

THE BOOK OF
1 SAMUEL
CHAPTER 6

QUESTIONS AND COINCIDENCE



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PUZZLING PAGANS (V. 1-6)

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PUZZLING PAGANS (V. 1-6)

- What Should We Do With Our Guilt?
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 - True repentance is a divine gift & cannot be purchased by man's gifts

PUZZLING PAGANS (V. 1-6)

- Why Should You Harden Your Heart?
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COINCIDENTAL COWS (V. 7-18)

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 - The people lack genuine conviction that they have offended God
 - Calculated test of God by an unnatural, passive experiment
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COINCIDENTAL COWS (V. 7-18)

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 - Lesson for us: Do we confess our sins, or do we merely apologize for slip-ups?
 - Apology vs. Confession
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COINCIDENTAL COWS (V. 7-18)

- Confession or Coincidence (v. 7-12)
 - Confession in Scripture
 - Proverbs 28:13
 - James 5:16
 - Psalm 32:3



COINCIDENTAL COWS (V. 7-18)

- Rejoicing Return (v. 13-18)
 - The Ark returned the opposite of the way it left: no army, no human effort by Israelites, God triumphing
 - Celebration in Israel
 - The Philistines walked away, even after clear evidence of truth
 - Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:18-23

LOOKING AND LEAVING (V. 19-21)

- Fear and Goodness
 - The men of Israel gazed on the Ark, an act prohibited in Numbers 4:20
 - Numbers 4:5 dictates proper treatment of the Ark
 - Joy to mourning as God judges sin
 - Israel failed to grasp the lesson: God is always good, but He is not safe

LOOKING AND LEAVING (V. 19-21)

- Fear and Goodness
 - The heart of Israel's unbelief (and often ours): failure to trust in God's goodness
 - Exodus 15:3, Proverbs 14:27
 - God always desires for His people to draw near, so He sent His Son
 - Isaiah 11:1–3, Revelation 7:9, Hebrews 4:16

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1 Samuel / Ark of the Covenant; Sovereignty; Repentance; Judgment; Guilt; Sin; Holiness of God / 1 Samuel 6

1 Samuel 6 ESV

The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed? Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence."

The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. And they put the ark of the LORD on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. 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. 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. 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. 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. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

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, 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.

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. 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?” 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.”

Questions And Coincidence

1. Puzzling Pagans (v1-6)

1.1 What Shall We Do With The Ark?

1.2 What Should We Do With Our Guilt?

1.3 Why Should You Harden Your Heart?

2. Coincidental Cows (v7-18)

2.1 Confession or Coincidence (v7-12)

2.2 Rejoicing Return (v13-18)

3. Looking And Leaving (v19-21)

3.1 Fear and Goodness

Introduction

In 1 Samuel, we encounter a young boy, born in response to a mother's fervent prayer, serving as both a gift to her and a prophet for a wayward nation. This child, Samuel, emerges as an answer to personal and national needs. However, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Samuel fades from the narrative, and the Ark of the Covenant takes prominence. In Chapter 5, it seems—by human standards—that God Himself is defeated, not just His people, as the Ark is captured and placed before the Philistine idol Dagon. The Philistines, like the Israelites, treat the Ark as a mere religious relic, a magical object to be seized and displayed, a golden box believed to hold the keys of obtaining their hopes and desires. Yet, the living God reveals His power, glorifying Himself by toppling Dagon and unleashing judgment on the Philistines. His work with Israel resumes by chapter's end, turning His attention back to His people. This chapter brims with themes of holiness, sovereignty, sin, guilt, judgment, and repentance, each rich enough for its own sermon. Today, we'll explore the full scope as we continue through 1 Samuel, seeking to glorify God by observing how He glorifies Himself in his world.

1. Puzzling Pagans (v1-6)

1.1 What Shall We Do With The Ark? (v1-2)

In **verse 1**, the Philistines are finally about to acknowledge their dire situation, but only after enduring seven months of death and affliction, which eventually spurs them to call for the pagan diviners to intervene. This sluggish response underscores a significant contrast between believers and unbelievers, as well as between mature and immature Christians. A hallmark of Christian maturity is a prompt reaction to God's discipline. When sin invites God's heavy hand, mature believers don't delay for months before their conscience drives them to repent and seek Christ. With tender hearts toward sin, mature Christians are sensitive to its presence, making it troubling for pastors to see prolonged, unrepentant sin in a believer's life. Weeks, months, or years of ongoing sin should not mar the witness of a blood-bought child of Jesus. As Christians grow in faith and walk longer with God, sanctification should quicken their response to sin, leading to swift confession and repentance.

Scripture teaches us just that truth:

Proverbs 28:13 “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

We certainly should not presume on “repenting later” while we enjoy sin now.

Romans 2:4 “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

We also know that attempting to seek repentance on our grounds, in our time is a recipe for sorrow.

Hebrews 12:14–17 “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”

Look with me at **verse 2**, the Philistines, now suspecting a divine force at play, not only convene the lords of their cities but also summon their pagan religious leaders. This escalation follows their earlier question in 5:8, when the people of Ashdod asked all the gathered lords of the Philistines, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” After enduring 7 months of affliction, they now desperately want the Ark gone, recognizing its connection to Israel’s God. To address this, they call upon their diviners—their “best magic guessers”—for guidance. Scripture doesn’t specify what the diviners did between verses 2 and 3 to arrive at their response in verse 3. Typically, pagan diviners employed practices such as interpreting omens and signs, where they sought meaning in natural phenomena like bird flights, unusual animals, or malformed births. They might also have performed hepatoscopy, examining the livers of sacrificed animals for divine signals, or conducted ritualistic ceremonies to invoke their gods’ guidance. These methods reflect their attempt to discern a solution to the crisis caused by the Ark.

So as the judgment of God is being poured out on them, the Philistines assemble their top false prophets to discern what the God of Israel demands. They perform their rituals—scattering animal entrails, observing birds, or perhaps engaging in frenzied dances and self-mutilation. They ask a key question that conveys to us they have made a few very important connections. Remarkably, despite their pagan beliefs, they reach a surprisingly sound conclusion: they acknowledge their guilt before God. The God of Israel is real, the God of Israel is powerful, and they are guilty before him.

The God of Israel is not a mere local deity limited to Israel's borders; His sovereignty extends over Philistia, Dagon, and beyond. Stricken by death and affliction, the Philistines rightly acknowledge their guilt before Him. Now, they face a critical question: how should they address this guilt? They understand that the Ark must be returned, not just passed from city to city, but sent back to Israel. Beyond that, they seek to know what they owe Israel's God to atone for their guilt. What a profound question—perfectly framed! Scripture is replete with such pivotal questions, yet the challenge often lies in arriving at flawed answers. As Pastor Mike often noted, one of the most striking questions in Scripture appears in John 18:38, when Pilate, standing face-to-face with Jesus, asks, “What is truth?”—a remarkable question, but he failed to wait for the answer. Here, in verses 3-5 we see the best response the Philistine diviners—those “liver lookers”—can muster to address their guilt before God.

1.2 What Should We Do With Our Guilt? (v3-5)

We said previously that despite their pagan beliefs, the Philistines arrive at a remarkably sound conclusion: they recognize their guilt before God, pose the right question about addressing it, yet offer a very typical human response. In **verse 3** they view the God of Israel, somehow tied to the “golden chest,” as a deity akin to their own god Dagon—capricious and childlike. Initially the Philistines were indifferent, they insulted God by placing the Ark in submission before Dagon's idol. But after experiencing His power through affliction, they realize the insults must stop. To appease this formidable God, they decide He requires lavish offerings.

In **verse 4** the Philistines' solution, born of their pagan wisdom, is to offer five golden tumors and five golden mice, hoping to neatly resolve their troubles and move on. This decision reveals their heart's motivation: there is no true confession or repentance. Yet, through their actions, in **verse 5**, they acknowledge God's glory. Despite their lack of genuine repentance, they recognize that the God of Israel deserves honor, and their offerings are a public display of this. However, this acknowledgment stems not from a transformed heart but from the undeniable power of God displayed in their land, compelling them to act. Their response is

merely a superficial gesture—a tip of the hat to divine power—while they remain content to send the Ark, and thus “God,” away, hoping to resume their worship of Dagon undisturbed. This falls far short of true reconciliation between a sinner and a holy God.

As Philippians 2:9–10 declares, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

All will one day acknowledge God’s glory, but this alone does not bring salvation. Recognizing God’s power and offering gestures of respect are not enough without a heart changed by God. Unbelievers often seek to escape God’s judgment, craving a life free of hardship while pursuing their own desires. A god who fails to grant their wishes or shield them from consequences holds no appeal. What they lack is genuine humility, confession, and repentance—responses that require God’s transformative work, as an unbelieving heart cannot produce them on its own.

This is echoed in 2 Timothy 2:24–25, which instructs, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.”

True repentance, which is a divine gift leading to the knowledge of the truth, cannot be purchased through offerings like golden tumors and mice. The Philistines’ failure to move beyond merely acknowledging God’s power and glory is evident, and their understanding isn’t limited to this recent display of divine judgment. They also drew from another well-known event: the plagues God sent upon Egypt. The Philistine diviners, aware of Israel’s history, referenced God’s mighty acts against the Egyptians, recognizing a pattern of divine power and judgment. This historical knowledge shaped their response, yet it still fell far short of true repentance.

1.3 Why Should You Harden Your Heart? (v6)

In **verse 6**, the Philistine diviners advise the lords, “If you’re set on returning the Ark to Israel, don’t send it back without a guilt offering, and don’t delay. Don’t repeat Egypt’s mistake of stubbornly holding onto what belongs to God’s people—look how that turned out for them. If the same God is dealing with us now, we must avoid an ‘Exodus-style’ judgment.”

This reveals a core flaw in the Philistines’ response: their recognition of guilt and attempt at

repentance stem not from God-given new hearts but from a desire to stop the “bad stuff.” Their decisions, driven by the lords and diviners, reflect human wisdom, not divine transformation. They don’t seek God Himself; they want to escape His judgment. They aren’t yearning for a changed heart from the Father—they just want the punishment to cease. If there’s any doubt about their motives, verses 7–18 clarifies their hearts. The Philistines don’t act from a desire for repentant restitution. Reluctantly, they make plans to part with the Ark, not out of devotion but because the populace is in chaos, and no city will accept it. Everyone recalls the Egypt story from roughly 250 years prior—a historical parallel as vivid to them as the founding of the United States 249 years ago is to us today. Just as we teach our children about our nation’s origins, the Philistines knew the Exodus account, which told them of God’s actions during the exodus, and they saw themselves trapped in a similar scenario of divine judgment.

Faced with an uproar and no viable option to keep the Ark—their “golden box of victory”—the Philistine leaders devise a test. This nation under judgment knows it needs to act quickly, but is blind on how to act rightly. They craft a plan to act without fully surrendering, revealing their unwillingness to truly submit to God’s authority.

2. Coincidental Cows (v7-18)

2.1 Confession or Coincidence (v7-12)

Verse 7 begins with the notion that this final plan will resolve everything, “now then”. The Philistine diviners persist in offering their peculiar advice for the lords to follow on behalf of a nation facing judgment. Yet, this so-called “repentance” presents another distinct issue. The people lack genuine conviction that they have offended the one true God. This “repentance”—a theatrical display of restitution for guilt—is flawed from the start, poisoned by the very element that undermines authentic confession or repentance: a condition. The entire passage hinges on the lords and diviners reluctantly agreeing to return the ark and offer a golden tribute to atone for their guilt, but only if two milk cows perform an impossible, unnatural act.

The Philistine leaders, in their so-called “guilt offering,” devise a calculated plan to test God while clinging to the ark, as given to us in verses 7–12. In **verse 7**, they choose two milk cows—animals unfit for the task, as they are the wrong type for pulling carts, have no

experience doing the task, and are placed in an unnatural environment, as they are separated from their calves. This setup is deliberately stacked against success, reflecting their reluctance to acknowledge God's power. In **verse 8**, their lack of genuine intent is evident: they send the ark "its way" without conviction that it must return to Israel, treating the act as a passive experiment rather than a committed offering. By **verse 9**, their approach is one of skepticism—"watch and see" if God is truly at work or if they can continue in their defiance. They set no clear destination for the cows, leaving the outcome to chance, and their hearts remain unmoved, attributing events to coincidence rather than divine will. In **verses 10-11**, the leaders follow through with the diviners' prescription, but their motives are still suspect. They entertain the possibility that they might retain the ark and avoid sending the golden tribute, rationalizing that the plagues and mice could be mere coincidence, unrelated to their capture of the ark. They cling to the hope that their illnesses are unrelated, avoiding true accountability. Yet, in **verse 12**, the God of Israel intervenes decisively, orchestrating a miracle that defies the natural order. The milk cows, against all odds, follow the path to Israel, confirming God's sovereignty over creation and exposing the Philistines' superficial repentance as futile in the face of His undeniable authority.

At the close of verse 12, the Philistines trail behind this humiliating procession, heads hung low, witnessing a miracle unfold before their eyes. Yet, the question lingers for us today: Did they truly repent of their guilt? Was their offering born of God-given repentance? More pointedly, we must ask ourselves this evening: Does our confession reflect genuine repentance? Is it rooted in biblical truth? Do we confess our sins, or do we merely apologize for slip-ups? The distinction can be profound one.

We need to consider the difference between apology and confession. We often use familiar words interchangeably, as we explored in Hebrews when distinguishing between punishment and discipline. Though Christian parents may use those terms interchangeably with good intentions, but their biblical meanings differ significantly. This morning, we face a similar issue with the words apology and confession.

I highlighted earlier the poison that taints true repentance: conditions. Do we want confessions offered to us with strings attached? More critically, is this how we confess to God? Does authentic confession come with conditions, excuses, or justifications? Apologies often sound like: "I'll be sorry if they're sorry," or "I'm sorry, but here's why—my upbringing, my struggles, what you did to me." These shift blame, seeking pity rather than owning guilt. The Philistines hedged their bets with their guilt offering, as if God would accept a "just in case" box of golden mice and tumors. True biblical confession, however, carries no excuses, no conditions, no safety nets. It requires full conviction of guilt before utterance. You are either guilty and in need of confession, or you are not. There's no middle ground—there can be no casual prayers or raised hands on Sunday to appease a God who might be "a little

upset.”

Let’s really nail down the difference between these words often used interchangeably. The difference between apology and confession lies in their intent and alignment with biblical truth. The word "apologize" comes from the Greek word *apologia*, meaning a verbal defense, as seen in apologetics, where someone gives a defense of the faith.

Merriam-Webster’s definition says that an apology is a “formal justification” or “excuse” for one’s actions. Even its secondary meaning—an admission of error with regret—falls short of biblical standards, as it often seeks to justify or mitigate guilt rather than fully own it. In contrast, biblical confession, in this context, means “to say the same as another, to agree, to assent.” It’s like signing a confession in a police station, declaring, “What they say I did, I did.” Confession involves complete alignment with the truth of one’s guilt, without excuses, conditions, or defenses. Biblically, confession is an unreserved acknowledgment of sin before God, agreeing with His judgment and seeking His mercy, not justifying oneself.

Christians are called not to apologize but to offer a biblical confession when they’ve wronged someone. Scripture never commands us to apologize, but it explicitly calls us to confess our sins.

Proverbs 28:13 states, “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

Similarly, James 5:16 instructs, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

Many view confession negatively, associating it with formal rituals, priestly catholic confessions, or mourning in sackcloth. Yet, true confession is a beautiful act that brings freedom. Psalm 32:3 reveals the weight of unconfessed sin: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” When done rightly, confession liberates the soul. Chapter 6 challenges us to examine our hearts on this matter. It would be a tragedy to leave this passage without asking: Are our confessions clear, unconditional, and biblically grounded? Or are we, like the Philistines, offering guarded, half-hearted gestures, hedging our bets with God? Apologies are easy—think of children muttering “sorry” without meaning—because they skirt the heart of the issue. True confession, though rarer, confronts sin head-on, aligning us with God’s truth and opening the door to His mercy.

2.2 Rejoicing Return (v13-18)

In **verse 13**, during the wheat harvest, the people of Israel looked up and saw the Ark returning—a stunning reversal of the Ichabod moment when the glory of God had departed. Now, without an army, without Israel lifting a finger, and without any human effort, God Himself had triumphed over the Philistines and brought the Ark back from battle. The sight sparked rejoicing as the people witnessed God’s mighty work. Yet, just as in chapter 4 when the Ark was captured, we soon encounter the same recurring issue with Israel’s response to God’s presence and power.

In **verses 14 and 15**, the Ark arrives directly in a field in Beth-shemesh, where a large stone stood. The Israelites used this stone as a platform to display the Ark and the golden offering from the Philistines. Though the Ark was soon moved from this place of celebration, the stone remained as a lasting marker. Future generations were told it was the very stone upon which the Ark rested when God brought it back to Israel. On that same day, the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and other sacrifices to the Lord, in addition to the burnt offering of the two cows. These additional offerings expressed their gratitude for the Ark’s return. Although it is not expressly mentioned I can imagine the feast of joy they must have shared together to celebrate their profound joy.

In **verse 16**, the Philistine lords receive a definitive answer: the return of the Ark was no coincidence. They witnessed the entire miraculous display, yet they turned and walked back to Ekron. Remarkably, they devised the test themselves, questioning whether this was mere chance or if confession was required. God responded with undeniable clarity, but the lords still walked away. This reveals the true nature of an unbelieving heart—confronted with evidence, it rejects and retreats. This isn’t just about one event. All creation testifies to God’s glory ceaselessly.

Psalms 19:1–4 declares “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun,”

Yet, the Philistine heart, like the natural state of all humanity, rebels.

Romans 1:18–23 explains “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give

thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

The Philistines should have fallen prostrate before the Ark of God, pleading to learn from the Levites about the true and living God. They should have poured out their hearts in genuine confession, fleeing from their guilt. Instead, they turned their backs.

That day, the Philistine lords walked away—returning to Ekron, to Dagon, and to their rejection of God.

In **verses 17 and 18**, a detailed record describes the offering sent with the Ark by the Philistines. Verse 4 notes that the diviners prescribed five gold tumors and five gold mice, symbolizing the five major cities. However, verses 17 and 18 imply wider involvement, with not only the five principal cities but also their surrounding walled towns and rural villages contributing to the guilt offering. It seems logical that these nearby villages, suffering similar afflictions in health and fields as the cities, would share in the cost of the offering to seek relief from divine judgment. Commentators differ on this point: some suggest that all shared the expense of the five tumors and five mice to claim a stake in the hoped-for mercy, while others propose that the villages went beyond, each sending their own golden tumor and mouse, fearing the five offerings from the main cities might not cover them. Thus, despite the diviners’ instruction for five of each, the broader region may have contributed additional offerings voluntarily.

Note: Another exodus like situation where Israel left the land of Egypt and plundered them as they went, now the ark leaves the land of Philistia and returns with plundered gold.

3. Looking And Leaving (v19-21)

3.1 Fear and Goodness (v19-21)

After the rejoicing from the people of Beth-shemesh some of the men were struck by God.

***Note: A question of quantity: Was it 70 (ESV, NIV) or 50,070 (KJV, NASB)?**

In **verses 19 and 20**, the men of Beth-shemesh gazed upon the Ark of the Lord, an act strictly prohibited in the Old Testament. Numbers 4:20 explicitly warns, “They shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die,” a command binding not only common Israelites but also the Levites. In Numbers 4:5 they are given express direction on how to handle the ark when it needed to be moved; “When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it.” Yet, seized by intense curiosity and probably emboldened by the Ark’s return, these men disregarded this divine prohibition. They may have wanted to check if the Philistines had tampered with the covenant tablets or simply desired to marvel at this ancient, sacred object inscribed by God’s hand. Driven by irreverent joy and curiosity, the Levites among them treated the Ark with shocking disrespect, forgetting their sacred duty. Like Eli’s sons, they reduced the Ark to a mere religious artifact to be gawked at, no different from a piece of furniture. How could they think there would be no consequences for casually approaching the holy presence of God?

Israel’s initial joy at the ark’s return turned to mourning due to God’s judgment against their sin. This led them to ask a profound question: If the Philistine army, God’s own people, and even His priests cannot withstand His holiness, who can stand before this holy God? The text offers no direct answer, but in their mourning under God’s judgment, Israel, like the Philistines, wanted to distance themselves from Him, sending the ark away.

They might have thought, “Remove this holiness; it’s too much for us. Our God is not safe.” The Israelites, of all people, should have understood God’s fearsome power. They witnessed His plagues on Egypt—swarms of insects, frogs, diseases, the Nile turned to blood, darkness over the land, and the death of every firstborn son. God led them out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, parted the Red Sea for their safe passage, and then closed it to swallow Pharaoh’s pursuing army. Yet, Israel failed to grasp the lesson: God is always good, but He is not safe. Familiar with His fearsome nature, they doubted His goodness in this moment. They wanted the ark gone, perceiving God’s judgment as unkind, unloving, or dangerous.

At the heart of Israel’s unbelief—and very often at ours—is a failure to trust in God’s goodness. By mishandling the ark with irreverence, Israel assumed their own ways and sense of goodness were superior to God’s. Why shouldn’t we be able to approach God’s presence with celebration? Doesn’t the joy of the occasion outweigh the rules for approaching the ark, for standing in the presence of God’s holiness? They might have been thinking, how can a good God strike us when we are so joyful to have the ark back where it belongs?

C.S. Lewis captures this tension masterfully in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. A character named Mr. Beaver explains that Aslan, Narnia's ruler, is a mighty lion, not a man as the little girl Susan assumed. Surprised by this, Susan admits she's nervous about meeting a lion and asks if Aslan is safe. Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King."

Unlike the Philistines and neighboring nations, who crafted unpredictable, cruel gods and feared them with rigid rituals and sacrifices, Israel's God—the true God—desired a different kind of fear, a fear that would be rightly rooted in His character. He is awe-inspiring, powerful, and fearsome, yet also compassionate, loving, patient, and relational. Last week Pastor Mike told us that God is a warrior!

Exodus 15:3 "The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name."

Israel was called to fear God, but unlike the false deities of the world, they were to fear God uniquely, trusting in His goodness. Had they believed in His goodness, they would have repented and turned toward Him, embodying Proverbs 14:27.

Proverbs 14:27 "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death."

If Israel had feared God rightly while trusting His goodness, they would never have sent the ark away. God had given clear covenantal instructions for approaching Him, saying, "This is the only way you may come near me." Yet, in **verse 21** Israel sent the ark away, unready and lacking the reverence that draws people into God's presence properly.

God has always desired for His people to draw near, which is why He sent His Son. Only one has ever perfectly feared the Lord: the promised shoot from Jesse's stump, who delighted in the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 11:1–3 “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear”.

Through Christ, God’s invitation to approach Him extends to every person through every nation.

Revelation 7:9 “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands”.

Because of Christ’s perfect reverence, we can approach God confidently, trusting in His mercy. True fear of the Lord isn’t about staying distant but about drawing close through faith, revering God for His holiness while embracing His grace and compassion. He isn’t safe, but He is good. This truth invites us, as Hebrews 4:16 declares, to;

Hebrews 4:16 “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We began this morning reflecting on the seven-month period of Ichabod, when God’s glory departed to Philistia. Now, we close with the ark’s return—a moment ripe for joy and celebration that Israel turned into mourning. Though the ark was restored to them, Israel chose to send it away. Now, a 20-year wait lies ahead for their repentance and return to God. Pastor Mike will pick up with that period next week. The Philistines endured God’s presence in their flesh for seven months, but Israel, in their irreverence and misguided fear, will stray and delay for 20 years.

May God grant us the grace to acknowledge our sins and offer sincere, complete confessions, knowing He has triumphed over sin and death on our behalf.

May He instill in us a holy reverence for His majesty, turning our hearts away from the fleeting safety of our flesh and toward the boundless goodness of our King.