

Mishandling The Holy

Matt Lewandowski / General Adult

Glory & Presence / 1 Samuel 6:12–21; 1 Samuel 7:1–2

INTRO

We've been tracing the Ark of the Covenant through one of Israel's lowest moments. The Ark — the symbol of God's glory and presence — was captured, but the deeper loss had already happened. Israel had drifted from covenant faithfulness and tried to use the Ark as a tool instead of honoring the God it represented. Their defeat revealed a hard truth: they had lost God's presence long before they lost the Ark.

The Philistines thought their gods had defeated Yahweh — but once the Ark crossed the border, it became clear God was the real conqueror. Idols fell, cities were struck, and the Lord showed He could defend His own glory without Israel's help.

But when the Ark returns in 1 Samuel 6:12–7:2, the problem isn't solved. Instead of reverent obedience, the people will ultimately mishandle what is holy. They ignore God's instructions, treat His presence casually, and suffer the consequences. At the conclusion of this passage we will read some startling and heartbreaking realities that reveal their true spiritual condition.

1 Samuel 6:12–7:2 ESV

¹² And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh. ¹³ Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD. ¹⁶ And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron. ¹⁷ These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, ¹⁸ and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. 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. ¹⁹ And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. ²⁰ Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?” ²¹ So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you.”

¹ And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the LORD. ² From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

OBSERVATIONS:

1: GOD SENT THE ARK TO THE RIGHT TOWN | God was in the details

- Beth-shemesh was a Levitical town.
- It was a city set aside for the clan/family of Kohath.
- According to Numbers 4, this family was charged with the responsibility for caring for the ark of the covenant
- It was also one of the cities designated for the descendants of Aaron - the priesthood.
 - Important, because the priests were charged with certain responsibilities in preparing the ark before the Levites (Kohathites) could carry it.

- This would also be important for setting it back up when they set up camp.
- NOTE: If any town in the region was setup to know what to do and how to care for the Ark... it was this town and these guys.

2: THE PEOPLE MISHANDLED THE HOLY THINGS | Revealing their true spiritual condition

- Mishandled the holy | IRREVERENCE
 - Only the priests (descendants of Aaron) and the Kohathites were to handle/transport the ark. (God brought it to the right town)
 - They were not to touch the ark, but carry it by the poles designed for it.
 - The ark was normally to be veiled/covered when transported
 - It was not to be displayed openly, nor looked at casually.
- What they did:
 - They presumably brought it down from the cart not using the poles.
 - They openly displayed it on the great stone for all to see
 - They sacrificed cows to the Lord (usually bulls were required,

but not in all cases)

- This would speak to careless zeal without attention to scriptural guidance
- Its contested that some not only looked upon it, but looked within it.
- How this revealed their true spiritual condition:
 - They acted more like the ignorant Philistines than faithful Levites & priests.
 - They themselves were acting:
 - In ignorance — if they didn't know the Biblical commands
 - Unbelief — not taking the warnings seriously
 - Disobedience/Open Hostility — knowing the right thing to do, but choosing irreverence anyways.

3: GOD JUDGED THEM FOR THEIR IRREVERENT SIN

- He would not allow his holiness to be violated.
- Their good intentions were no excuse for disobedience

4: THEY MOURNED THE CONSEQUENCES, BUT

DIDN'T REPENT

- The ESV says the great stone was there as a witness of all the events
- Some scholars note the Hebrew could be rendered: the stone of Abel (or mourning).
- V19 states clearly that they mourned because the Lord had struck them with a great blow.
- The text records fear and grief — but no recorded confession, sacrifice for sin, or covenant renewal. Their response centers on removing the Ark, not restoring relationship.
 - But notice the lack of repentance!
 - There's no prayer, no sorrow for disobedience.
 - They don't care that they've offended God.
 - They're mad that God judged them. THAT'S WICKED. THEIR TRUE CONDITION.

5: THEY SENT THE ARK AWAY

- Again, they act more like Philistines than the people of God.
- They send the ark to Kiriath-Jearim (the city of forests)
 - The city had other names in connection to baal: Kiriath-Baal

(city of baal), Baalah, Baale-judah.

- The cultic history of baal worship here is potentially problematic.
- It was 20 years before the people began to lament/mourn after the Lord.
 - Again, reflecting a generational departure from the Lord.
 - A subsequent generation would turn to God.

APPLICATIONS:

1: WE CAN'T JUST BLINDLY ACCEPT WHAT IS HANDED DOWN TO US.

- The scriptures and not tradition or current trends (the way we've always done things) need to be our authoritative rule and guide.
- If the priests go astray, who or what can get things off course?
- I don't know what exactly happened to the levites and priests in Beth-shemesh, but somewhere along the way, somehow, someway... they departed from the scriptures.

- God held them accountable for their ignorance/rebellion.

2: GOOD MOTIVATIONS OR ZEAL DON'T EXCUSE DISOBEDIENCE.

- We have the word of God.
- We have no excuses

3: PROXIMITY AND KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT EQUAL HOLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

- You can be near the things of God, be knowledgeable about God AND be wicked, idolatrous, and unbelieving.

4: WE NEED TENDER AND REVERENT HEARTS TOWARD THE LORD.

- We cannot allow ourselves to grow cold and calloused to the things of God (and God himself).
- We cannot lose our sense of wonder and awe towards the sacred and holy.

5: WE MUST REMEMBER THE FEAR OF THE LORD

- V20: Who can stand before the Lord?

6: GOD'S HOLINESS DOESN'T CHANGE

- God brought judgment to both Philistines and Israelites

7: FEAR WITHOUT REPENTANCE LEADS TO DISTANCING FROM GOD

- Fear causes us to withdraw and hide from God
- Repentance draws us near

8: GOD'S PRESENCE IS MERCY, BUT IS DANGEROUS TO THE UNREPENTANT

- May we not allow familiarity to breed contempt to the holy and sacred