

Who Is Able to Stand Before the LORD, This Holy God!

1 Samuel 6

Introduction

In the film *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Nazi soldiers are seeking to find the Ark of the Covenant because they believed, much like the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4, that the Ark was a source of supernatural power and could be used as a weapon against their enemies. There is a scene at the end of the movie when the Nazi's open up the Ark and look inside it. Like the men of Beth-Shemesh, who looked upon and perhaps even into the ark, God struck them all down for their profane curiosity.

This cinematic moment reflects the truth of our passage today from 1 Samuel 6: “**Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?**” (1 Samuel 6:20). As we explore this passage, we will examine the significance of God’s holiness, the problem of sin in relation to God’s holiness, and the ultimate answer to this question in Jesus Christ.

I. The Background: The Ark in Enemy Territory

To fully grasp 1 Samuel 6, we must revisit the events that led to the ark of the covenant falling into Philistine hands. In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelites fought and lost against the Philistines. Desiring to win the next battle, Israel brought the ark of the covenant into battle against the Philistines.

Besides trying to manipulate God's power for victory, the ark was carried by the two wicked sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. But instead of triumph, the LORD handed Israel another defeat. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of the high priest Eli, were killed, and the ark was captured.

Believing they had conquered Israel's God, the Philistines placed the ark in Dagon's temple as a trophy. Yet, like a Trojan horse, the ark brought destruction into their midst. Their idol, Dagon, fell face down before the ark—twice—his head and hands shattered (1 Sam. 5:2-4).

The LORD then struck the Philistine cities with plague. Desperate to escape His wrath, they passed the ark from city to city, but the destruction only spread. After seven months of suffering, the Philistines consulted their priests and diviners, asking how to return the ark and end the devastation.

II. The Ark's Return and God's Judgment

The Philistines realized they had trespassed against the LORD, for the LORD's hand was Heavy upon them, so they said that if they return it, they must not send the ark away from them empty handed. God's heavy glorious hand

must be filled with the weight of glory if they are going to have His hand lighten from off of them.

So the priests and diviners of Philistia said they must return the ark with a guilt offering. A guilt offering, also known as a trespass offering, was required by the LORD when someone unintentionally trespassed on holy things or holy space.

How did the Philistines trespass against the LORD? Remember when the ark was put into Dagon's temple, the presence of the ark turned the temple of Dagon into the temple of the LORD. And so the presence of the idol in the LORD's temple was a desecration of His holy space.

Similarly, as the ark was sent around to all the Philistine cities, all those cities became "holy cities" because the LORD was there. But the people were not "holy people," so their mere presence in the city that the ark of the covenant was in was an unintentional trespass against the LORD. The boundaries of the holy of holies are redrawn as the ark of the covenant of the LORD's presence travels into exile into Philistine territory.

The guilt offering consisted of five golden tumors and five golden rats which ravaged the land. They also represented the five Philistine lords and their cities and villages (1 Sam.

6:17-18). Because all of them trespassed into Holy Ground when the Ark was sent around through the Philistine cities, a guilt offering had to be given to make atonement for all of them.

Now notice what they want to happen as a result of this guilt offering.

*“⁵Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and 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. ⁶Why then do you harden (glorify) your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened (glorified) their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?”*
(And the word “harden” is literally the same exact word for “glory” – KaVoD).

In 1 Samuel 4 when the ark was brought into the camp of Israel before the battle, the Philistines had recalled the account of the LORD defeating the gods of the Egyptians in order to strengthen their resolve to fight like men against the Israelites. But now they recall how the Egyptians and Pharaoh responded once it was clear they were absolutely defeated – they sent the people of Israel away, so too they thought it best to send the ark of the covenant away.

So they devised plan to send the ark away, but they also built-in a little test to determine whether their afflictions were truly from the God of Israel or if they were in fact just a coincidence.

They placed the ark on a new cart, they put the golden rats and tumors in a box next to the ark, they hitched the cart to two cows that had never been yoked. And after they took the cows' calves away from them, they would send the ark pulled by the cows toward Israel. If the cows who were nursing their calves would keep walking straight to Israelite territory and not turn back after their calves, going against their natural instinct, then they would know for certain that the LORD had done this great evil to them. But if the cows turn around and come back, then they will know that it was a coincidence.

Miraculously, the cows went straight to Beth-Shemesh, confirming that God's hand had been against the Philistines.

III. Beth-Shemesh

The people of Beth-Shemesh rejoiced at the ark's return. But their joy soon turned to sadness, as the people of Beth-Shemesh also trespassed against the LORD and sow

suffered God's punishment as a result. Here is what happened:

The Levites showed up, and whenever the Levites have been mentioned in the book of Judges, it is always bad. The law of God required that only bulls could be offered as burnt offerings. But when the Levites show up they offered the cows as burnt offerings.

Also, the law required that the ark of the covenant be covered with either badger or goat skin (depending on the translation), and a blue cloth, so people could not touch the ark, nor even look upon it, let alone look into it. But here the Levites touched the ark, without poles, and they did not cover it and so allowed people to look upon it, and they went even further and allowed people to look into it.

But the law is clear – nobody is supposed to touch any holy thing, nor look upon the holy things, lest they die (Num. 4:15,20). We see this same thing happen to Uzzah later on in the story of Samuel when the Ark is brought up from Kiriath-Jearim, when it was also put on a cart, contrary to the law, and he reach out his hand to stop the ark from falling off the cart, and God struck him down.

The ark, as a symbol of God's presence, was not to be treated in such a profane manner. So the Lord struck out

against the men of Beth-Shemesh, just as he struck the Philistines, and he killed a lot of people.

The text literally says, “seventy men, fifty thousand men.” But some translations combine both together to get 50,070. But other translations resort to just the 70, and disregard the fifty thousand, saying that the population of 50,000 people in Beth-Shemesh, is just too large, and their must be some weird corruption of the manuscript. 50,000 is the population of Ankeny by way of comparison.

So scholars are at a loss how to understand this. Either way, I personally would be more favorable toward the number 70 for theological reasons, as 70 is a number with significant symbolism. 70 is the number of nations of the world according to the table of nations in Genesis 10. So the number 70 signifies the whole world. This act of judgment of God striking down 70 men thus provoked their fearful question: **“Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?”**

Then the people of Beth-Shemesh, just like Egyptians, and just like the Philistines, looked to send the LORD away from them. So they sent messengers to Kiriath-Jearim.

Then the men of Kirjath Jearim 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. ²So it

was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

IV. The Holiness of God

The fundamental issue in this passage is the holiness of God. Now, we are familiar with the idea that holiness means pure, or even separate. Purity and separation, however, are technically natural effects of holiness, but that is not what holiness is. Holiness is to be dedicated, committed, or devoted to something completely. God is holy because he is 100% committed and devoted. God is all in. God does not do anything half-way.

Now what is God committed to? Much of the time in the Bible, context is going to determine what the reference is to God's holiness. God is holy in relation to His righteousness. God is holy in relation to His covenant. God is holy to providing and preserving His people.

To give you one example. In Numbers 20 the people grumble and complain that they had no water, and they said that Moses brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness to kill them. Their grumbling is basically saying God is not committed to finishing the job. He brought us

out, but now we have no water, so He must not be able to save us after all.

So the LORD told Moses to speak to the rock, and the rock would give water. But Moses did not speak to the rock, instead he struck the rock twice, saying, *“Hear now you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?”* And Moses struck the rock with his staff twice.

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron,

“Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the children of Israel therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

Moses did not uphold God's holiness because he struck the rock, and he said that it was Aaron and himself who would provide the water for the people, not the LORD. What Moses had demonstrated to the people was that God was not committed to finishing the job, and so he did not uphold God's holiness.

You see that? Holiness has nothing at all to do with purity or separation in this context. God's holiness is His devotion to providing for His people and bringing them into the promised land.

Now here in 1 Samuel, the context of God's holiness is His devotion and commitment to His glory.

Remember back in 1 Sam. 2:30, the LORD said to Eli - *those who honor me I will honor, and those who dishonor me I will lightly esteem.* This word for 'honor' is the same as 'glory.' This same word is later translated as 'heavy,' when it said "the LORD's hand was **heavy** upon the Philistines." And it shows up again in reference to the Egyptians and Pharaoh who '**hardened**' their hearts - the word 'hardened' is literally the same as glory, they glorified their heart.

So what this teaches us is this - If you honor/glorify yourself, your heart become hardened because it is heavy with self-glory. When you glorify yourself, and harden your heart, you rob God of the honor and glory due His name, and so, He lays His heavy glorious hand of wrath upon you. (Ex. 14:4).

The LORD is 100% devoted to getting the glory due His name. As the LORD said about Pharaoh a number of times in Exodus 14 - "*Then I will harden/glorify Pharaoh's heart so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor/glory over Pharaoh and all His army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD*" (Ex. 14:4).

And as Pharaoh's chariots chased the children Israel through the Red Sea, the chariots wheels drove with heaviness/glory. And it was at that moment that the Egyptians realized that they ought to flee because the LORD fights for Israel against the Egyptians.

When the LORD presses His weighty heavy hand of glory upon you to get glory over you, you will know that His name is the LORD, because He lays His vengeance upon you. This was true of the Egyptians, the Philistines, the children of Israel, and the people at Beth-Shemesh.

When God is 100% committed to getting glory, and He is not being properly glorified through the faithful obedience, trust, and praise of His people, then He will get the glory due His name through another means - by punishing sinners for trespassing against God's holiness.

IV. The Problem of Sinful Humanity

The holiness of God presents a profound dilemma for us all. Our chief end is to glorify God, but because of sin, we fail to be devoted to His glory as we ought. We do not love the LORD our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Worse still, we trespass against His holiness by treating Him as though He were like us—only partially committed to His own glory. Yet this very partiality on our part is the essence of sin. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* We have taken the weight of His glory lightly, and so He esteems us lightly in return.

The prophet Isaiah saw the LORD, high and lifted up, with seraphim flying around the throne crying, “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!*” (Isaiah 6:3). People of God, we must realize that our God is no tribal deity, bound by borders or confined to temples. The whole earth is His throne room, and we are ever in the presence of a thrice-holy God, utterly committed to His glory.

We are all, in a sense, trespassing on holy ground. This should drive us to reckon with the gravity of sinful man standing before a holy God. Isaiah himself felt it keenly, crying out: “*Woe is me! For I am undone!*” (Isaiah 6:5).

Remember, a trespass—or guilt offering—was required for unintentional sin against something holy. And here we stand, sinners in the presence of a holy God.

Not every sin we commit is a high-handed act of rebellion or sacrilege. Sin is the air we breathe—so pervasive that we

scarcely realize when or where we sin. When the whole earth is filled with the glory of the LORD, and every inch of life is consecrated to Him, it is inevitable that we trespass against His holiness, even without knowing it.

Think of the book *Three Felonies a Day*, which claims the average professional breaks several federal laws daily—without ever realizing it. How much more, then, do we commit sins of irreverence against the One whose glory fills the earth?

Yet ignorance will not spare us. One day, we will all die, and our souls will be laid bare before the Holy God. The question is: Will we stand clothed in our guilt or in His grace?

This question that the men of Beth-Shemesh asked therefore is the question that we must all answer before that day arrives: **Who among us can stand before the LORD, this Holy God?**

VI. How Should We Respond?

1. Recognize Our Sinfulness and the Need for Repentance:

We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Everyone of us fails to live in a way that fully honors God's holiness and glory. But we must not act as though this were not true. Whoever says he has no sin is a liar and the truth is not in them. So, be honest to God, and to yourself. Open you're the eyes of your heart and mind and soul to see the many ways you have "taken lightly" the weightiness of God's glory, and how you have not upheld the LORD as Holy. Recognize that because of your guilt, the heavy hand of God's wrath is hanging over you to destroy you on judgment day.

2. Believe in Jesus Christ:

The Egyptians, the Philistines, and the Israelites all trated the problem of a holy God the same way, they sought to send God away from the m. Like Adam and Eve in the garden who hid from the LORD. We also are tempted to run from a holy God. We also are tempted to send God away from us. To stop going to church, to not read our Bible, and to try to keep God at a safe distance from us.

But that kind of thinking does not take into consideration that God drew near to us in His Son Jesus Christ, so that we could draw near back to God, in Jesus. Jesus alone can stand before the Holy God without being destroyed. As the God-Man, He is holy as God is holy—fully devoted to

glorifying the Father. But when we confess our sins and seek to repent of them, we can now draw near to God and His holiness and not be afraid of being destroyed.

Jesus went to the cross, fully devoted to the Father's glory, and was struck by the heavy hand of God's wrath on our behalf. On that cross, Jesus became a guilt offering—atoning for the intentional and unintentional sins of all those who place their trust in Him. Through His sacrifice, all who believe in Him are forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. So you do not need to send God away. Instead, draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

3. Live Lives of Holiness:

The apostle Peter said:

“As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:15-16)

We were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold tumors and rats, but with the precious blood of Christ ...whom God...raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Let us, therefore, live with a holy reverence for God, rejoicing in the salvation provided through Jesus. May our lives reflect His holiness, by becoming more and more

devoted to God's glory every day because of the mercy and grace given to us. And may we also proclaim His mercy to those who, like the men of Beth-Shemesh, are asking, "Who can stand before the LORD, this Holy God?"—showing them the only answer: Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and Man. Amen.

Sermon Summary Sentence

“God demonstrates His holiness by bringing judgment upon both His enemies and His own people when they treat His presence with contempt. This judgment exposes humanity’s inability to stand before Him, pointing us to Jesus Christ—the true and ultimate guilt offering—who alone can stand before the holy God on our behalf.”