

God Is Not Safe, But He Is Good

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[0 : 00] Take your Bibles tonight and let's open them to 1st Samuel.

! We're making our way through this book, 1st Samuel. You'll go ahead and find chapter 6. The passage will be all of chapter 6 and on into chapter 7, the first two verses of chapter 7.

So we'll take all of this together. So let me go ahead and read the passage. 1st Samuel chapter 6 verse 1. Now the ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

Now you remember our study last week, chapter 5, how the ark had been captured by the Philistines. Israel's armies defeated.

Eli's sons, Hophni Phinehas, killed on the battlefield. Eli dying after hearing the news, really primarily the news about the ark being lost, the ark of God.

[1 : 17] And so now for seven months, the Philistines have had the ark. Remember last week they put it right next to their god, Dagon. Dagon, of course, had a hard time, bless his stone heart, and lost his head over it.

All right, so six months, seven months rather, the Philistines have had it. And verse 2, and the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Well, they had trouble with the ark too, didn't they? Kind of some unmentionable things were happening to them. So what are we going to do? Tell us how we should send it to its place.

Get rid of this ark. They couldn't just, by the way, couldn't just send it back. Just, you know, without, because they weren't really sure, I don't think, whether what was happening to them was really something of God.

We're going to see that here as the story unfolds. All right, so what are we going to do? They get with their priests, their pagan priests, by the way. And so they said, the priests said, If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, Do not send it empty, but by all means return it to him with a trespass offering.

[2 : 33] Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand is not removed from you. And they said, What is the trespass offering which we shall return to him?

And they answered, Five golden tumors and the five golden rats, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, five of them, For the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. Therefore you shall make images of your tumors, images of your rats that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel.

Perhaps he will lighten his hand from you, from your gods and from your land. Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts when he did mighty things among them?

Did they not let the people go that they might depart? Now therefore make it a new cart. Take two milk cows, which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart, and take their calves home, away from them.

[3 : 42] Then take the ark of the Lord and set it on the cart, and put the articles of gold, which you are returning to him as a trespass offering, in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go.

And watch, if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then he has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us.

It happened to us by chance. Then the men did so. They took two milk cows, and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home.

And they set the ark of the Lord on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats, and the images of their tumors. Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh. Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they lifted their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.

[4 : 54] Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there, and a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart, and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord.

The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone.

Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings, and made sacrifices the same day to the Lord. So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day.

These are the golden tumors, which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the Lord. One for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Eshcalon, one for Gath, one for Ekron.

And the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel, on which they set the ark of the Lord, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

[6 : 06] Then he struck the men of Beth Shemesh, he being God, of course, struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. He struck 50,070 men of the people.

Now I know if you have another translation, a number quite smaller than that. In fact, it could be translated, he struck 70 men of the people and 50 oxen of a man.

That could be a literal translation. I don't know how it turns out in NASB and ESV. I didn't go back and check that. So there's some confusion about the number there, but God struck these men.

They had looked inside of the ark. And the people lamented, because the Lord had struck the people with a great slaughter. That's why I tend to believe that the number is larger than just 70 men.

It says that he struck the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Beth Shemesh said, Who is able to stand before the Lord, Holy Lord God?

[7 : 11] And to whom shall it go up from us? So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath-Jerim, saying, The Philistines have brought back the ark of the Lord.

Come down and take it up with you. Then the men of Kirjath-Jerim came and took the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill and consecrated Eleazar, his son, to keep the ark of the Lord.

So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath-Jerim a long time. It was there 20 years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

All right. So chapter 6 on into chapter 7. And so we're continuing, you know, to discover what has happened as a result of the great defeat of Israel, Israel, the stealing of the ark, the capturing of the ark of God by the Philistines, what happened to them as a result of that, and to their God, and to their land, and now what the Philistines are going to do about it.

And then not only that, but we find the ark being returned to, in a sense, returned to Israel, and some of the calamities around that. And then ending with this statement, that Israel lamented after the Lord.

[8 : 32] For 20 years, lamented after the Lord. Now all this goes together. Now, the subject tonight, or I guess I could say my title tonight, which is my subject, is this.

God is not safe, but he is good. Does that sound familiar to you? Any of you ever read the Chronicles of Narnia? How many of you read the Chronicles of Narnia?

Not very many of you. I'm surprised. Very interesting. I have read it a number of times over the years, and really enjoy it. And perhaps the most well-known book in that series would be The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

And you might have seen the movie that came out, which I think was really pretty pitiful, in relation to the book itself. But if you've not read it, then you probably thought the movie was okay.

You know, that's kind of the way it goes. But one of my favorite lines, early on in the book, and it really is also brought out in the movie as well.

[9 : 38] My favorite line is when Susan is first told about Aslan. Aslan, of course, is representative of the Lord Jesus in the Chronicles.

And so she's first told about Aslan. She's not met Aslan yet, but she's told about him. And it is Mr. Beaver, of course, who says to Susan, and I quote, Aslan is a lion.

The lion, the great lion, that's what he says to Susan. And Susan says, Oh, oh, I thought he was a man. And then she asks the most natural question, really, I think we would all ask, or something similar.

She asks, Is he quite safe? And, I mean, she said, I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe? Said Mr. Beaver.

Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, he said, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you.

[10:46] It's just a great lion. And that actually repeated a few other times about the character of the lion. He's not safe, but he's good. And it's a picture of our God.

He is not safe in that sense. He's holy. And, unapproachable, other than by way of Christ.

He's not safe, but he is good. And so, I want you to notice that the Jews of Beth Shemesh, as we get kind of toward the end of the chapter there, they basically ask the same question.

Did you catch it? There in verse 20. Verse 20, they asked, Who is able to stand before the Holy Lord God? That's basically the same question. Is he safe?

Who can stand before him? Now, again, remember, what has happened here. They've been defeated. The Israelites had been defeated by the Philistines.

[11:44] The ark had been captured. The ark was then brought by the Philistines into the temple of Dagon, their god. And, things didn't turn out very well for Dagon.

He fell on his face before the ark. In fact, twice, and the second time, he lost his head and lost his hands. But also, the men of the city, remember, were stricken with tumors.

Now, I hate to mention this again. It's actually not tumors, but hemorrhoids. Hemorrhoids. Stricken with them.

Many thousands of them. Not just in Ekron, but as it was moved to another city, they were stricken with it. In fact, the whole northern part of the nation, of Philistia.

These men were stricken with hemorrhoids. And many thousands of Philistines suffered, of course, and some even died. Serious.

[12:42] And then eventually, of course, they send the ark back to the Israelites, as we just read a moment ago, to Beth Shemesh. And what happened there? Well, you know, God slew a number of the men there.

Because why? They looked into the ark. Now, the Bible's not trying to attach some mysterious kind of power to the ark. This was an act of sacrilege.

This was an act. It was kind of like, you know, they set it up on the rock, and it became, perhaps, a tourist attraction. You know, and say, come to Beth Shemesh, and see, we've got the ark here.

And so, some of these people are coming, and they're opening it up, and looking inside of it. Kind of harkens back to the Indiana Jones movie, you know, and suddenly, they're struck down.

And what didn't happen, I'm sure, exactly that way. But many were killed. I personally think thousands were struck down by God. And so, that is what led them to ask this question.

[13:46] And it's a very valid question. Who is able to stand before this holy God? And it's Israel asking the question. Israelites, in Beth Shemesh, it was a question, really, that I'm sure was on the mind of the Philistines as well.

But the question is posed by the Israelites. And I don't think, really, that there is a more pertinent, more important question to be asked, of all questions.

It is the most significant question relevant to this life, but also, it's the most significant, certainly the most significant question relevant to the next life.

As people contemplate appearing before God on Judgment Day, who is able to stand before the Holy Lord God? Who is? And listen, even as believers, as believers who contemplate appearing before the Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ, who is able to stand before this Holy Lord God? It's an important question. That's why I think this is the key verse, key question, certainly, for this entire passage. I mean, how can I, think about it, you can just place yourself in this question, how can I, a sinner, a sinner, a rebel, really, come before a holy and just and pure and righteous God and not be utterly consumed?

[15:14] It's a valid question. And by the way, this was basically the question asked by Luther. This was the question on his mind. And the answer is what gave birth to the Reformation.

So how can sinners stand before a holy God? And the answer, justification by faith. Justification by faith. Now, as we look at this story, we want to consider three issues relative to God.

God is the focus here. Primarily. First of all, how to correctly appraise his nature. How do you evaluate his nature?

What is your evaluation? Your appraisal of the nature of God? That's in this passage. How should we not approach, how not to approach him?

That's also here in the passage. How not to approach him, a holy God. And then finally, how to appease him. How to appease him.

[16:19] Alright, so first of all, appraising God rightly. That's number one. Praising God rightly. When you read this story, you get, if you really think about it, you get the impression that the Philistines are at least trying to appraise the nature and character of Israel's God and to appraise it rightly.

Not that they had become worshippers of Yahweh God, the Hebrew God. Not at all. Not that they, of course, were convinced suddenly that he is the one and only God. That's not the case.

But they are appraising God correctly. Trying to determine who he is. And what did, what did they know about him?

Well, this is what they knew about him. You just read how they were responding to this whole situation. Then you understand that this is what they knew about God. That he is indeed a God. Of course, to them, one of many gods. In fact, when they captured the ark, they thought they were gaining another God to be added to their whole army of gods that they were worshipping. But they knew that he was indeed a God and they also knew that he can be offended and was offended and that he responds, out of his offense, he responds with judgment, with wrath.

[17:38] That's what they knew about the God of the Hebrews because they had experienced it. And all of this comes down to one thing. The God of the Hebrews is holy.

Let me put it another way. The one and only God, the true God, is holy and his holiness can be offended. It's offended by sin.

Now, even the pagan priests here had appraised the Hebrew God rightly to a point. I just noticed in verse 2, the Philistine lords asked, they asked this question, asked this of their priests, what shall we do with the ark of the Lord?

I mean, they were in big time trouble. You know, Dagon's statue, their idol's been destroyed. They're stricken with these tumors or hemorrhoids and many of them dying.

So this is a very severe plague that has come upon them. And so they asked the question, what is to be done? What should we do? And so they said, the priest said, in verse 3, if you send away the ark of God of Israel, do not send it empty.

[18:48] I mean, it's pretty wise. But by all means, return it to him with a trespass offering. Now, these are pagan priests. And they have an understanding of the nature of God.

That he's been offended. And that a trespass offering must be given. A sacrifice is needed. Now, I'm not saying they had full knowledge of just what that meant.

An understanding. I mean, we read a little bit later, we understand they did not know completely what they were talking about. Did not know what kind of sacrifice was acceptable. But that, we'll get to that in a minute.

But at least they had come to this understanding that God, the God of the Hebrews, is a holy God. And that he can be offended. And later on, in verse 6, they said, Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?

Let's look, that happened over 400 years before this time. And they knew about it. About what had happened in Egypt. Pretty incredible when you think about it.

[19:57] What God did there in Egypt in delivering his people and judging Pharaoh and the Egyptians was known all around the civilized world of the day.

And so, these priests bring this up. He said, You need to do this because you don't need to harden your hearts like Pharaoh did. You know what happened to him. So, he did this.

God did mighty things among them. Did they not let the people go that they might depart? So, you need to deal with this in the right way. You see, they realized that God was holy.

This is what we're talking about here. He's holy. They realized that because he is holy, he can be offended. And he had been offended. And they realized that God must be propitiated.

That he must be satisfied. His holiness must be satisfied because he's been offended. And they realized really the basic truth about the holiness of God.

[20 : 58] A truth that is made very plain to us in the New Testament in Romans chapter 1 verse 18 where the Bible says the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness of men.

They had come to understand that truth about God. And so, the fact is these ancient Philistines realized something about God that actually many modern people, people living today do not accept. do not believe in. That is that the holiness of God revealed sometimes through his wrath. Modern people today don't like that.

Most people refuse to believe in a God like that. In fact, some have just relegated that to some Old Testament God that no longer exists somehow. That's not the New Testament God or the God of grace.

That's the God of judgment. We don't deal with a God of judgment anymore. So there are many different variations, very many different objections to this nature or this truth about God.

[22 : 06] That the holiness of God is revealed through his wrath. Most people refuse to believe that. God who judges sin, a God who reveals himself sometimes through wrath, or even a God who allows suffering and death.

They accept only a certain view of the holiness of God, a holiness that reveals itself through tolerance, through benevolence, or through what they would term as love, but not a holiness that reveals itself through wrath and judgment.

Let me ask you something which God is more loving? Now, what you think about this? Think real hard. Which God is more loving?

This kind of imagined God of tolerance, benevolence, or the God of the Bible? That's a trick question.

which one more loving? Now, let me put it this way. The God of the Bible, which one is more loving? The God of the Bible who can forgive sin, only forgive sin by sending his own son to the cross, and then inflicting upon him the punishment of our sins, the punishment our sins deserve.

[23 : 34] Or, the God of tolerance, benevolence, who doesn't have to do anything to forgive our sins. Doesn't have to do anything. All he has to say is, I forgive you.

I forgive you. It doesn't cost him anything. It doesn't require any sacrifice. Which one is more loving? The God who would send his son to die on the cross, bearing our shame, bearing our guilt, bearing our condemnation, laying the wrath we deserve upon his perfect sin to son, or the God, who just simply says, ah, forget it.

I forgive you. Which one? I think you know the answer. So, appraising God rightly, for all the problems and the paganism and idolatry of the Philistines, they'd at least got that right.

This God is holy. Now, if they can get it right, then we should get that right. Now, not anyone here would disagree. God is holy.

You wouldn't disagree with that. But have we truly embraced all of what that means? God is holy, praising him rightly. Second, approaching God wrongly.

[24 : 54] That's in this passage too. Approaching God wrongly. There's a wrong way to approach a holy God. Even if you appraise him correctly, there's a wrong way to approach him.

And the Philistines, though they made a correct appraisal of God, he is holy, he is wrathful towards sin, he must be propitiated, he must be satisfied, even though they got that right.

The Philistines approached the holiness of God wrongly. What did they do? Well, look again at verse four. Now, we've just got to walk through this again. Then they said, what is the trespass offering which we shall return to him?

And they answered, five golden tumors and five golden rats. By the way, let me interject something here that really is somewhat confusing.

The purpose of the rats has led some scholars, by the way, to surmise that this plague was actually the bubonic plague.

[25 : 59] and that the rats, of course, were associated with that because they brought that plague or God brought it to them. And so, maybe it's not tumors or hemorrhoids but some like bubonic plague.

And there's nothing in the text that suggests that at all. You can't go back to the previous chapter and find anything about the rats. I think the idea is that the Philistines weren't quite sure for from where the judgment had come.

Either it was God judging them, this God of the Hebrews, or it was just by chance. Remember, they say that a little bit later in the passage. And so, you know, maybe it's God who brought this affliction or maybe it was the rats that did that.

So that's why we have the rats brought into the whole scheme here. And so, what do the priests say? They're saying that you're to make images of your tumors and the images of your rats that ravage the land and you shall give glory to the God of Israel.

Perhaps he will lighten his hand from you, from your gods, and from your land. So we'll make golden images of the hemorrhoids.

[27 : 16] They must have been really big ones. And also the rats. make golden images of them. That was their answer. So what is the problem with this?

Well, what is it that really propitiates, satisfies the wrath of God towards sin? What is it?

Well, it's innocent blood is what it is. Blood. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin. No forgiveness of sin.

So the Philistines, they sent a bloodless propitiation. And they sent something that was a product of their own paganism.

Just plain and simple, it is. And what do you expect from them? I mean, they're pagans. They're idolaters. And so if you're a pagan idolater, then you craft some representation of your affliction or your problem.

[28 : 21] and then you make it as costly as you can. They made them out of gold. And then you send it to appease the deity you have offended.

That is paganism in its purest form. And so that's what we have here. Their propitiation. Alright, so they recognize, they praise God correctly. He's a holy God.

He could be offended. And so the wrath that he has sent upon us is because we've offended him.

They got that part right. But their approach to him as a holy God was completely wrong.

They approached it from the perspective of paganism. What they should have done was send a spotless lamb. That's what they should have done. And you think they could have found out that that was the right way?

I think they could have. It doesn't really matter. they did not appease or propitiate God in the right way.

[29 : 21] In the only way that he would accept it. But they made also another mistake. They put God to the test. They put him to the test. If you look there in verse seven again, now therefore make a new cart, take two milk cows, which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart, and take their calves home.

Away from them. I mean, everybody knows what's going to happen then. They're milk cows. And they're going to be searching for their calves.

So you take them away, then take the ark of the Lord and set it on the cart. Put the articles of gold, which you are returning to him as a trespass offering in the chest by its side, then send it away and let it go.

And watch. If it goes up the road to its own territory, it's real, to Beth Shemesh, that would be the nearest Israelite town, then he has done us this great evil.

So if the cow does what is contrary to nature, leaves the calves behind, not searching for the calves, but takes the cart to the city, then we know that God did this.

[30 : 36] God does it. If not, then we shall know that it is not his hand, God's hand that struck us, it happened to us by chance. What are they doing?

They're putting God to the test here. They're not really convinced that they have offended this holy God. They're not convinced that it is by his hand that this affliction has come upon them.

You know, I wish I had a dollar for every time I heard somebody mention putting out a fleece. Have you ever said that?

I guess I wish I had a dollar years ago for every time I said it and thought it. You know, Gideon's fleece, kind of covered this back when we were looking at the book of Judges.

And really, remember the point of the story of Gideon is to highlight Gideon's, not to highlight Gideon's faith, but rather to highlight Gideon's weakness.

[31 : 44] And this is really nothing more than just kind of testing God. Now, God accommodated Gideon's fleece, all right, even though it was really a product, a demonstration of his faithlessness.

Doubting God. God's still accommodating him, gracious. Do that. And, in a sense, he accommodated the Philistines because he had those cows take the ark to Israel for his own purposes.

All right, so appraising God rightly, approaching God wrongly, what the Philistines did. And then third, appeasing God righteously. And this brings us back to the question that was asked by these men in Beth Shemesh, and that question, that key question, who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?

And again, it's a pertinent question. We could ask the question this way, how do we appease a holy God? How do we appease it? Well, there are two answers to this from the passage, two righteous answers.

First of all, an acceptable sacrifice, a blood sacrifice. sacrifice. That's the only way. And so, as the story goes, remember, the cart comes first to Beth Shemesh.

[33 : 06] I mean, the cows take it directly to Beth Shemesh, proving to the Philistines that, yeah, this judgment really did come from this holy God, the God of the Hebrews. But also, it comes there, and their first reaction, the people of Beth Shemesh, they're out in the fields, you know, they're harvesting, and they look up, and here comes the cart, two cows are pulling it, no one driving the cart, and there on the cart is the Ark of the Covenant.

And what do they do? Their first reaction is to rejoice. That's what the Bible says, verse 13, now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they lifted their eyes and saw the Ark, and rejoiced to see it.

So, great day. Remember, there was a great sadness and horror in Israel when the Ark had been destroyed. And remember Phinehas' wife, when she heard of her husband's death on the battlefield, she was pregnant, and suddenly she goes into labor, she gives birth, and before she dies, she gives the baby a name, Ichabod.

The glory has departed. So, it was a terrible day when the Ark had been captured by the Philistines, so now it is being returned, and it's a great day. The Ark of the Lord has returned to us, and so they were rejoiced.

And then in verse 14, what do they do? They cut up the cart for wood or fire. They cut up the cows for what?

[34 : 33] A sacrifice, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord. Symbolic, of course, all of the Old Testament sacrifices commanded by Moses were symbolic or shadowing of the supreme sacrifice, the last sacrifice, the sacrifice of all sacrifices, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, it's symbolic of the cross here. And so, you see, the answer to the question, how can we appease God's holy wrath, is this. Really, God appeases himself.

God appeases himself. He appeases himself by providing the costliest sacrifice imaginable. his only son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is also something else required here, and it is genuine repentance. Genuine repentance. Remember, Jesus said several times, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

So, look at the passage again, verse 20, and the men of Beth Shemesh said, who's able to stand before this holy Lord God, and to whom shall it go up from us?

[35 : 48] So, they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath-Jerim, saying, the Philistines have brought back the ark of the Lord, come down and take it up with you. I wonder if they mentioned the part about all of those guys being slaughtered through the judgment of God in their city.

It would be kind of a hard sell if they brought that up. And so, they're talking to the people of Kirjath-Jerim. And so, take it up. And so, then the men of Kirjath-Jerim came and took the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord.

And now, watch this. So, it was that the ark remained in Kirjath-Jerim a long time. It was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

That's key here. For twenty years, they lamented. By the way, in the very next verse, then we have Samuel speaking. God starts speaking.

This was a long period of time. A time of coming to grips with their rebellion against God. a time to bring them to a place of utter repentance.

[37 : 10] For twenty years, Israel lamented after the Lord. Now, how long does it take sometimes to really come to true repentance?

And I wonder, though, the more pertinent question is, how many times are we guilty of a very shallow repentance? One that's not really very meaningful? See, repentance is not just simply saying, I'm sorry.

God's people, it took them twenty years to come to grips with their real sin. Come face to face with their real problem.

And you know what the real problem is? Our greatest problem? Our greatest problem is ourselves. Our greatest problem is our hearts.

Our greatest problem is our sin. our greatest problem is not acknowledging the holiness of God.

And our only remedy is to repent.

[38 : 13] To repent and not just simply say, I'm sorry. Not just simply feeling guilty. Not just simply feeling bad about our sin.

It took Israel twenty years to be contrite and truly repentant. And after that time, God then spoke to them again through Samuel.

Our remedy, the only remedy, is to repent and turn to the only sacrifice for sin. That is Jesus and his blood shed for us.

Amen. Thank you.