

Fallen Gods & Fallen People

Introduction: The defeat at the lower plains of Aphek and Ebenezer was the darkest day of Israel's history to that point. The capture of the Ark of the Covenant symbolized the loss of God's presence and power, a fact that caused Eli to faint, resulting in his death. The capture of the ark was as much a spiritual defeat for Israel as it was a political and military loss. This should have been a wake-up call to the nation, which had languished for years in spiritual ambivalence, moral anarchy and civil chaos.

Read verses 1 & 2.

1. What is the significance of the Philistines taking the Ark to Ashod and placing it in the temple of Dagon?

Background:

- ◆ Ashod was one of five Philistine cities. It was located about three miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea and about twenty-two miles south of Joppa (refer to the color map).
- ◆ Dagon is the principle deity of the Philistines whose ancestors migrated from Crete to the Palestinian shores. He was called the father of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god.
- ◆ Some references have Dagon pictured as half man with the lower half that of a fish.
- ◆ Philistia was an important grain producing region and Dagon was thought to produce a good crop. The Philistines made sacrifices to him for war and crops.

Discussion:

- ◆ For ancient lands, placing the relic or statue of an enemy's gods into your god's temple was proof that your god was superior to their god.
- ◆ In the ancient world, it was believed that a deity had certain powers and sphere of influence that was especially powerful in their region or city.
- ◆ This was the Philistines way of saying their god Dagon was greater than the Israel God Jehovah or Yahweh.
- ◆ The Philistines felt that the Israel God was defeated on the battleground and was now Dagon's servant attending Dagon in his temple.

Read verses 3, 4, and 5.

2. What happened in these verses? Talk in your group about the significance of what happened.

- ◆ Israel was a weak and divided nation
- ◆ But Israel's God was self-existent, transcendent, eternal, omnipotent, immutable, omniscient, wise, sovereign, faithful and loving.
- ◆ The repeated falls of Dagon was supposed to send a message – Yahweh is not defeated, inferior, subordinate or about to suffer humiliation.
- ◆ Cutting off the hands and head and feet of the idol indicates destruction.
- ◆ Remember what this idol is – a manufactured object. Idols are lifeless, powerless and have one destiny....destruction.
- ◆ "The threshold is typically made of a single stone that spanned the doorway, raised slightly from the level of the floor... Superstitious belief held that stepping on the threshold would allow demons that haunted the entryway to gain admission. Perhaps that was the preferred explanation among the Philistines for Dagon's troubles? " IVP Bible Background OT

3. Make application of verse 3, 4 and 5 to us today and our daily walk.

- ♦ False gods are fallen gods.
- ♦ *"It is not easy to relinquish an inadequate understanding of God. Even today when our little gods fall, our first instinct is not to abandon them but to prop them up again. The prophets constantly reminded Israel (and us) that the gods we make are always impotent when they face the living God."* Communicators Commentator, Kenneth Chafin.
- ♦ Like our government or our national economy, we think things are too big to fail. We pursue a bail out plan to keep the false gods working.
- ♦ We often take the same tack in our daily lives to keep the lies we have created alive.
- ♦ The true and living God is able to take care of Himself....we cannot. It is only through Him that we can survive and only in the way He provides.

4. Talk about idols in your group and how they can affect us today. (Ps42.2, 1Thess 1;9, 1 Timothy 2:5).

- ♦ Idols are powerless to help us in hardship. Why do we constantly seek help from those things that are not God in financial distress, sickness, accident, broken promises, depression, loneliness, guilt, temptation and death?
- ♦ Only the true and living God can deliver us and preserve us in the midst of trial and temptation.
- ♦ The Lord demands two things from us: 1). That we have absolutely nothings to do with false gods and idols 2). That we acknowledge Him, the only true and living God.

Read verses 6 – 12.

5. What is happening to the people of Philistine in these verses?

- ♦ When the Philistines captured the Ark of God they arrogantly treated the Ark as though he was just one of many gods. They invited judgment of the living God.
- ♦ The Philistines had to learn that the Ark was not a magical box to use as a good luck charm. The Ark was a representation of the living God and He would not allow His holy ark to be associated in any manner with their pagan worship or temples.
- ♦ God then is brining judgment on the Philistines though death, tumors or boils and plagues in these verses.
- ♦ Gath is located in the valley of Elah which is one of the principle passes that separate the costal planes form the hills of Judah. Perhaps the Philistines thought that if the Ark of God goes to Gath and there are no ill consequences then the calamities must be a coincidence.
- ♦ No it is not a coincidence as the ravage spread to Gath and then to Ekron.
- ♦ Finally in verse 11 the lords of the Philistines asked that the Ark be sent back to its own place to end the destruction.

6. What are the messages from these passages (John 8:24)?

- ♦ The Philistines were able to see what so many refuse to see today – rebellion, mocking, insulting the true living God leads to judgment.
- ♦ *"The hand of the Lord was heavy upon the Philistines; he not only convinced them of their folly but severely chastised their insolence. Yet they would not renounce Dagon; and instead of seeking God's mercy, they desired to get clear of his ark. Carnal hearts, when they smart under judgments of god, would rather, if it were possible, put him far from them, then enter into covenant or communion with him, and seek him for their friend. But their devices to escape the Divine judgments only increase them. Those that fight against god will soon have enough of it."* Matthew Henry Commentary
- ♦ The rituals and superstitions of the Philistines have disappeared into history but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.
- ♦ The hand of God will fall on the unbeliever and the false worshipper of this world. It is a hard but true message.

Application:

What is the lesson of the Ark?

- ♦ From Matthew Henry... "Note, the kingdom of Satan will certainly fall before the kingdom of Christ, error before truth, profaneness before godliness, and corruption before grace in the hearts of the faithful. When the interests of religion seem to run down and ready to sink, yet even then we may be confident that the day of triumph will come. Great is the truth and will prevail. Dagon by falling prostrate before the ark of God, which was a posture of adoration, did as it were direct his worshippers to pay homage to the God of Israel, the greater than all gods."
- ♦ God cannot be controlled by people. God cannot be used by Israel as a national deity to gain victory and neither could God be belittled and ridiculed by the Philistines who had won a great victory over Israel.
- ♦ And yet after the fall described in Genesis 1:28, we battle thorns and thistles, we war against nature with disease and petulance. We earn a living by painful toil and the sweat of our brow.

Talk in your group how that applies to our lives today plus how it applies in our country and economy. From this study, how are we to respond to all this turmoil we see today?

- ♦ With our daily toil do we tend to treat God as the Israelites did...asking for Him to save us from all the turmoil we see in today's world? Do we try to control God for our own well being in the midst of this turmoil?
- ♦ Or do we turn to Him in worship, asking for forgiveness and for His direction each and every step in our day?

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