

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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1 Samuel Chapter 5

God punishes the Philistines

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

One of my boyhood heroes was Horatio Nelson. I can still recall some of the pictures in a book I had about him. I enjoyed reading all about his life. Did you know that as a boy of 14 he sailed to the Arctic, or that he lost the sight of his right eye at the siege of Calvi in 1794? When he was buried, he used the sarcophagus that was originally designed for Cardinal Wolsey and the decoration in his hat was called a chelengk!

Hello and welcome to the Truth for Today radio programme. Please do not think that you have tuned in to the wrong radio station. It is just that it is possible to be interested in someone, to know a lot about them but those facts do not impact our lives in any way at all. There was never a chance that I might take to the seas. Oh no! it was always going to be two feet firmly on dry land for me, thank you very much. However, just the opposite is true of the way in which God reveals Himself to us through the Bible. As we learn about what God is like, the expectation is that this will have the profoundest impact upon our lives. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that if we are not changed by what we learn of Him, then we have not learnt of Him at all.

So, in this broadcast, as we continue our studies in 1 Samuel, by looking together at chapter 5, we are going to think of four attributes of God. We will then consider how these attributes ought to affect our behaviour. Let us start by reading together 1 Samuel chapter 5:

“Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So, they took Dagon and set it in its place again. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon’s torso was left. Therefore, neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon’s house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.” Therefore, they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines, and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?”

And they answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath.” So, they carried the ark of the God of Israel away. So it was,

after they had carried it away, that the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumours broke out on them.

Therefore, they sent the ark of God to Ekron. So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!" So, they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumours, and the cry of the city went up to heaven."

The first lesson we learn about the character of God is that He is sovereign. The ark was a symbol of His presence but now it had fallen into the hands of the Philistines. It belonged in the Most Holy Place, in the Tabernacle, but the Israelites had thought that they could parade it like some magic box that would guarantee them victory. God had a much greater plan in mind, as we shall see, and He allowed the Israelites to be defeated and the ark captured. The Israelites would learn that it was just a symbol – what truly mattered was being in the presence of the Almighty God. Through their idolatry and disobedience, they had long forgotten what this was really like. The philistines were going to learn the lesson that to come into the presence of the One true God with no sense of contrition or change of heart was a fearful thing. All must learn that God will act in the way that He knows is best, and this may not always be what we are expecting.

The second characteristic of God revealed in this chapter is that God is a jealous God. Having captured the ark, the Philistines brought it to Ashdod and put it in the temple of their god, Dagon. They thought of it as nothing more than a religious artifact that belonged alongside all their other religious statues and paraphernalia. Now this position of one amongst many, or one amongst equals in the minds of the Philistines, was never a position that God was going to accept. The words of the commandments are so very clear:

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:3 – 6).

It is worth just pointing out two things here:

First, I might be a jealous husband, if I were to find my wife in a crowd of rich and famous and good looking and successful men. That speaks of my inadequacies rather than my wife's character. However, when God says that He is a jealous God, He in no way is saying that the other gods – Dagon in this chapter, the gods of Egypt in Exodus, Baal, and Ashtaroth, etc., were of an equal worth or better than Him. He is supreme and without an equal. It is because He is this, that He is jealous for the unrivalled obedience and affection of those who would worship Him. He will not be brought down to even the position of first amongst equals.

Second, some might argue that this seems like being a bit arrogant or proud of God – not very inclusive nor multifaith! Well, it would be if I was to say it of myself because it would not be true. But God is exactly all that He says He is – He does not exaggerate when He says that He is supreme,

He is great, He is without equal. He is merely stating facts. We cannot overstate God's glory. We can either respect Him or be judged by Him.

There would be no point in an ant protesting about the elephant that had just squashed its nest. All it can do is accept the reality of the situation and live in a way that recognises this. We dare not protest that it is not what we want to hear that God will tolerate no competition for our worship and affection. We must simply obey and recognise the reality of who He is. Of course, when we do so, we find that He is wonderful and merciful, gracious and kind and so much more beside. He is not a tyrannical despot, nor a mindless elephant, but we should never forget that He is and remains a jealous God.

The third characteristic of God we see in this chapter is that of the omnipotence of God. In the morning, the people of Ashdod came to their temple, only to find that the statue of Dagon had toppled over in the night, face down before the ark. Instead of causing them to realise that the ark, as a symbol of the presence of God, was far greater, they just picked up their statue and put it back in its place. The next morning, the people returned, this time to find that the statue had again fallen to the ground, but this time the head and the hands had broken off. No wisdom and no actions on the part of a false god can ever compare or compete with the almighty power and wisdom of God.

Now what the people of Ashdod should have done was to repent and to turn to the true God, who had twice displayed His power. They would have displayed this change of heart by returning the ark to its rightful place – in the Tabernacle. Sadly, what they did was institute some mindless religious rule about not standing on the threshold of the temple of Dagon, as that was where they had found the broken image. No amount of religion is worth anything. Only what God has said, as revealed in His word, the Bible, has any value.

As the people of Ashdod continued in their rejection of God, they were afflicted by disease – tumours broke out on their bodies. So, they called the great and the good together and decided to send the ark to Gath. They were to learn that when you oppose the will of God you cannot run away from trouble – it just follows you and catches you up. So, the people of Gath were struck down by the same plague. Again, the people of Gath proposed sending the ark on to Ekron, but the same judgement followed the ark there. The people of Ekron were terrified and eventually the penny dropped, and they resolved to return the Ark to Israel.

So, the fourth lesson we learn about the character of God is that He is holy. There can be no peaceful co-existence between idolatry and the presence of God Himself. The Philistines learnt the hard way that God alone was to be worshipped. God cannot be incorporated into some grand world coalition of religions but must have His due place. He can only be approached in the way that He sets out. The ark belonged where God had said it was to be and nowhere else. So, the Philistines were brought to the point where they want rid of the ark and decide they will return it to Israel. In the next talk in this series, we will learn how this was accomplished. Suffice for now to recognise that God must be set apart from all others.

We have learnt from this chapter that God is sovereign, God is a jealous God, God is omnipotent and God is holy. Are these just interesting facts that we learn, good for filling our heads but not likely to fill our hearts? Like those facts we started with concerning Nelson that might be of interest but have no bearing on my life, does what we learn of God just sit in the interesting facts drawer? Most assuredly not!

If God is sovereign, and He is, then we are not! That may be a rather obvious thing to say but all too often we act in a way that suggests we think that we are rulers of our own lives. Imagine if there were two monarchs in the U.K. just now. That would be a recipe for civil war and chaos. Our history shows that this is always the case over and over again. We like to think that we are in

charge of our own lives, but this is just a veneer for rebellion and falsehood. God is sovereign and His will is to use me in whatever way He chooses. I may not like some of the choices He makes. I certainly do not understand the whys of everything that happens in my life but that is all part and parcel of accepting the fact that He is in charge.

When Jesus spoke to the centurion regarding his servant (Luke 7:1–10), He was amazed at the man's faith. When the centurion exclaimed, "I too am a man under authority...I say to one go and he goes", he was giving voice to exactly what our attitude should be. A ruler does not need to explain their every action. It should be sufficient for us that the command is given. This world is one where everything is known to Him, and over which He exerts His ultimate control. By accepting His rule in our lives, we make progress on the path to true freedom. I know that whatever happens to me, even when things appear so uncertain, He has allowed them and He will over-rule. So, in confidence I can live a life of obedience to His word knowing that I am safe in Him.

His sovereignty reaches beyond the extent of our own circumstances. This world belongs to Him. I cringe every time I hear someone say that, "Jesus came into our world." Now I know what they mean, and it is wonderful to know that Jesus came "right where we were" but this world is not our world. God has not signed over the title deeds to us. He came into His world, as the Owner, and His own, His stewards, did not receive Him. This world still belongs to Him. Now this fact should affect every aspect of our lives. For instance, how I treat the planet should be so in light of the fact that it is His.

I had a bit of a disaster the other week. We had been decorating and I was dusting some of my wife's ornaments before returning them to the room. Unfortunately, the tray I put them on slipped off the table and several of the ornaments were smashed. Now if they had belonged to me, I would have just binned them – they had no great intrinsic value. But because they belonged to my wife, I spend hours gluing them back together and getting the fragments to fit. Their value lay in the fact that they belonged to someone else. My rampant consumerism that consumes this world's resources, my throw away culture, my wanting the latest and the best all take its toll on this world's resources. I should think very carefully about how I use what I do. But I don't fall into the trap of thinking that this world is on a one-way ticket to global destruction – at least not at the hands of climate change! God has clearly shown in His word that He will recreate a wonderful kingdom on earth over which He will reign. He is sovereign and He will rule.

His sovereignty should also keep us, and our leaders, from any sense of national pride that comes at the expense of others. Sometimes, for example, people have claimed that God was on their side in a particular conflict, only to find out that God ends up losing, or doing some very strange things. He is sovereign and we do well to remember that unless we are presenting what the Bible says, we cannot possibly speak for God with any degree of certainty.

The fact that God is a jealous God should also very strongly impact upon the way that we live. I would really hate it if my wife was to start flirting with any and every man that came her way. I don't think that I am unduly sensitive or unsure of who I am. It is just that we have made a declaration of love to each other and certainties rest on our mutual trust. God is no different – in fact our feeling that way is a distant echo of our God-given nature. In being created in His image we inherited His characteristics, albeit they are dulled and corrupted by sin. At some stage, it would be worth your time reading through the book of Hosea. There you will see the extraordinary pain that God's heart endured because of His unfaithful people. How He can still love them is testimony to the fact that He is love! Personally, I would long ago have been broken by that level of infidelity.

God has not changed since Old Testament times. He is still deeply hurt by our infidelity. When we think that we can add something to our salvation by some level of works, when we worship created things or beings, we provoke Him to jealousy. He wants the full and total affection of our hearts. Nothing less will suffice. Some believers go to church because they enjoy the service, or

because that is where they meet their social circle, or for a whole host of reasons. Now it is good when we enjoy our fellowship together – whatever form that may take – but if all my friends were to leave, or if my favourite songs were no longer sung, would I decide to give up? My only real reason for attending my local church should be that that is where He has promised to meet with His people. I want to spend time with Him and so that is where I want to be. I know that we can come into God's presence anywhere and at any time, but there is a particular sense of His presence when we meet together in church. I should want to be there because He is there.

The truth that He is omnipotent should give us real confidence. Which of us has never felt a little disheartened at the spiritual state of things in the U.K.? One hears mission reports from overseas and it is so encouraging to hear of hundreds being saved, of churches filled, and of real spiritual growth. Here in the U.K. things just seem suffocatingly lukewarm. That said souls are still being saved, people do still want to follow the Lord and people are still growing spiritually even in the U.K., even now! Now I might be tempted to despair and to give up – humanly speaking things aren't great and it is difficult to see what to do about it. However, I should always remember that we have an omnipotent God who is able to do far more than we ask or think. If God decides to withhold blessing, then that is His prerogative – remember He is sovereign. But if He wants to re-energise the church in the U.K. and restore her to true spiritual purity then He is well able to accomplish this. It will not come by a series of business meetings and / or careful strategy planning seminars. It will only come by broken people, praying and obediently doing what they can. Nothing is too hard for God and we do well to remember this – it will keep us from gloomy despondency and from giving up. His promise to build His church is still true – hope clings on to this. His character that does not will the death of any is unchanged – and hope clings on to this. Let us not become weary in doing good for we serve an awesome God, who knows no limits to His power and ability to accomplish all that He has purposed. At the end of time, all that He had purposed will have been done in just the way that He allowed. There will be no unfinished stories, no loose threads, no “if onlys.”

The fact that He is a holy God ought also to have the profoundest effect upon our lives. God has set Himself apart for His own pleasure. Those who claim to belong to Him ought to set themselves apart for His pleasure too. Holiness is something that should come into every decision that we make each day. How does God want me to use my time today? How does God want me to use my money, home, resources, today? Holiness involves separating ourselves from some things and attaching ourselves to Someone. There are many legitimate things in life that may get in the way of my holiness. They may clutter my thought life and my time to the extent that I do let my relationship with Him drift. This is not good enough for the believer. We cannot turn on holiness on Sunday's, like we do with the central heating at church! What we are throughout the week is what we bring when we meet together. If He has had little part in my life for 6 days a week, then I will not be ready to be used by Him on Sunday.

May it be that as we learn more about our wonderful God that we not only appreciate Him more fully, but also that we become more like Him as we let our characters become increasingly more like His.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk in the series on 1st Samuel: Chapter 5: “God punishes the Philistines,” talk number T1281.

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