

Opening Scripture: Psalm 18:1–3

Introduction: A few years ago, a trend swept the country as people began to attend what came to be known as “Ugly Christmas Sweater Parties.” While these ugly sweaters have experienced a comeback with ironic popularity in recent years, many of us are old enough to remember receiving an actual tacky, bulky, knitted Christmas sweater from a well-meaning grandma or an aunt and then our moms making us wear it on Christmas eve. I won’t ask for a show of hands, but if you know, you know.

Or who can forget the gift exchanges in elementary school? You look around, and everyone else gets cool stuff, and you get a dense, brick-shaped fruitcake. Which, disappointingly, is neither fruit nor cake. Have you ever bit into anything in your life that was a greater disappointment than holiday fruitcake? I was surprised to learn that when the fruitcake was first invented in Europe in the 18th century, it was all the rage. People looked forward to exchanging these blocks of compressed barley mash, raisins, pine nuts maybe a little sawdust thrown in there. How bad would your diet have to be that fruitcake is an annual highlight? There’s a theory going around that there’s actually only one fruitcake in the world, and it’s been passed around since the 1700s (I read that on the internet so it has to be true).

(If you don’t mind, I’ll just get a few more things about fruitcake off my chest) When I was growing up in the 70’s if someone actually gave you a fruitcake for Christmas, it was their way of saying, “I don’t really like you.”

If you’ve ever received something that you wish you could give back—then you know what the Philistines are experiencing in our text today.

Transition: Today’s text is a sobering warning about being careful what you wish for because you just might get it.

Main Thought: The Philistines and the people of Beth-Shemesh learn the consequences of false religion. And we learn the importance of glorifying God in all that we do. They learned their lesson, and in the process, you and I are going to learn our lesson—what does it mean to glorify God?

Chapter 5

In 1 Samuel 5:1-6, a significant and somewhat eerie scene unfolds as the Philistines, after capturing the Ark of the Covenant, place it within the temple of their god, Dagon. The first day they come in and find Dagon, their statue, toppled over and lying face-down in front of the Ark. So they lift their idol up and set it back its place. The next day they find it fallen face-down again this time with its arms and head broken off.

1 Sam 5:4 “Only Dagon’s torso remained.⁵ That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon’s threshold.” The Ark of the Covenant brings suffering to Ashdod, and they get a great idea we see in verse 10, “The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, “They’ve moved the ark of Israel’s God to us to kill us and our people!”¹¹ The Ekronites called all the Philistine rulers together. They said, “Send the ark of Israel’s God away. Let it return to its place so it won’t kill us and our people!” For the fear of death pervaded the city; God’s hand was oppressing them.¹² Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

Background: Chapter 5 is the background for their response in chapter 6.

Ashdod, Ekron, Gath: Ashdod, known as Azotus among the Greeks, held a significant position among the five satrapies of the Philistines. It was strategically located near the Mediterranean, lying between Ashkelon and Jamnia. According to sources like Diodorus Siculus, it stood approximately thirty-four miles to the north of Gaza. The cities are there today.

Dagon: Ancient Greeks (Lucian, Diodorus, Horace) who saw the remains of the idol all describe it as having a human head and torso and the rest of the body was that of a fish (basically, an ancient trans-mermaid). When a rival tribe defeated you and captured your king, they usually cut off his head and hands as a sign of victory. So this is a very powerful omen for them.

Their acceptance of the Ark was an acknowledgment of its power: Remember last week that they thought a “god” had entered Israel’s camp at the news of the Ark’s procession. It would have been their custom in battle to take their defeated enemies’ idol, in this case, a symbol of God’s presence, and incorporate it into their own religious system. Unlike Israel, they are not monotheists—meaning worshipers of one God. They believe are polytheists, believers in many gods, and want to add the Ark’s strength to their own.

They placed it next to Dagon's statue, which signaled their reverence and fear of the Ark. But also Dagon's victory. This would have been a way of acknowledging the superiority of their god—Israel's God YHWH is now subject to and in service to the Philistine god Dagon.

In the next chapter, we see that their response in the face of God's clear judgment is critical to their survival as a people.

Chapter 6—The Philistines return their trophy to Israel.

After seven months of this misery, they gathered all their satraps, wisemen and diviners to find a solution. What should we do?

1 Samuel 6:3–6 “They replied, ‘If you send the ark of Israel's God away, do not send it **without an offering**. Send back a guilt offering to him, and you will be healed. Then the reason his hand hasn't been removed from you will be revealed.’⁴ They asked, ‘What guilt offering should we send back to him?’ And they answered, ‘Five gold tumors and five gold mice corresponding to the number of Philistine rulers, since there was one plague for both you and your rulers.’⁵ Make images of your tumors and of your mice that are destroying the land. Give glory to Israel's God, and perhaps he will stop oppressing you, your gods, and your land.⁶ Why harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened theirs? When he afflicted them, didn't they send Israel away, and Israel left?’”

In verses 7–12, the Philistines conduct a test to determine if their troubles are the result of divine intervention.

Background

Diviners and Satraps/Wise men: Divination was expressly prohibited in Deut 18:10, 14. When ancient pagans practiced divination, it always involved two things: (1) A human intermediary who could relay a divinely inspired message from the heavens to men. (2) The interpretation of omens, signs, and events in order to deduce what a divine message might be. In this case, you get the sense that the diviners of Philistia are just making it up as they go.

Unyoked Milk Cows: They use two milk cows that had never been yoked before to transport the Ark of the Lord on a cart alongside gold objects as a guilt offering. They release the cows, and if they go straight to Beth-shemesh, it confirms God's involvement because there's no way; otherwise, it's deemed a chance occurrence. The cows indeed head directly to Beth-shemesh, affirming God's role in the events.

Guilt Offering: In the ANE, a guilt or "trespass" offering was made to deities in order to assuage or avert certain judgment. This offering had to be costly, hence their use of gold, and it had to be related to their punishment, tumors of gold and mice. And they were to be representative of the five rulers of the five Philistine cities (vv.17–18) are represented by these items. In the ancient world, a representative offering was vicarious. It was their way of saying, "God of Israel, we're acknowledging our failure and your judgment."

Mice: This odd gift of gold shaped as mice likely represent a pestilence—the word mice here is a generic term for "rodent" and could encompass all kinds of various rodents, some of which were prone to spread disease. It's clear that God's judgment is internal (tumors) and external—swarms of rodents destroying their crops and spreading disease.

Let's make some observations about this story:

1. False worship happens when God isn't given His rightful place (1 Samuel 5:1-6). We've already seen this form of false religion in the stories of Hophni and Phineas—the two corrupt priestly sons of Eli, the high priest. In the previous chapter, God brought judgment on them because they misused their priestly authority and disrespected sacred offerings. They took the best portions of sacrifices for themselves, violating Mosaic Law, and demanded their share before proper presentation to God. What's worse, their immoral behavior within the holy sanctuary added to their desecration of the worship space, demonstrating a disregard for God or

his word.

But here in the story of the Philistines, they are also practicing this same principle of defiling God's Sanctuary: After capturing the Ark and bringing it home to Philistia as part of the spoils of war, they placed the Ark in the temple of their god Dagon. The Ark of the Covenant was a sacred symbol of God's presence among the Israelites. It contained the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments and was meant to be kept in the Tabernacle, a place of worship for the Israelites. When the Philistines captured the Ark and placed it in their temple next to their idol Dagon, they effectively desecrated it by treating it as a mere trophy from their victory over Israel.

How so?

- **Idolatry is, first and foremost, an act of irreverence and lack of acknowledgement.** What does it mean to glorify God and revere him? Going back to Genesis 1, we see that when God creates the universe and the world, everything is properly aligned under his sovereign rule. And the pecking order goes like this:
 - > God reigns supreme over all creation
 - > His sons and daughters. are the priests and co-rulers/royal viziers in his realm—mediators of God's glory and rule to the created order and representing the created order to God.
 - > The created order, including all animate and inanimate things, brings praise and glory to God because things are in alignment.
- Understand that irreverence is failing to revere God and putting him in his rightful place in our lives.*** This requires a certain sobriety and alertness in our thinking. We must ever be cognizant of God's rightful place in our lives.
- We lack urgency and alertness in our worship when we just take God and put him in our trophy case along with all our other achievements, interests, or goals.*** This is what it means to not fear God. And our irreverence diminishes God's importance.
- **Failure to acknowledge God's supremacy:** By placing the Ark next to Dagon, it was their way of saying that he was now subservient to Dagon. This disregard for the one true God's authority and power was a form of blasphemy.

Application: We live for his glory by realigning ourselves under His sovereign rule.

The Philistines thought they could just add Yahweh, the God of Israel to their trophy wall, that the God of the universe would be in service to their personal aspirations.

2. False worship seeks to manipulate God’s power for personal gain. So, if the first principle of false worship has to do with God not being in his rightful place in our lives—we just treat him as though he were any other idol we’re serving, then this principle has to do with the deployment of God’s power for our ends.

- **Religious Syncretism:** Placing the Ark next to the statue of Dagon was an act of religious syncretism, where the Philistines tried to incorporate the worship of the God of Israel into their own polytheistic belief system. This showed an attempt to co-opt His power for their own purposes.

As Christians, it is vitally important that we understand not only the pecking order and where God belongs in it, but that we understand who is living for whom. A couple of essential passages I want you to memorize them:

Ephesians 1:4–6 “For **he chose us** in him, before the foundation of the world, to be **holy and blameless in love before him.** ⁵ **He predestined us** to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ **for himself**, according to the **good pleasure of his will,** ⁶ to the **praise of his glorious grace** that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.” Look carefully at these words.

- Did **we choose God**, or did he choose us?
- Do **we bring God before us**, or does he bring us as holy and blameless worshipers before him?
- Did he predestine us to be **fully sufficient in ourselves**—so that we might live for “us”? Or did he predestine us to be adopted as his own *for himself*?
- Is my Christian faith the result of **my desire**, or for **my pleasure**? Or have I been chosen in accordance with *His good pleasure and will*?
- Is it my glory or His glory I am living for? All the blessings in heavenly realms that God has lavished on us, while they are certainly for our benefit, they are *to the praise of his glorious grace.*

Here, let me give you another one. Put this on in your front pocket...

Romans 11:36 “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

When I understand that God has called me, chosen me, and that every blessing in my life is because all things are from him, and through him, and to him. And to him be the glory forever. When my life becomes fundamentally oriented around that truth, I will offer God the worship that is due him.

Let me give you an application principle you can take away from this.

Application: Stop inviting God into your story; understand that you’ve been included in His story. We are not the authors of our own narrative; we are the beloved, chosen participants in his greater drama of redemption.

The problem with the Philistines is that fundamentally they think they can add Yahweh’s power to their false Gods. This false religion seeks to manipulate God’s power for personal and national gain. And they are learning the hard way that God will not be employed for our ends.

3. False religion seeks relief without a relationship. (1 Sam 5:11b–12). “For the fear of death pervaded the city; God’s hand was oppressing them.¹² Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.” So, Chapter 5 ends by saying that the groaning and the cries for relief actually went up to heaven. This is the same kind of phrase that is used for the Israelites groaning under the yoke of slavery in Egypt—God hears their cry.

- **Their diviners and satraps prescribe their own solutions.** Chapter 6, however, shows them engaging in false pagan solutions for their problem. They propose to regift the Ark, send it back to Israel, with a guilt offering, symbols of their torment (tumors and mice), new cows a new cart and send it to the wrong place. It doesn’t belong in Beth-Shemesh it belongs in Shiloh at the Tabernacle.
- **The diviners’ solution is superficial repentance, in their own messed-up way, they want to make it right but only to relieve their present agony.** Now, God has surely put pressure on them to return the Ark. But nothing that they are doing to appease an angry God is necessary nor required. All that is actually

required is the Ark's return to the Tabernacle.

- **There is an open invitation in Moses' Torah for Gentiles to abandon their false gods and turn to faith in the one true God of Israel.**
 - **God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3)** is that through his offspring (Israel) God will bless all the nations of the earth—and that Abraham's family will come from every nation and tribe on earth.
 - God's choice of **Melchizedek**, a Canaanite priest in Salem (Gen 14);
 - Moses led the people out of Egypt, Exodus 12:39 tells us that **"a mixed multitude"** went up with the Children of Israel. Verses 48–49 anticipates that some Egyptians "sojourners and aliens" will want to join Israel in the Passover so as to avert certain judgment.
 - **Moses' wife** was a Midianite (Exod 4).
 - **Rahab** the Canaanite, who harbored Israeli spies, was included in God's people (Josh 2).
 - **Ruth**, the Moabitess, married into Judaism and became the ancestor of David and Christ (Ruth).
 - **Gentile nations** and tribes will later submit to David's lordship, including the Pelethites, Gittites, and Cherethites (2 Sam 15). Some of David's mighty men were Gentile converts as well.
 - In the story of Esther's marriage to an Assyrian King, the Scripture says, "Many of the people of the lands converted to the Jews." This term, *am' ha' eretz* is specific to Gentile peoples (Esther 8).

The Philistines would be more than welcome to leave behind their false idols, their absurd, man-made religion, and turn to the one true God. This is their opportunity to experience true repentance according to God's prescribed means.

When we search our own hearts, how often do we seek God because he merely provides relief from suffering or viewing God as a support system for our concerns? Not to say God doesn't meet our needs; he certainly wants to and does.

Application: We must value relationship with God above our own comfort or possessions. Jesus said, "Make your first priority to seek the Kingdom of God, then all

these other things will be added to you as well.” That’s the Philistines’ problem, they’ve contrived a method to appease YHWH’s wrath but aren’t truly seeking a relationship through true conversion to the Torah covenant, being incorporated into Israel, and living under Torah law.

False religion responds, “Fine, whatever you need God just leave me alone and let me get on with my own life.”

4. False religion can be enthusiastic and well-intentioned but ultimately mistaken (1 Sam 6:13–16) ¹³ The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. ¹⁵ The Levites removed the ark of the Lord, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord. ¹⁶ When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day.”

Problem solved, right? Not so much. We might first be tempted to think, “What’s the big deal? They’ve got several elements present for a worship service. Levites reside in their town, and their religious officials. There’s a large flat rock that can be substituted as an altar. We’ve got the sacred Ark, all these gold tumors and mice to offer. And fresh wood—we can chop up the cart it came on and use it to burn in the offerings.

See what happens next...

Verses 19–21 “ God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the Lord. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the Lord struck them with a great slaughter. ²⁰ The people of Beth-shemesh asked, ‘Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?’ ²¹ They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, ‘The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and get it.’”

- **The answer to the question “Who can stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God?”** should be obvious by now. Samuel can—that’s who. And he can stand before the Lord as priest and prophet because he is a man of God’s choosing. His sacrifices are acceptable to the LORD because they are the ones that God has prescribed. He is faithful to serve before the LORD in both his private and public life. Unlike the previous priestly family, Samuel’s public

persona matches his secret life.

What the Beth-Shemeshites are doing here is just as unauthorized an expression of religion as what the Philistines tried to do.

- They make the mistake of treating the sacred object that represents God's presence flippantly, casually, commonly.
- They made the mistake of thinking that their enthusiasm and effort could replace God's authoritative and prescribed method of worship in the Tabernacle.

Illus. In the Christian life, I wonder how much of what is happening in our churches in America is just Beth-Shemesh worship. You can attend enthusiastic and celebratory worship services that are almost entirely self-focused on the individual's personal experience. I've sat in worship services that were sincere, well-intentioned, passionate expressions but were devoid of theological substance, God was not the center.

I've been to church services where everyone in the church is simultaneously speaking, prophesying, praying in tongues, shouting at the devil—and when Paul wrote the Corinthians about these same issues he says, “Stop that. Knock it off. Everything is to be done decently and in order and ultimately intelligible.” Why? Because when you have a chaotic environment of supposed “worship”—the God of the universe is not the object of your affections. God is a God of order. A disordered messy worship service focused on the personal expression at the expense of the body is not true worship.

The 2020 Pandemic actually accelerated churches' leaning into virtual environments. So-called leadership gurus have advocated churches leaning into it, developing “cyber congregations.” Which is absurd. That's like saying you're a married bachelor or you've discovered a round square. The church (*ekklesia*) is by definition a physically gathered body. This is why CCC and the leadership have no vision for multi-site campuses—which usually describe themselves as one church with many locations. But that is due to a weak theology of the church. Biblically there are many different gathered assemblies. I bring this up because I think it is so important for us to be biblical in our expression of worship. Biblically we gather around five things: (1) The Word which takes priority in our singing and preaching. (2) The table—which represents our communion with Christ and each other. (3) The tank—baptizing disciples into Christ. (4) The fellowship—the early church gathered for regular fellowship in homes. (5) Prayer—last but not least, we gather to pray and seek God for his will, his power, to do his work. Prayer reminds us that we are not here to do our will, in our power, for our purposes.

As important as they are, Passionate, sincere worship is no substitute for prescribed worship.

Application: To be in relationship with God, we must worship him in ways that are worthy of Him and prescribed by Him. The Bible doesn't give us a particular liturgy to

follow, it doesn't prescribe a great many things that we do as a result of biblical wisdom and prudence, but in those areas where Scripture does speak directly, we are to be conformed to it.