

1 Samuel 5:1-7:2 // The Glory of God on Tour

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[0 : 00] This morning is from 1 Samuel chapter 5, beginning at verse 1. That can be found on page 275 of the Church Bibles. That's page 275, 1 Samuel chapter 5, beginning at verse 1.

After the Philistines had captured the Ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the Ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon fallen on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon fallen on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold. Only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.

The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity. He brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors.

[1 : 16] When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, The Ark of the God of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our God.

So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, What shall we do with the Ark of the God of Israel? They answered, Let the Ark of the God of Israel be moved to Gath.

So they moved the Ark of the God of Israel. But after they had moved it, the Lord's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors.

So they sent the Ark of God to Ekron. As the Ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, They have brought the Ark of the God of Israel round to us to kill us and our people.

So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, Send the Ark of the God of Israel away. Let it go back to its own place, where it will kill us and our people.

[2 : 23] For death had filled the city with panic. God's hand was very heavy on it. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors. And the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

In chapter 6, verses 1 to 12, the Philistines decide to send the Ark of God back to Israel. They make five gold tumors and five gold rats as an offering to appease the God of Israel and send them back in a box along with the Ark.

The cart they send is pulled by cows who have recently given birth. And instead of turning to their calves, they go straight to an Israelite town named Beth Shemesh.

This confirms to the Philistines that this really was the hand of the God of Israel upon them. We pick up our reading at chapter 6, verse 13. Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley.

And when they looked up and saw the Ark, they rejoiced at the sight. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock.

[3 : 32] The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the Ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock.

On that day, the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.

The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron.

These are the gold tumors the Philistines sent as a guilt offering to the Lord. One each for Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron.

And the number of the gold rats was according to the number of Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers. The fortified towns with their country villages. The large rock on which the Levites set the Ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

But God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting 70 of them to death, because they looked into the Ark of the Lord. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them.

[4 : 48] And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the Ark go up from here?

Then they sent messengers to the people of Kiriath-Jerim, saying, The Philistines have returned the Ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to your town. So the men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the Ark of the Lord.

They brought it to Abinadab's house on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the Ark of the Lord. The Ark remained at Kiriath-Jerim a long time, twenty years in all.

This is the word of the Lord. Well, thank you, Jack, for reading. Let me add my welcome to Andrews.

My name is Simon. I'm a training minister here. And let's pray to ask for God's help with our Bible reading this morning. Father, thank you that you speak through your word, by your spirit.

[5 : 55] We pray that you would teach us this morning, help us to see you rightly as the glorious God who rules over the whole earth. Amen. Do you want to be near something glorious?

It might seem like an odd question. You might think, well, obviously, yes. About half the entire country is about to depart to Germany to take part in the big glory-thon, we hope, and see a big Scottish win.

Maybe the glory of that epic win of a football match is something that you crave, desire, just really want to be there. Maybe think about meeting someone famous, getting close enough to shake their hand, or maybe a view or a place that you just think is a glorious thing to see.

Maybe a sunset over the western isles of Scotland you think is glorious. But I wonder if you ever think of glory as a dangerous thing. Maybe like a don't-get-too-close thing.

You meet your heroes, and then you find out that they are either very regular or actually not great people. You take out a waterfall or a volcano, get at a distance, but not safe close up.

[7 : 03] A Bengal tiger might be majestic, but I would not want to get too close to it. There's something about glory that is often so related to power that if we get too close, it might not be safe for us.

And the big question as Christians then is, what kind of glory does our God have? Is it safe? Can I come near? Does it fill us with joy or fear to come close to him?

Is God approachable or not? And the word glory has a lot to do with weightiness. There's kind of a synonym there going on, and we'll see that in a bit of a passage today.

But where we pick up the story in 1 Samuel, we are about as far away from glory as we can get. At the end of 1 Samuel chapter 4, we see that the dishonest, corrupt, and feeble leadership of Eli the priest and his family have led to Israel lost in battle.

Their enemies, the Philistines, have won. They've lost 30,000 soldiers in the battle. And worst of all, the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of the Lord with them, has been stolen away.

[8 : 15] The seat of God's glory among his people has been taken, and Israel has hit rock bottom. The last words of chapter 4, some of the worst in the whole Old Testament. The glory has departed Israel.

It's gone. The Philistines, well, they're probably cheering. The Philistines think that they and their god Dagon have won. They've defeated Israel, and it's god Yahweh.

And for Israel, this is one of the bleakest moments in the whole of the Old Testament. Where has the glory gone? It's left us. Will our God ever come back to us?

Will things ever be good again? And so we're left to the end of chapter 4 with God in a box without any of his people to help or carry him. And a big question.

What happens to God when you kill his followers and steal his box away from them? What happens to this God when he is bereft of his people? And Samuel's answer to that this morning is actually quite entertaining.

[9 : 24] If you have your white sheets you received on the way in, our sermon points are on there. Our first part of our story is the God of glory smashes idols. As we get into today's passage, starting verses 1 to 5 of chapter 5, I just want you to imagine this from the Philistines' perspective.

So you've just won the battle. You've absolutely decimated Israel. You've carried off the box of their god. You've shoved it into your temple next to the statue of Dagon. And you think, yes, we are

supreme.

Look at us. We have got the box from our enemies. We have won. Praise the mighty Dagon. And so you celebrate. You have a big party, some drinks.

It's a great time. And you wake up a bit bleary-eyed in the morning. And you go to praise Dagon.

And you get there. And he is face down on the floor. You think, oh dear. Poor Dagon.

We should prop him back up. He's just fallen over. He'll be fine. Dust him off. So you set him back on the thing. Have another party. It's great. And then you wake up the next morning. And you go to the temple. And there's Dagon on the floor.

[10:26] And his head's fallen off. And his hands have fallen off. And I think if you're a conscientious Philistine, you might start thinking, that's a bit ominous. But that's not the conclusion they come to.

Have a look at verse 5. Faced with Dagon, fallen over, headless, handless, on the floor. They turn to superstition. That's why to this day, neither the priest of Dagon, nor any others who entered Dagon's temple in Ashdod, step on the threshold.

The mighty Dagon, his biggest enemy, the scary step. I mean, it's ridiculous, isn't it? Rather than thinking, oh, that box of that God of Israel, we should think about that.

They just go, oh, no, the step is a problem. Don't step on that. It's unlucky. Don't do that. And it's just utterly ridiculous. You can kind of imagine an Israelite later on reading this story going, all right, there's your God, headless, handless, hopeless, helpless.

That's Dagon. And yeah, fair enough. As of yet, none of the Philistines have noticed what's hiding in plain sight. Dagon can't even keep himself upright before the God of Israel.

[11:39] Of course, the problem is, Dagon isn't real. There is no competition between Dagon and Yahweh. This is the creator of the universe versus a wobbly statue.

And yet, so far, none of them see the real problem. The glory may have departed Israel, but the glory has certainly not departed from the God of Israel. In fact, he's just getting warmed up.

And it seems like Dagon isn't going to be very much use to the Philistines. And so we turn to the second point, the God of glory terrifies his enemies. Dagon's been floored, and now the people of Ashdod have nothing standing between them and the glory of God.

And his hand is heavy on these people. And hear the heavy word, heavy and glory. A weighty, dangerous glory. Now, we might struggle with this, but honestly, this passage probably would have been very funny to its first readers.

But this next passage has a slightly sharper edge than the first one did, maybe. The people of Ashdod wake up from their recent victory, only to find their town is overrun with rats that are eating their crops, and they are being devastated by a plague of tumors.

[12:57] Now, depending on your Bible translation, tumors can variably be translated tumors or groin tumors or hemorrhoids. So, yikes, it's not a pretty picture anyway.

But they begin to twig in verse 7 what's happening. The ark of the God of Israel must not stay here with us because his hand is heavy on us and Dagon our God.

All of a sudden, the spoils of war are beginning to feel like a curse. Time to get rid of this ark. And thus begins an utterly ridiculous game of hot potato with the ark of God.

The people of Ashdod go, right, got to get rid of this. Send it on to Gath. And the people of Gath go, yeah, the box, we got the box. Put it in Gath, and then all of a sudden, the plague starts again and these people become terrified.

So they pass it on. And the people of Ekron, if you look at verse 10, see it coming and go, whoa, they have brought the ark of God of Israel around to kill us and our people. Get rid of it.

[13:55] It's not safe. We don't want it. And yet more plague and death and panic ensue in Ekron to the point at which the Philistines in verse 11 are at their wits end saying, send the ark of God of Israel away.

Let it go back to its own place or it will kill us and our people. This victory isn't very victorious anymore, is it? The Philistines think they've won, overpowered the God of Israel, who with no help of his own people is absolutely destroying them.

But they've brought this on themselves, thinking that they could overpower him, thinking that the God of the universe who created everything could be overpowered by mere men. Their God, Dagon, is powerless to help them.

He can't even stand up for himself. And this passage just contrasts the silliness of pagan idolatry with all its rituals and temples and sacrifices achieving nothing to the seriousness of the glory of God.

What is it like to be in the presence of God without the protection and regulations of the sanctuary that he put in place? Terrifying.

[15:12] The presence of God is not safe for sinners. And massively unlike Dagon, God does not need his people to prop him up.

He isn't struggling to defeat his enemies. He doesn't need his people's help. In fact, he's going to get his own ark back to Israel without a single one of his people lifting a finger.

And so that's when we get on to the third part of our story. The God of glory goes where he pleases. Now in the proper sense, our God is omnipresent. He is everywhere all at once, all the time.

But he's chosen to manifest his glory in this ark. If you look back over the page at chapter 4, verse 4, we get the description of the ark as the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim.

This is God's mobile throne. And as you can see on the map above me or on the screens, it's been moving from town to town in Philistine territory. And in the first half of chapter 6, which we didn't have right out, we find that this entire fiasco in the Philistine towns goes on for seven months.

[16:26] Seven months of rats. Seven months of tumors. This victory is not worth having. So hear the words of the pagan priests in chapter 6, verse 6.

Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did when Israel's God dealt harshly with them and did not send the Israelites out so they could go their own way?

Now we know from the start of chapter 4 that the God of glory's reputation has been spreading. In fact, the first time the Philistines went into battle with the Israelites, they were terrified because they heard what the God of Israel had done in Egypt.

They heard about the plagues, they heard about the Red Sea, and they thought, this God is going to kill us. Yet because his people were so far away from him, so far away from his worship, so unholy, he was not with them.

And the Philistines won. But they didn't defeat the God of Israel. They only defeated his people. And now the glory of God is catching up to them.

[17:32] So they and their priest ask, well, how should we send the ark back? And they come up with a plan to appease God. Now this is, as well, completely ridiculous.

Look down with me at chapter 6, verse 5. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country and give glory to Israel's God. And perhaps he will lift his hand from you and from your gods and from your land.

They make five golden tumors and five gold rats for five Philistine towns, making it the weirdest 12 days of Christmas in history. But they get something right.

Maybe, giving glory to this God, perhaps he will lift his hand. Interesting. Think about the words hand and heavy. Perhaps he will lift his glory from us.

So the start of the next part of their plan is to take two mother cows who have just given birth to calves, separate them from their young to pull a cart with the ark on it. Now I heard from a friend who is a farmer, the most dangerous time to be around a cow is when it's just given birth because there is nothing more vicious than the mother cow who's just given birth protecting their calves.

[18:46] If you go anywhere near them, you may get trampled to death. And so, this cart with the ark on it and a box full of golden ornaments is attached to two mother cows.

And the plan is, verse 9, keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory towards Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us.

But it happened by chance. And again, it's just so ridiculous. You have never had a plague of tumors and rats before. The day you bring this box, you do. But maybe it's not the box.

Maybe God is not the problem. So the cows are hitched to the cart. And instead of going back to their calves, they immediately turn off to Israel. Straight to Beth Shemesh.

And the Philistines have to go, oh, this really was the God of glory that was with us all this time. It really was his hand heavy upon us. These pagans seeing the power of God just want rid of him.

[19:49] And the problem is they could have worshipped him, couldn't they? They could have gone, clearly our God Dagon is of no use.

Let us say sorry, repent before this God and worship him. Look at what he's able to do. If God was this powerful, shouldn't they do that? But all they do is respond to appease him.

They won't glorify him. All they want to do is to get him out of the way. Yet what they experience is the exact consequence of those actions.

It is not safe to be on the wrong side of this God, let alone in his presence. The terrifying reality of the glory of God is catching up to these people.

And it's the kind of response to God that we see in Jesus' life as well. In one place where Jesus goes, in a pagan area, there is a man possessed by a legion of demons.

[20 : 51] And we are told that when the demons are cast out, they flee into a herd of pigs and drown. But the people of that town, instead of going, look at the restoration of this man, who is this?

Let's worship Jesus. Go. Go away. We don't like this. It scares us. Go away. And they ask Jesus to leave. And it proves the point that hearing about the power of God is not enough.

Even seeing the power of God is not enough. Unless we respond in worship, we are completely missing the point. Because God cannot be appeased. You cannot pay him off.

The only right response to the God of glory is repentance and worship. So the final part of our story then is the glorious homecoming of the ark as the God of glory comes to refine his people.

Now, some Israelites are in a field at Beth Shemesh harvesting some wheat when down the valley comes a streak of gold. And after seven months, Ewol, here comes the ark. It's back.

[22 : 02] Praise the Lord. No Philistine entourage, no Israelite escort, just the ark on its own making its way back to Israel. And so they rejoice. They cut up the cart to make a fire.

They sacrifice the cows as an offering. They take the ark down, put it on a rock along with the chest of strange golden ornaments. And the Philistines watching from afar admit defeat and return home. And notice, the Lord has seen off five pagan kings and brought home the plunder from the battle without a single person being involved.

Usually the army would bring back the spoils of war. God brings it back himself with no effort. And verses 17 and 18 detail the offering that was sent.

Five golden tumors, five golden rats for five pagan kings. And again, you can hear the insult, can't you? Five golden rats, five pagan kings. You have to kind of imagine the guy who first opens that box though.

[23 : 01] He opens the box and pulls out a golden tumor and a golden rat and goes, what on earth happened in Philistine territory? What is going on? It's a really odd image. And kind of, if the story finished here, well, you might think, fantastic.

It fits in with everything we hear about God at the start of 1 Samuel. If you look back at chapter 2, verse 6, we kind of get this theme song for the book that Hannah sings. And chapter 2, verse 6 says, the Lord brings death and makes alive.

He brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth. He humbles and exalts. And then verse 9, it is not by strength that one prevails. Those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven and the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. And you might think, yeah, great. Look at him judging the Philistines, stupid Philistines, with their fake God. But then, verse 19 of chapter 6, rejoicing turns to fear. But God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting 70 of them to death because they looked into the ark of the Lord.

[24 : 09] And the people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them. And suddenly, the funny side of the story is gone. Israel haven't learned.

They're still on the wrong side of the God of glory. That's a serious problem. The ark returns and instead of reverently covering it, as their law would tell them to of the ark, they just think, ah, I wonder what's inside there and go and open it and 70 people die in the process. because they forgot that their God is not domesticated. He is not under their control. He does not do what they want or conform to their standards. It's a bitter irony that these people end up sending the ark onto another town just like the Philistines did.

And we hear in chapter 7, verse 2, the ark makes its way to Kiriath-Jerim where it's guarded, tended, and remains for 20 years. In fact, it actually isn't until the days of King David that the ark ever comes out of that village.

It isn't until the building of the temple in the days of King Solomon that the ark ever goes back to a holy place. The presence of God isn't safe for pagans, but it's not safe for a reverend Israelites

either.

[25 : 34] And we're left with this uncomfortable conclusion in this story. Who is more of a threat to Israel? The enemy Philistines or the holy God?

Who's more dangerous? Verse 20 of chapter 6 sums it up well as the people of Beth Shemesh finally ask the right question. Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? And indeed, isn't that the right question for us? Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? One of the most striking features of our story is how clearly it demonstrates that God does just not need his people.

He doesn't struggle to win battles against idols. He doesn't struggle to move himself around, even confined in some sense to a box. He doesn't struggle to win. God does not need his people at all. But the people absolutely need God. They are completely dependent on him. Without him, they can get nowhere. They lose a battle, they lose everything. But see the tension that sets up and how terrifying that really is.

[26 : 54] God doesn't need Israel. Israel desperately need God. But who can stand in his presence? What do you do with that?

We need him but we can't get close to him. We want him but he is terrifyingly glorious and powerful. We are sinners. We can't get near him. Now, in the coming chapters, we will see how God answers that question by raising up Samuel and eventually King David to rule his people rightly.

But in the meantime, the question of the presence of God remains a very uncomfortable fact for the people. And I wonder how you felt hearing the story this morning.

It's funny. It's meant to be funny. But the humor gives way really quickly to a sense of fear and tension as we read. And if we have the right view of God, we must be people who ask that question. who can stand before the Lord who is holy? The God of glory is in fact terrifyingly holy. His presence will never be safe for sinners.

[28 : 05] A phrase our minister Martin often uses about God is that he is not God Almighty, he is God Almighty. And the story reminds its readers that he is a God who is rightly to be feared.

But the fear of God isn't meant to be like the Philistines fear. It's not one of blind terror. But a reverent fear.

A fear that leads to right living and right worship before this God. A fear that listens to him. A fear that chooses to do the right thing.

So for us the question of who can stand before the Lord this holy God is wonderfully answered in the person of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is the presence and glory of God made manifest in flesh.

But unlike the glory of God in the ark gone walkabout bringing terror to the people of the Philistine towns. In Christ we have the glory of God in a person who walks with his people.

[29 : 15] The one whose very presence is mercy because the glory of God is contained and safe for sinners. And in him we have someone who has access to the presence of God.

Because Jesus is perfect in holiness he can stand before the Father in heaven and because of his death for us on the cross any who believe in him can have the judgment that separates us from God taken away.

which means if I want to be safely admitted into the presence of God the only way I can ever come is in Christ. But according to what the book of Colossians says in the fullness of Christ all for in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.

all those who put their faith in Christ are no longer living in fear of the presence of God but safely in the presence of God. Able to be in a place of worship not a place of terror and fear.

Friends one of the best bits of news about the Christian life is if you believe in Christ you need not panic about the Lord but be assured. You do not have to sit there thinking is God going to smite me today must I panic no.

[30 : 41] With faith in Christ you are safe your salvation is assured because of what he did on the cross 2,000 years ago. But if that's true the Christian life can never be a place of irreverence either.

If Christ has achieved our salvation and access into the holy presence of God how could we possibly live an unholy life? What other could we do other than worship him and joyfully live for him?

Our lives must always be shaped as people who are living in reverent and joyful worship living repentant and holy lives as it is the only right response to this God.

So finally the question who can stand before the Lord this holy God is answered with well in Christ we can. what a marvelous thing it is to be able to worship as the redeemed people of God confident forever in his goodness and being welcomed into his presence receiving mercy and grace in our time of need because of all that Christ has done for us.

Let's pray. Father God holy creator of the universe the beginning and end the one who through Christ has saved us and welcomed us into his presence we thank you for your glory and thank you that in Christ you have made your glory open to us and safe for us would you bless us in our knowledge of you and help us to honor you of our whole lives and this we pray in Jesus name Amen