaching. The Philistines of secularism, sensualism, and relativism are just too strong and biblical Christianity lacks sufficient appeal. It is on this view that so many Christians and churches have concluded that we must join the Philistines if we are ever to win them. So it seemed for Israel: the Philistines had better technology and organization, and even bigger and stronger men. Yet how easy it was for God to cast the Philistine idol upon his face!

This shows, by the way, that it is not the church’s job to cast down the Philistine gods. The job of God’s people is to honor the Lord in all things, refusing to join in the world’s idolatry and remaining faithful. Thus Christians are told to “to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). We are not told to go on the offensive against Satan, but “to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:13). This is not to say that Christians should not speak out against lies and evils. It simply means that the church in its spiritual mission is not called to wage worldly warfare against our enemies. In his own time, in his own ways, we can be sure that God will humble the idols of the world. We are to remember the Lord, trusting in him and spreading his gospel through the world.

Israel’s problem in the days of Eli’s priesthood was that they forgot about God. Eli’s sons could not possibly have committed their sins in the temple had they remembered the Lord. Israel was spiritually estranged from God and his Word; their worship was false-hearted; their lives were an affront to the Lord’s purity. Forgetting God, drifting from God, and offending God, the Israelites were easy prey for the Philistine army. And so it is with the Christian church today.

The same is true on a personal level. Consider, as one example, the struggle of men today with the sin of pornography. Numerous surveys show a majority of men practically addicted to filthy fantasies, mainly by means of internet web sites. Surveys also show professing Christian men, and even pastors, addicted to pornography at similar rates as non-believers. In response to cries of alarm, we are told that we must simply face the fact that the temptation is too strong, the pictures too accessible, and men’s hearts too deeply

ingrained for us to expect any real change. What can an Israelite man do in the face of so mighty a Philistine? The answer is that we can remember God. We can turn to God for his power. We can bathe our hearts and minds in the glory of God through his Word. We can gain a passion for the cause of the gospel in a dying world, so that we no longer need fantasies in order to feel important. We can get on our knees and ask our mighty, merciful God to cleanse us from our sins and make us holy.

The reality is that Christians not only *must not* continue in the sinful habits of a Philistine world, but we also *need not* continue in the power of sin. Yes, the Philistine is stronger than we are, but not stronger than God! The apostle John reminds us, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4). This was Paul’s logic when he wrote to Christians living in a world just as depraved as ours, with sinful pleasures just as accessible and just as culturally tolerated: “You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions... For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:11-14).

GOD’S MESSAGE FOR THE PHILISTINE WORLD

By casting down the Philistine idol and striking the people in his wrath, God delivered a message not only to his own people but also to the Philistine world.

First, God proved that he is *a living God*. The Philistines thought of their gods as objects: idols that they worshiped to gain an edge in the problems of life, but still objects. Israel had fallen into this kind of thinking when it put its confidence in the Ark, while forgetting God. But God is not a thing to be manipulated and controlled, an object to be put on the shelf and taken down at our whim. He is today as he was in Bible times: “the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jer. 10:10). Lloyd-Jones says, “When you think you have him defeated, then he is active; when you think you have him captive, he knocks down your god. He is God who cannot be restrained, illimitable, absolute, eternal – the living God.”⁵ For

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, 70.

this reason, we all must reckon with God, for it is before the living God that we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Second, the Lord taught that he is *the one and only true God*. God is jealous of his exclusive status: “I am the LORD your God... You will have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2-3). God is not placated if we make a little room for him on the shelf of our lives. He demands exclusive sovereignty in our lives. He will not share his reign with idols, but ruthlessly casts them down and smites those who serve them. On the national level, if we make a god of government, then God will send corrupt and incompetent leaders. If we make a god of the economy, God is able to make the stock market plummet. If we use science to violate his laws, then God will make our technology a curse to our lives. God demands that all things – presidencies, corporate earnings, fighter planes, and microscopes – be submitted to his sovereign rule. “I am God and there is no other,” he decrees; “I am God, and there is none like me” (Isa. 46:9). Likewise, on the personal level, God calls for us to submit all things to his service, not willing to share sovereignty in our hearts with the false gods of fame, pleasure, or wealth.

Third, the living and true God is *a God of awesome power and might*. How swiftly and surely the Philistines were crushed when the heavy hand of God struck them, just as God did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the time of Moses. There is no chance of withstanding God’s judgment, either now or in the end. For this reason, the odds of the evolutionary worldview prevailing indefinitely are precisely zero. The chances of sexual liberty producing happiness are zero. God will strike down every rebel power with his infinite might.

History has shown this over and again. The French Revolution raised its fist against God and produced not fraternity but tyranny. Nineteenth century German humanism did not produce a secular heaven but the hell of Nazism. Atheistic communism did not produce a workers’ paradise but a workers’ poorhouse. Likewise, secular humanistic, postmodern America will not achieve its promised dreams of pleasure and prosperity but only a legacy of societal ruin and lost opportunity. God lives. God demands our worship. And God is omnipotent to frustrate the plans of rebel mankind.

Lastly, God reveals himself as *a saving God*. The Philistines might well have reflected on what God was doing to the enemies of his people. How faithful this God was to allow himself, via the Ark, to fall into the hands of his enemies, that he might better save Israel. Reflecting on God's covenant-keeping grace, the Philistines should have cast out Dagon and every other false god in order to embrace the true God in faith.

The message God delivered to the Philistines is the message we need to give to our world today. We must insist that God is not on the shelf and that God is very much involved in events and affairs, in accordance with the principles taught in his Word. He is a living God and we must reckon on him. Moreover, we must insist that God is jealous, warning of grave danger for all who trust in other gods. We must show people from both Scripture and God's providential dealings in history how foolish and futile it is to rebel against the true and living God, and how severe is his holy judgment against his enemies.

But we can also tell the world that the God who we should all fear is also a merciful and saving God who we can adore and trust. For this incident of the Ark falling into enemy hands was only a preview of a greater work of salvation. God sent his own Son into this rebel world to deliver his people. Jesus surrendered to his enemies, but did not strike them with his heavy hand. Instead, he yielded himself to death on the cross. In this way, God struck the heaviest blow to the power and dominion of sin, taking away its curse by cleansing our guilt with the precious blood of Christ. The plague of sin that should rightly slay us fell instead on Jesus Christ. Indeed, it was for Philistine sinners like us that Jesus died: Paul writes, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Now, by trusting in Christ we are reconciled to live in the light of God's love. And remembering the Lord in obedient faith, we need never fear any Philistine foe ever again.