



Finer Grounds Bible Study

1 Samuel

Lesson 4: 1 Samuel 3

At this point in 1 Samuel, all seemed lost for the nation of Israel. Their army was defeated, the High Priest and his sons were dead, and the ark, the symbol of God's glory and presence, had been captured by their enemy. While the nation was at one of its lowest points in its history, God was still working mightily. He would do something that would prove that He rules over all the peoples of the world even when His own have rejected him.

Read 1 Samuel 5:1-5

What happens to the statue of Dagon when the ark is brought into the temple?

You can imagine the elation of the Philistines after they captured the ark. They brought it back as a trophy of their victory over the Israelites and place it in the temple of their god, Dagon. In those times, capturing an enemy idol proved the power of the conquering nation's gods. The Philistines, who initially feared the ark and its presence on the battlefield, now see themselves, and their god Dagon, as conquerors.

The Philistines soon discovered that the ark was not some idol made of wood or stone. God caused the statue of Dagon to fall before the ark. With its face on the ground, the statue looked like it was bowing in homage to the ark. The Philistines might have attempted to rationalize this as an accident, so God clarified His message. The statue was found

the next day with its hands and head removed. At that time, it was common for victors in battle to cut off the hands and heads of their enemies as signs of their victory (Tsumura 205). God communicated with the Philistines in a way that would be clearly understood. By destroying the lifeless statue, He proved that He was stronger than any god that the Philistines could invent.

Think of other instances in the Old Testament when God showed His power to nations other than Israel. How did He make His power known?

Read 1 Samuel 5:6-12

After exhibiting His power in the temple of Dagon, God displayed His power over all creation by sending a plague of tumors on the Philistines. The plague followed the ark as it was moved throughout Philistia, from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron, causing the Philistines to panic.

Read 1 Samuel 6:1-12

Even after they saw the signs at the temple of Dagon and experienced plague for seven months, the hard-hearted Philistines still doubted the power of God. So, they returned the ark in a way that both paid homage to the god it represented and tested whether that god was truly the cause of their problems. They attempted to appease God by offering a gift of five golden images, one for each of the five cities of Philistia. They also used a new cart



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so that the ark would be transported by something clean and undefiled.

By using two milch cows to pull the cart, the Philistines attempted to test God. Milch cows are animals that are still nursing their young and have never been yoked. The Philistines would know if God had caused the plague if the cows went against their instincts and returned the cart to Israel, instead of staying in Philistia near their young. After preparing their offering and setting up the test, the Philistines released the cart. The cows went straight to the Israelite border town of Beth-Shemesh, proving to the Philistines that God was in control.

The most telling part of this passage is what the priests and diviners say to the leaders of Philistia in verse 6. They compare the Philistine leaders to Pharaoh who hardened his heart against God.

Read Exodus 11:9-10

Why did the Lord harden Pharaoh's heart?

Despite the signs and plagues, the leaders did not want to admit that they had been defeated by an enemy god. They had hoped by moving the ark around the territory, they could avoid the misery that its presence caused. They suffered for seven long months until they could not stand it anymore. God hardened their hearts, just as he had hardened Pharaoh's, to prove his power to the nation of Philistia. God used the leaders' unwillingness to acknowledge Him to spread the news of His greatness to the farthest reaches of their kingdom.

What are some ways that people harden their hearts to the gospel message?

How have you witnessed God bring about good despite a hardened heart?

Read 1 Samuel 6:13-7:2

The Philistines watched as the ark traveled by cart back to the land of Israel. Upon seeing the ark safely returned, the Israelites, in their delight, offered burnt offerings to the Lord. Beth-Shemesh happened to be one of the towns belonging to the descendants of Aaron (see Joshua 21:13-19). It is assumed that the priests offered the sacrifices and removed the ark from the cart, in keeping with their inherited priestly duties. Their joy was short lived; grief and fear came after some of the Beth-shemeshites defiled the ark.

Read Numbers 4:5-6, 15-20

What commands did the men of Beth-Shemesh violate?

Only the Levites of the Kohathite clan were to transport the ark and even they were not to touch it or look at it. Special poles were inserted into rings on the sides of the ark in order to transport it from place to place. The Beth-shemites, who were mostly direct descendants of Aaron himself, should have known better than to reach out and touch the



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ark. The fact that they did so anyway is yet another symptom of Israel’s strained relationship with their covenant God. Even a town of priests didn’t treat one of God’s holiest objects with honor.

A quick side note on variations in translations: Some translations say that 50,070 men were killed while others just say 70. This confusion results from some of the Hebrew words in the passage having multiple meanings. Most likely, 70 men were killed as the town was not that large.

Just like the Philistines, the Beth-shemites feared the ark and attempted to send it away. They most likely could not send the ark back to Shiloh as the city would have been destroyed after the Battle of Aphek (1 Samuel 4). Instead, they sent the ark to Kiriath-Jearim, and established the ark at the house of a man named Abinadab.

Read Joshua 9:3-21

What people group lived in Kiriath-Jearim?

What were the duties of these people?

In an ironic twist, the priestly Beth-Shemites were so afraid of the power of God that they asked the people of Kiriath-Jearim to take care of the ark for them. Kiriath-Jearim was once occupied by the Gibeonites and now was situated in the tribal lands of Judah. While the Gibeonites had assimilated into Israel, they were not Israelites themselves. In fact, they were to have the most menial of duties in Israel and were to cut wood for fires and draw

water to drink. The priests, who had been blessed with the most distinguished occupation of tending to God’s house, gave up their duties to those who had the lowest occupations, the Gibeonites.

How do we let fear, or lack of understanding, keep us from being obedient to all that God calls us to do?

The ark stayed in Kiriath-Jearim for 20 years as the people mourned over their disobedience. The Israelites had lost the ark because they did not seek God’s counsel, which, ironically, was the very thing the ark was made to provide. When God, entirely through His own power, returns the ark to His people, they defy His commandments concerning its treatment. Now, the ark resided in a town that belonged to the servants of Israel, the Gibeonites. Every day that the ark stayed there would remind the people of their failure.

Read 1 Samuel 7:3-4

The events of the first seven chapters of 1 Samuel perfectly follow what is often called the “Cycle of Judges.”

Revisit the “Cycle of Judges” from the introduction. How do the events of 1 Samuel 1-7 fit into the “Cycle of Judges”? Consider that the events in 1 Samuel are not always revealed in the typical order of the cycle.

- **Disobedience to God/Worship of False Gods:**



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- **God allows enemies to overcome Israel:**

- **Israel repents/ask God for deliverance:**

- **God raises a judge to restore political and spiritual order:**

As these events unfolded, God was preparing a judge, prophet, priest, and military leader to help His people. Samuel was made ready for his service before the prayers of the nation were even said. God’s plan for deliverance was put into action before the Israelites knew that they needed it.

Read the following verses. What do they tell us about how God works in our lives, even when we aren’t aware of His plans?

- **Genesis 50:19-21**

- **Jeremiah 29:10-14**

- **Romans 8:28**

- **Ephesians 2:10**

In His omnipotence and mercy, God used the consequences of the Israelites’ disobedience to bring about their repentance. The ark was captured because of their folly and it was brought back to the Israelites solely through God’s power. Seeing the ark in Kiriath-jearim reminded the Israelites of the Philistine oppression and of God’s displeasure with their actions. Once their hearts were ripe for repentance, Samuel was sent to urge them to seek after God again.

Who are you like in this story? You may be an Israelite; someone who knows what is good and right but continues to do the opposite. How comforting to know that we have a savior who has already taken care of our sins. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8).

You may even be a Philistine; someone who sees the power of God, whether it be in creation itself or in the day to day lives of those around you, but you continue to deny His authority. Are you testing God, asking him to prove His power when He already has?

If you have become a follower of Christ, you can be assured that you are a Samuel; someone who is being prepared for the good works that God has planned for you. According to Ephesian 2:10, God created you with these good works in mind. How humbling it is to know that we are on Earth to be used by God!

Remember to write down anything you learned about Samuel.



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Tsumura, David T. *The First Book of Samuel*. Eerdmans, 2009.