

# Who Can Stand Before the Lord?

## Text: 1 Samuel 6

**Introduction:** You know that we are in the midst of a sermon series through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. The trouble with that is that this morning, as we come to chapter 6, it is not immediately apparent how we ought to interpret and apply what we read.

Thursday night, my kids were playing a video game in our living room. It was a holiday, so I had been at home all day with my family. But what was I thinking about as I sat there watching my kids play Crash Team Racing on the Xbox? I was thinking about Sunday's sermon. I was thinking about 1 Samuel 6. What in the world am I going to say? How am I going to make sense of the strange series of events recorded in this chapter?

Now, that was not my first time thinking about 1 Samuel 6 this week. And by that time, I did have some initial thoughts about the chapter. But I was still trying to wrestle with the text as I sat there watching my kids play Xbox.

See, this is the trouble with preaching through books of the Bible like 1 Samuel. Sometimes you come to a text that it takes you a while to make any sense of it. But I believe that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. The Bible is God's Word. It is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteous. God intends to use His Word to make us complete, equipped for every good work.

But it is not always immediately apparent how that is the case. So, what did I do? I did what I often do when I come to a text of Scripture that stumps me. I asked Ashley. First, I tried telling her the story, just to jog her memory of what is going on here in 1 Samuel 6. That was mostly ineffective because of my lack of story-telling ability. Even though I had read and studied the text, I had some of the details mixed up as I recounted them to her.

So, I went and got my Scripture journal and read 1 Samuel 6. The truth is that she was about as stumped as I was. This is not an easy chapter of Scripture. So, I told her, "I think the whole chapter hinges on the question that is asked in verse 20, 'Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?'"

Her response was perfect. She said, "That same question is asked in the book of Revelation." And at that point, I was off to the races. I knew I would have a sermon for you this morning after all. God knew that it was not good that man should be alone.

So, let's read 1 Samuel 6. And let's see what it is that the Lord would have to say to us this morning. Turn there in your Bible if you haven't already. Follow along with me as I read.

(Read 1 Samuel 6...Pray)

One of the problems with the way that we often interpret the Old Testament is that we try to moralize the text. And that works okay when you have a story like David and Goliath, which we'll come to in 1 Samuel 17. Be like David. Don't be like Goliath. Have courage. Trust the Lord. And He will give you the victory.

But that doesn't work so well when you come to a passage like what we find here in 1 Samuel 6. Are we supposed to be like the Philistines? Or are we not supposed to be like the Philistines? Is God giving us a method for determining His purposes? Take two milk cows. Separate them from their calves. Yoke them together. Put a cart behind them. And based on which way they go, that's how you'll determine God's purposes. Or, if you think you've made God mad, make some golden tumors and mice, and offer them to Him, and see if that makes things better. 1 Samuel 6 is not easily moralized.

So, what are we supposed to do? I think that understanding a chapter like 1 Samuel 6 requires eyes of faith. If you are not a follower of Jesus, it's going to be really difficult to read something like 1 Samuel 6 and make any sense of it. In addition, if we're going to understand 1 Samuel 6, we're going to need a good understanding of the story of the Bible, the grand narrative of Scripture, from Creation in Genesis 1 to Restoration in Revelation 21-22.

But as I said before, I think the key to understanding 1 Samuel 6 is found in the question asked in verse 20: Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?

And the first answer we get to that question is that...

**I. The Philistines could not stand before the Lord (1 Samuel 6:1-12).**

**A. You remember where we are in the narrative of 1 Samuel.**

1. The Philistines defeated the Israelites in chapter 4 and captured the ark of God.
2. Then in chapter 5, they took the ark and placed it in the temple of their idol Dagon.
3. Dagon could not stand before the Lord. In fact, the idol literally fell on its face before the ark of the Lord.
4. In addition, the people of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron were all struck with tumors.
5. As a result, the people were freaking out. Verse 11 of chapter 5 says that there was “a deathly panic throughout the whole city.”
6. Which brings us to the beginning of chapter 6 where we read, “The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months” (vs. 1).
7. Seven months may not seem like a long time, but it is a long time to be stricken with tumors and terrified about what might happen next.

**B. The Philistines didn’t know what to do. They just knew that they wanted the ark of the Lord as far away from them as possible.**

1. So, they called for the priests and diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place” (vs. 2).
  - a. It is a good thing that the Philistines recognized that they didn’t know what to do. When you don’t know what to do, it’s always good to acknowledge that reality.
  - b. They seemed to understand that digging a hole and burying the ark in the ground as far away from their camp as possible may not be the best way to get rid of the ark of the Lord. But they didn’t know what to do.

- c. So, they asked their priests and diviners.
- d. They should have asked an Israelite priest. Hopefully, an Israelite priest could have pointed them to the book of Leviticus regarding guilt offerings. They could have then better understood the holiness of God. They could have better understood the seriousness of their sin against the holy God of Israel. They could have better understood that what they were experiencing because of their sin was the judgment and wrath of the holy and righteous God. Then they could have turned to the Lord in repentance, offered to Him the appropriate guilt offering, and experienced the mercy and grace and forgiveness of God.
- e. Instead, they turned to their Philistine priests and diviners. When you don’t know what to do, it matters who you ask. It matters that you ask someone with spiritual wisdom and understanding who can point you to God and His Word.
- f. But the Philistines turned to their priests and diviners.

**2. And what did their priests and diviners tell them? Look at verse 3. (Read vs. 3)**

- a. One commentator points out that “in Biblical narratives we often hear words spoken that are more significant than the speakers themselves could have known” (Woodhouse, 113). That certainly seems to be the case here.
- b. In fact, here in 1 Samuel 6, there are numerous reminders of the story of the exodus from Egypt.
  - 1) *The verb that is translated “send away” is the same word used many times for Pharaoh’s dismissal of Israel from Egypt. It is the word Moses used when he said, “Let my people go” (Ex. 5:1). There’s a sense in which the ark’s departure from the country of the Philistines would be like the departure of Israel from Egypt.*

- 2) *You'll also remember that the Israelites were not to leave Egypt empty. They were instructed to take gold and silver jewelry from the Egyptians with them. And here in 1 Samuel 6, the priests and diviners instruct the people not to send the ark away empty.*
  - 3) *We also see the term "guilt offering" used to describe what the Philistines were to offer to God. This doesn't mean that the Philistine priests and diviners knew the Law of Moses. But it does show us that the Philistines had sinned against God and incurred a debt that must be repaid.*
3. The Philistines received the counsel of their priests and diviners. But they wanted to know more. They asked, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" (vs. 4a).
  4. To which the priests and diviners responded... (Read vs. 4b-5)
    - a. This is something, isn't it? My mom is terrified of mice. I can just imagine what she would say if someone told her she had to make a golden mouse to offer to God for the forgiveness of her sin.
    - b. Commentators think it possible, maybe even likely, that the reason the Philistines were told to make golden mice is because they had been infected by bubonic plague, which causes the swelling of the lymph nodes and is spread by rats.
    - c. Either way, this is descriptive not prescriptive. The author of 1 Samuel is telling us what happened not what we should do if we find ourselves in a similar situation. In fact, "mice are among the ritually detestable animals that God forbade to be used in offerings" in Leviticus 11 (Phillips, 111).
    - d. The Philistine priests and diviners had some understanding that sin against God required a costly offering. This offering was certainly costly. But the truth is that it was not costly enough (Phillips, 111).
- e. Our sin causes infinite offense to our holy and righteous God. Thus, we can only be forgiven and cleansed by an infinitely valuable sacrifice.
  - f. The Apostle Peter wrote that we are "ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).
5. Look at what the priests and diviners said in verse 6. (Read vs. 6)
    - a. That's pretty good counsel coming from pagan Philistine priests and diviners.
    - b. When you sin against God, don't harden your heart. Turn from your sin. What the Philistines couldn't have known is that we are to come to God through faith in Jesus Christ.
    - c. Refusing to turn from our sin. Refusing to come to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Will result in the same penalty experienced by the Egyptians who hardened their hearts. Namely, death.
- C. That brings us to the milk cows. What are we to make of the milk cows?
    1. Look at verses 7-9. (Read vs. 7-9)
      - a. The first thing we should notice is that the Philistines were still considering the possibility that seven months of plagues was all a big coincidence that just happened to coincide with their capturing the ark of the Lord.
      - b. The truth is that there's no such thing as chance. There are no coincidences. God is sovereign over everything. And we should always be looking for His hand in our lives.
      - c. For the Philistines, it was His hand of judgment. As we saw last week, the hand of the Lord was very heavy against them.

- d. But rather than simply acknowledging God's providence and acting accordingly, the Philistines decided to test His providence.
2. They took two milk cows that had never pulled anything, yoked them together, and put behind them a new cart carrying the ark of the Lord and their guilt offering. They separated the cows from their calves and sent them on their way (vs. 10-11).
  3. If the cows went straight to the land of Israel, specifically Beth-Shemesh, they would know that it was the Lord who struck them with plagues. But if not, then they would know that it was not the Lord (vs. 9).
    - a. The problem with this approach to determining God's purposes is that God was in no way obligated to cause the cows to go to Beth-Shemesh.
    - b. It was possible that the cows could have gone off to their young AND that the plagues had come from God.
  4. But as we keep reading, we discover that God was merciful. Much like He provided Gideon confirmation of His will with the fleece in Judges 6, He provided the Philistines confirmation of His hand of judgment here in 1 Samuel 6.
    - a. The cows pulled the cart carrying the ark of the Lord and the guilt offering of the Philistines straight to Beth-Shemesh (vs. 12).
    - b. This does show us that God is sovereign over everything. Even the direction that cows walk.
    - c. But it is not intended to teach us how we ought to determine how God is at work in the world.
    - d. If we want to know how God is at work in the world, we seek spiritual wisdom through prayer and reading our Bible. The Bible is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105).

D. Before we move on, I want you to notice verse 16. (Read vs. 16)

1. As far as the Philistines were concerned, their work was done. They had returned the ark to Israel.
2. Their expectation was that God would remove His heavy hand of affliction from them. And it seems that He probably did.
3. But I appreciate what Richard Phillips says about this in his commentary on 1 Samuel: "We should not suppose that their gold trinkets successfully atoned for their sins, but that the Lord had sufficiently humbled them and made his point. The Philistines returned home, glad to be rid of this dangerous holiness. How easy it is for us to do likewise when God's hand has struck us in chastisement, glad to escape the pain of God's reproof but thinking little on the truths he has emphasized" Phillips, 113).
4. Brothers and sisters, when we experience the disciplining hand of the Lord, let's repent. Let's turn from our sin. Let's turn back to the Lord. Let's walk in righteousness before Him.

Now, we've seen that the Philistines could not stand before the Lord. But what about the Israelites? They were God's covenant people. Surely, they could stand. No. As we keep reading, we see that...

## II. The Israelites could not stand before the Lord (1 Samuel 6:13-19).

### A. Now, remember the situation in Israel.

1. They had been defeated by the Philistines. 30,000 soldiers had died in battle. And worst of all, the ark of the Lord was captured.
2. The priest Eli's daughter-in-law declared, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (4:22).
3. And now it has been seven months. We don't know anything about how the seven months have gone. But we can imagine that there was still a feeling of despair due to their devastating defeat at the hands of the Philistines and the loss of the ark.

- B. But still, they are going about their business when the ark appears.**
- 1. The text tells us that “the people of Beth-Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley” (vs. 13a).**
  - 2. But then “they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark” (vs. 13b).**
  - 3. You can understand their reaction. The text says that they rejoiced (vs. 13c).**
  - 4. We continue reading of the people’s response to the return of the ark in verse 14. (Read vs. 14-15)**
    - a. They were excited. They split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord.**
    - b. But again, this is descriptive rather than prescriptive.**
    - c. In fact, we have reason to believe that they should not have offered the milk cows as a sacrifice to the Lord. Leviticus 1:3 specifies that only bulls were to be sacrificed as burnt offerings to the Lord.**
    - d. But that wasn’t their most significant error.**
  - 5. We keep reading in verse 17. (Read vs. 17-18)**
    - a. I like that. The text says, “The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh” (vs. 18b).**
    - b. Now, this reference to the field of Joshua, which we also saw in verse 14, does catch our attention. There was another Joshua in Israel’s history who led God’s people into the land of promise. Now, the ark’s reentry into the land is associated with a man named Joshua. Given the clear references to the exodus in 1 Samuel 6, I don’t think that’s an accident.**
  - c. But I also like how the author tells his initial readers that the stone where these events took place was still there at the time of the writing of 1 Samuel. It’s as if he is saying, “If you want to see for yourself, you can go and look.”**
  - d. See, what we’re reading in 1 Samuel is a real historical account of events that actually took place.**
  - e. We celebrated Independence Day this week. It’s the day when we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. And one of the things I love about Virginia is that you don’t have to just read about significant people and events that took place in our nation’s history. You can go and see. In fact, right here in our area, you can go to George Washington’s boyhood home at Ferry Farm. You can visit his mother’s home right in downtown Fredericksburg. I’ve been to both places. I’ve been to Thomas Jefferson’s home at Monticello in Charlottesville. I’ve been to Patrick Henry’s home at Red Hill in Charlotte County, VA. I’ve been to Yorktown. I’ve been to Colonial Williamsburg. Those places give evidence that the people I’ve read about in a history book were real people who really did the things I’ve read that they did.**
  - f. Now, I haven’t been to field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh, but the original readers of 1 Samuel could have gone. As confirmation that what the author is saying happened actually happened as he said that it did.**
- 6. But look what else happened. It’s recorded for us in verse 19. (Read vs. 19)**
- a. I know that some of your translations say fifty thousand and seventy men instead of seventy men. That’s obviously a big difference. The textual evidence indicates that it was 50,070. But it’s unlikely that there were ever even that many people living in Beth-Shemesh.**

- b. **The Jewish historian Josephus says that it was only 70. It's possible that there was a scribal error. The truth is that we can't be certain how many it was. That's not to cast doubt on the text of Scripture but to say that we can't be certain what the original text said about the number of men who died.**
  - c. **What we know for certain is that a number of men died because they looked upon the ark of the Lord.**
  - d. **They could not stand before the Lord.**
  - e. **The Lord had specified in His law that only the priests were allowed to see the exterior of the ark. And no one was supposed to look inside.**
  - f. **One commentator writes, "All the humor that has been part of this story and the mockery of the foolish Philistines stops at this point. There is nothing funny now" (Woodhouse, 120).**
- 7. In the aftermath of this slaughter by the hand of the Lord, the men of Beth-Shemesh are left with just one question: "Who can stand before the Lord, this holy God?" (vs. 20a).**

Not the Philistines. Apparently not the Israelites either. What about you? Do you think you can stand? I want to say to you very clearly this morning...

### **III. We cannot stand before the Lord (1 Samuel 6:20-21).**

- A. You see, the truth is that we are in no better condition than the Philistines or the Israelites were.**
  - 1. The Israelites were God's covenant people. If anyone should have been able to stand before the Lord, it was them.**
  - 2. But by acting in a way toward the ark that did not offer to God the holy living and reverence for Him that He requires, the Israelites incurred the wrath of God just like the Philistines.**

- 3. In fact, we see in the second half of verse 20 that after experiencing God's wrath, the Israelites responded in the same way as the Philistines. Get rid of the ark! They asked, "And to whom shall he go up away from us?" (vs. 20b).**
- 4. Phillips says, "This shows the ultimate result when God's people drift from God's Word: the church takes on the attitude of the world and ultimately rejects the holy God in unbelief" (Phillips, 115).**
- 5. They could have repented of their sin. They could have cried out to God in faith. Instead, they sought to send the ark away.**

### **B. I say that we are no better off than the Philistines or the Israelites because we are also rebels against God.**

- 1. God has given us His Word. He has told us how we're supposed to live. He's told us what we're supposed to do. What we're not supposed to do.**
- 2. And yet, we have gone our own way. Done our own thing. Lived as we've seen fit. Done what was right in our own eyes. Without any regard for the Lord and His holiness. We've sinned against the holy God.**
- 3. And because we've sinned. Just like the Philistines deserved God's wrath. And just like the Israelites deserved God's wrath. We deserve God's wrath. The wages of sin is death.**
- 4. Brothers and sisters. Goshen family. We cannot stand before the Lord.**

### **IV. Only Jesus can stand before the Lord (Revelation 6:17; 2 Corinthians 5:21).**

- A. Revelation 6 was read for us in our Scripture reading this morning. I mentioned it again briefly in the beginning of the sermon.**

- 1. What we find there at the end of Revelation 6 is the same question that we find here in 1 Samuel 6. Everyone who is living when the seven seals of Revelation 6 are opened cries out to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and WHO CAN STAND?”**
- 2. The implied answer to that question in 1 Samuel 6 and again in Revelation 6 is “NO ONE.” No one can stand. No one apart from Christ.**
- 3. The only way to withstand the wrath and judgment of God is through Jesus. To repent of your sin. To place your trust in Jesus.**

**B. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

- 1. Jesus can stand because He is the sinless Son of God.**
- 2. But He did not stand. He hung. And He died. In your place. He took your sin on Himself. He experienced the wrath of God in your place.**
- 3. And now, because though He could stand, He hung instead, you now can stand!**
- 4. Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? You can! I can! We can stand! But only because of Jesus.**

**Conclusion:**