

# THIS HOLY GOD!

1 Samuel 6:1-7:2

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, February 22, 2009

---

Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?” (1 Sam. 6:20).

The apostle Paul addressed the philosophers in Athens, saying, “I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22). Those same words might be said of men in every place and time. People in our day claim to have repudiated religion, when their pursuit of science is intensely religious, seeking the hope and meaning that have traditionally come from belief in God. Even the Philistines, the ancient enemies of God’s people, Israel, were very religious. Thus they took special joy in capturing Israel’s most holy object, the Ark of the Covenant. But when the presence of the Ark brought God’s wrath upon them in the form of a deadly plague, the Philistines sought answers to some of the most basic religious questions. They wondered, first, how to escape God’s holy wrath. They then sought a means for understanding God’s holy ways. Finally, when the Philistines were rid of the Ark, the Israelites sought yet another essential religious question. They asked, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” (1 Sam. 6:20).

## ESCAPING GOD’S HOLY WRATH

The Philistines’ first question is one that was particularly pressing given their circumstances. “The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months” (1 Sam. 6:1), and during this time the people of at least three Philistine cities were thrown into an uproar. It started in Ashdod when the Philistine god Dagon was found on the ground before the Lord’s Ark and then later

with his head and hands cut off. A plague fell upon the people of Ashdod, so the Ark was sent away to Gath and then to Ekron. Ekron was thrown into panic and many died or “were struck with tumors” (1 Sam. 5:12).

It was clear that all was not well between the Philistines and the Lord. Capturing their enemy’s most sacred object was something to be proud of, so at first there likely was opposition to simply giving up the Ark. But now it was clear that it had to be sent away. The question was how? “The Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, ‘What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place’” (1 Sam. 6:2). Kenneth Chafin writes: “What had happened to their god Dagon, to themselves, and to their land had created a certain fear of making things worse by not observing the proper protocol.”<sup>1</sup> The priests answered them: If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering” (1 Sam. 6:3).

The Philistines’ approach reveals both insight and ignorance with respect to God and his holy wrath. What insight they had came from the schooling they had been receiving: they realized they had offended a holy God. Yet even with this insight, their desperate attempts to rid themselves of God and his wrath ultimately reveal great ignorance of God and his ways. Still, their actions help us to understand three key truths about God and his holy wrath.

The first truth is that God’s wrath is brought on us by our sin, which the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”<sup>2</sup> Placing the God’s holy Ark beside a pagan idol transgressed not only God’s law but God’s very first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). This sin alone was a sufficient explanation for the Philistines’ suffering at God’s hand.

Second, the holy God responds to sin with wrath and judgment. As Paul wrote, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18). He teaches the very thing experienced by the Philistines, that “the wages of sin is

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Chafin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Preacher’s Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 57

<sup>2</sup> Answer 14.

death” (Rom. 6:23). The Philistines had offended God and broken his law, so God in his wrath struck them with death.

The idea of God’s wrath is widely disputed today. An example is Rabbi Harold Kushner, who tells of ministering in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, and feeling distress by the guilt that his people felt. To address these feelings of guilt, Kushner wrote a book revising the Bible’s story of Adam and Eve and their fall into sin by eating from the forbidden tree. Kushner writes, “A God who punished people so severely for breaking one arbitrary rule was not a God I wanted to believe in.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in Kushner’s retelling, “the story of the Garden of Eden is not an account of people being punished for having made one mistake, losing Paradise because they were not perfect... The story of the Garden of Eden is not a story of the Fall of Man, but of the Emergence of Humankind.”<sup>4</sup> In short, Kushner responds to the guilt feelings of his congregation by denying the Bible’s teaching on sin and by simply changing the Bible’s story. Remarkably, similar arguments are being made today evangelical Christian scholars. For instance, evangelicals Joel Green and Mark Baker write, in accord with Kushner, “The Scriptures as a whole provide no ground for a portrait of an angry God needing to be appeased in atoning sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup>

Kushner’s book would not have sold well among the Philistines and Green and Baker’s argument would have gained little traction in Ashdod or Gath. The Philistines had experienced God’s wrath first hand! Whether or not they felt guilty, it was obvious that God considered them guilty and responded in anger. The Bible concurs with this view, assuring us that God’s wrath burns against all unforgiven sin. To be sure, we should never think of God’s wrath in terms of petulant, sinful human anger. Instead, John Stott explains, “The wrath of God... is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations.”<sup>6</sup> Given the perfect holiness of God, such wrath

---

<sup>3</sup> Harold Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be?* (New York: Little Brown, 1996), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>5</sup> Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 173.

against sin is not only inevitable but it is also right. J. I. Packer thus argues, “So far from the manifestation of God's wrath in punishing sin being morally doubtful, the thing that would be morally doubtful would be for Him *not* to show His wrath in this way.”<sup>7</sup>

Given that sin produces guilt and that God responds to sin with righteous anger and judgment, the Philistines needed a way to placate or turn aside God’s wrath. In other words, the third thing they realized was that they needed a suitable sacrifice to satisfy God’s anger towards their sin. Their priests urged this very idea, saying: “Do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you” (1 Sam. 6:3). What the people needed was the right offering to satisfy God’s anger, so that the plagues would stop. Therefore, they replied, “What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?” (1 Sam. 6:4). This is the central question with which the entire Bible is concerned: what is the offering that will satisfy God’s wrath against our sin?

It was at this point that the Philistine priests reveal both insight and ignorance. Their answer is one that sounds strange to us, but involved a fair amount of understanding. They answered,

Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land (1 Sam. 6:4-5).

How are we to understand this offering? The first thing they realized was that any payment to God for sin must be costly. The Philistines had been receiving a crash course in the theology of divine wrath during these seven months. They were paying a high price for what they had done to offend the Lord, and it was obvious that they could only satisfy God’s wrath by a sacrifice that was also costly and valuable. Moreover, the offering must correspond in some way to the punishment they were receiving. Since God’s judgment involved diseased mice and produced tumors in their flesh, they thought to

---

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 35.

offer the Lord what verse 18 assures us was a great many golden idols – one each not only for the major cities but also for each of the towns – that would memorialize the dreadful judgment God had inflicted.

There are some obvious problems with these offerings from a biblical standpoint. Mice are among the ritually detestable animals that God forbade to be used in offerings (cf. Lev. 11:29) and the images of tumors were likewise as unclean before the Lord as they would have been unpleasant to the eyes. The Philistines had learned much at the heavy hand of the Lord, but they failed to realize that saving truth does not come from the kinds of diviners and pagan priests they had consulted but only from those who spoke the word of the Lord.

What they should have done is consult an Israelite priest, just as we should consult the Bible to learn how to satisfy God's wrath against our sins. A true priest would have told them the proper guilt offering: "bring to the LORD as his compensation, a ram without blemish out of the flock" (Lev. 5:15). The prophet Isaiah would have informed them that these animal sacrifices looked forward to the coming of a Savior whom God would send. Isaiah wrote: "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Finally, in the New Testament we learn that this Savior was the very Son of God, Jesus Christ, of whom John the Baptist declared: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29).

The apostle Paul gives the clearest account of the Bible's atonement theology, telling us that the sacrifice we need was so costly that only God could provide it, and that God in his grace has sent his own Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. Paul writes: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25).

The Philistines' instinct in offering costly materials was right, but their estimation of the cost of forgiveness was simply too low! Our sin being an infinite offense to God's holy justice, we can be forgiven

and cleansed only by an infinitely valuable sacrifice. Peter says that we gain forgiveness “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18). God himself, in his infinite grace, has sent the sacrifice by which we can escape his wrath against our sins; only by relying on the blood of Christ can we receive forgiveness, not as something we have bought or earned but as a gift from God’s mercy, received through faith alone.

The Philistine diviners may not have known the way of atonement accepted by God, but they at least recognized the urgency by which we should seek it. They warned the people: “Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?” (1 Sam. 6:6). The story of Israel’s departure from Egypt in the time of Moses was well-known in the ancient world. Pharaoh had hardened his heart and death fell on the land of the Nile. This exhortation remains valid today: sinners must not harden their hearts against God’s way of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. To refuse to confess their guilt, or to reject the way that God has provided, is simple self-destruction. Why would anyone who realizes how holy God is and how offensive to him is our sin do anything but accept God’s gift of forgiveness through faith in the precious blood of Christ?

## UNDERSTANDING GOD’S HOLY WAYS

**D**espite all they had experienced, the Philistines still entertained doubts as to whether the plague was really caused by the Lord.

So they devised a scheme to determine God’s ways: “Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch” (1 Sam. 6:7-9). The making of a new cart and the use of cows that had not previously been yoked is an expression of respect. But they added a wrinkle, using cows that had recently given birth to young calves. Anyone who has been around farm animals knows that mother cows and their nursing calves are

practically inseparable. Thus, if the cows went away on their own to the nearby Jewish city, that supernatural working would indicate the Lord's will.

The Philistines were practicing an approach to discerning God's will that is sometimes used by God's people. A famous example is Gideon, who responded to God's command by seeking supernatural confirmation. Just like the Philistines, Gideon was asking God to confirm his involvement by making things happen contrary to nature. Gideon laid his fleece on the ground and asked God to make the fleece wet with dew while the ground was dry. When this happened, Gideon asked for the ground to be wet but the fleece to be dry. His "laying out a fleece" is presented in the Bible not as an example we should follow but as a sign of Gideon's weak faith.

Off went the cows, with no one guiding them and their nursing calves left behind. Sure enough, the cart went straight down the road to Beth-Shemesh: "They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh" (1 Sam. 6:12). We can scarcely imagine the relief of the Philistines as God's holy Ark finally departed from their lands.

God's accommodation to the Philistines' procedure should not encourage us to rely on similarly superstitious approaches to discerning God's will. Subjective signs crafted out of the folly of our minds are no way to discern God's will; instead, they invite us to divinize our own hunches and sometimes provide an opportunity for Satan to deceive us. Instead, we should remember the testimony of Peter, who witnessed several clear divine revelations, including the audible speaking of God's voice. Yet Peter tells us "we have something more sure, the prophetic word," that is, the Bible, "to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). If we want God's revelation to us, the place for us to look is in the holy Scriptures, which God has given as a lamp to our feet and a light for our path (Ps. 119:105).

Apparently, God's purposes with the Philistines were finished for the time being. We should not think their gold trinkets successfully atoned for their sins, but that the Lord had sufficiently humbled them and made his point. The Philistines returned home, glad to be rid of this dangerous holiness. How easy it is for us to do likewise when

God's hand has struck us in chastisement, glad to escape the pain of God's reproof but thinking little on the truths he has emphasized. The Philistines were like the wicked of whom Job said, "They say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways'" (Job 21:14). How much better to treasure God's Word and to humble ourselves in trusting obedience to all that he has revealed.

## ABIDING IN GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE

So God's holy Ark returned to Israel after seven months in Philistine hands. The Philistines had wanted only to escape God's wrath and discern enough of God's will to think themselves free from his judgment. Now, as the Ark returned to Israel, we ask, "How can his people abide in the presence of so holy a God?"

The first answer is that God's people are to receive God's presence *with joy*. We see this modeled by the people of Beth-shemesh: they "were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it" (1 Sam. 6:13). The Philistines may want only to be rid of so holy a God, but the Lord's people knew of his mighty grace. Nehemiah said, "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). Christians are strongest when we are rejoicing in the Lord, and God is never more praised by us than when we most rejoice in him.

Second, God's people are to dwell with him *in reverence*. It turns out that Beth-shemesh was a Levitical city in which the clan of Kohath lived, the clan assigned to care for the Ark of the Covenant within the tabernacle (cf. Num. 4:2; Jos. 21:16). It is not surprising, then, for them to arrange an immediate sacrifice: "The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD" (1 Sam. 6:14).

What is surprising is their failure to observe the commandment that only male cows be offered (Lev. 1:3). This was followed by a more fatal transgression. The Ark was set on a great stone in the field of a man named Joshua (1 Sam. 6:18). There, God "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" (1 Sam. 6:19).



Remarkably, the Levites had allowed God's holy Ark to become a tourist attraction. And what a sight it must have been to the eyes of country folk: a large, shining golden box, adorned with such finely crafted angels that God had used craftsmen specially anointed by Holy Spirit (Ex. 35:30-35). How natural it was for crowds to gather to see the great Ark of the Covenant, now in Beth-shemesh for the first time! But what seems natural to us is sometimes sacrilege to God. Indeed, the Lord had specified that only priests were allowed to see even the exterior of the Ark, while not even the Kohathites were allowed to look inside. According to Numbers 4:20, no one was to "look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die." This rule expressed the utter holiness of the God represented by the Ark. The priests' first duty, which they would have realized with even a cursory inspection of God's Word, was to safeguard the Ark from view.

The example of Beth-Shemesh reminds us that we do not show reverence for God by treating him according to our own wisdom and sentiments, but only by obeying the commands and precepts of his Word. How much flagrantly carnal worship is offered up to God today, designed to appeal to the fashions of men but with no reference to biblical principles (often in direct violation of Scriptural teaching), and how greatly such irreverence must account for the lack of true spiritual blessing experienced by Christians. Just as the Kohathites' remarkable ignorance in handling the Ark reveals the spiritual decline of that generation, so also does the lack of reverence for God in Christian worship today signal a spiritual declension among us.

The Levites of Beth-shemesh further showed their spiritual poverty by responding to God's wrath in a fashion identical to the Philistines. They cried out, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" (1 Sam. 6:20). Then, just as the Philistines of Ashdod had pawned off the Ark to Gath and then Ekron, the people of Beth-shemesh "sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, 'The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you'" (1 Sam. 6:21). This shows the ultimate result when God's people drift from God's Word: the church takes on the attitude of the world and ultimately rejects the holy God in unbelief.

The people of Kiriath-jearim provide a third example of how we are to dwell amidst the holy God, namely, *by faith*. “The men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the LORD” (1 Sam. 7:1). William Blaikie comments, “More timid men might have said, The ark has brought nothing but disaster in its train; we will have nothing to do with it. There was faith and loyalty to God shown in their readiness to give accommodation to it within their bounds.”<sup>8</sup>

It is noteworthy that Kiriath-jearim was a Gibeonite city (Jos. 9:17). The Gibeonites were non-Israelites who tricked Joshua into permitting them live and who were assigned as wood-cutters and water-bearers for the tabernacle (Jos. 9:21-22; 27). Thus God shows that his true people are those who respond to him in faith. These Gibeonites trusted God’s Word, and acting according to Scripture they were keen to have the Ark in their midst. Trusting in God’s grace, humbly adhering to God’s Word, they had the privilege of housing God’s holy Ark for a generation, until the time when King David appeared to take the Ark and bring it into Jerusalem.

Abinadab and his son apparently did everything they could to observe God’s commandments for the ark. They also refused to do more than God’s Word permitted. Kiriath-jearim thus was not advertised as a new national shrine, replacing Shiloh, which the Philistines had destroyed. The feasts were not celebrated there and the sacrificial service was not observed, there being no proper priesthood. For twenty years “the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim,” not in the center but on the fringe of the nation, faithfully cared for by loyal foreigners who trusted God’s Word but inaccessible to the nation, so that “all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD” (1 Sam. 7:2). Just as the gospel is, according to Paul, a savor of death to those who do not believe but an aroma of life to those of faith (2 Cor. 2:15-16), so also the Ark was the savor of death to irreverent Beth-shemesh and the savor of life and joy to the faithful household of Abinadab.

---

<sup>8</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 85.

## THIS HOLY GOD!

We have considered three great religious questions asked and answered in this chapter: How can we escape God's holy wrath? How can we understand God's holy ways? And how can we abide amidst this holy God? All three of these questions can really be wrapped up in the last of them, asked by the Israelites to whom the Ark returned, and answered by the example the faithful Abinadab: "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" (1 Sam. 6:20). To stand in God's holy presence is to be cleansed from sin and freed from God's holy wrath. To believe this message of salvation is to understand the very heard of God's will for us.

Interestingly, the answer to this question is provided by the very construction of the Ark of the Covenant, so that if the Philistines had reflected on its unique design and they might have understood God's will and salvation far better than they did.

As we have noted, the Ark was a golden box, inside of which were contained the actual tablets of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God. Atop the Ark were golden statues of two holy cherubim, angels who serve as God's attendants and signified his holy presence. Looking downward, the angels saw the law of God – his holy requirements for mankind – which we have broken. This is our problem, and the source of God's wrath against us. But there was one more feature to the ark, a golden tray, known as the mercy seat, upon which the blood of sacrificed goats and lambs was sprinkled, so that the holy God no longer saw his broken law but the atoning blood of the sacrifice he himself had ordained. Earlier I cited Paul's teaching in Romans 3:25, which says of Jesus Christ, the true lamb, that "God put [him] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." Propitiation refers to the turning aside of God's wrath; in the Greek language, the word is *hilasterion*. This happens to be the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the mercy seat, the tray on which the sacrificial blood was sprinkled to turn God's wrath from our sin. With the law and the mercy seat, the Ark of the Covenant was designed to express God's absolute holiness that burns against all sin and his marvelous grace that provides a way for sinners to draw near through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.

I do not believe that the Philistines could have understood all this simply by examining the Ark. But it would have got them thinking in the right direction. They would have immediately realized that this was a completely different religion than the pagan idolatry that they served. By seeking further, they might have put away their pagan schemes and sought to learn more about Israel's God and his mercy seat that covers the sins of those who come in faith.

We have the benefit of God's completed revelation in the Old and New Testaments. This not only means that we can understand God's will by simply reading God's Word, but also that the story of redemption is now complete in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The Ark played its role for a time, declaring God's holiness and mercy, but now in the coming of Jesus Christ, the apostle John writes, "grace and truth [have come] through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17).

How does Jesus answer the question that looms above every other quest of man's universally religious heart: "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" (1 Sam. 6:20). He answers, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). The Book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus came as "a merciful and faithful high priests in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). Jesus came to cleanse us from our sins and robe us in the garments of his own righteousness, that we might stand unafraid in the presence of God and with great joy. "Once for all... he offered up himself" (Heb. 7:27), and "consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him" (Heb. 7:25).