

Good morning! It is so good to see each one of you here this morning. Here's what I want you to know this morning. Whether you're carrying questions or answers, whether you're in a valley or on a mountaintop—God is inviting you into something deeper. Something better than just getting what you want. He's inviting you to know who He is.

Listen to these ancient words from the prophet Isaiah. God speaks to His people then. And to us now:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Can you picture that? The distance between heaven and earth? That's how much higher God's thoughts are than ours. How much wiser His ways are than our ways.

This morning we're going to discover what it means to trust a God like that. A God whose plans are better than ours. Whose wisdom exceeds our understanding. Who cannot be controlled or manipulated. But who can absolutely be trusted.

So let's not come to worship this morning trying to get God to bless our agenda. Let's come ready to surrender to His. Let's not come casually, as if God exists to serve us. Let's come with reverence, knowing we serve Him. Let's not come going through religious motions. Let's come hungry. Desperate. Ready to truly encounter the living God.

The God whose ways are higher than our ways is here. Right now. In this place. He sees you. He knows you. And He's inviting you to worship Him.

So let's stand together. And let's worship the God who is infinitely greater than we could ever imagine. The God who is worthy of all our praise.

Who Is Able To Stand?

1 Samuel 4-6

John Harris

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INTRODUCTION

Yesterday, I included in the Sunday bulletin email the situation about what happened to me and our friend Rob Rule in New Orleans a little over a week ago. I shared about a collision at an intersection—about how quickly everything can change, about symbols of safety that both protect and fail, about how in the accident Rob suffered a fractured sternum, about assumptions meeting reality.

And that collision in New Orleans connects me to another collision story—one that happened almost three thousand years ago at an intersection in ancient Israel.

Like Rob and me, they didn't see it coming. Like us, they thought they were safe. Like us, they had symbols of protection—we had seatbelts and airbags; they had the ark of the covenant.

But then Israel's religious confidence collided with God's reality. And this can happen to us as well.

We live in a world of formulas and quick fixes. Download the app. Follow the steps. Get the results. We've become so conditioned to controlling outcomes that we bring this same mentality into our relationship with God. We show up on Sunday, check the box, pray the prayer, and expect Him to deliver what we want. We treat worship like a transaction and God like a vending machine—insert the right religious coin, press the right button, and out comes the blessing.

But what happens when God refuses to be controlled? What happens when the formula fails and the ritual doesn't work? That's exactly what Israel discovered in one of the most disturbing stories in the Old Testament. They thought they had God figured out. They had the ultimate religious symbol—the Ark of the Covenant itself, the very throne of God's presence. Surely if they brought it into battle, victory was guaranteed. Surely God would have to show up and fight for them. They were about to learn a devastating truth.

The story is found in 1 Samuel chapters 4 through 6. It's a tragic story, a sobering story, but it's also a story that asks us the most important question any of us will ever face:

When your assumptions about God meet the reality of who God actually is—will you be able to stand?

This morning, we're going to walk through 1 Samuel chapters 4-6 and discover what it means to truly honor who God is, rather than trying to use Him for what we want.

The Story: When God's Presence Becomes a Prop

The story opens with Israel in a desperate situation. They're at war with their ancient enemies, the Philistines, and they've just suffered a crushing defeat. The people of Israel were in crisis.

1 Samuel 4:1-3 (ESV) **1 And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. 2 The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. 3 And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? They had just faced the Philistines in battle at a place called Aphek, and the results were devastating—four thousand Israelite soldiers lay dead on the battlefield. As the survivors stumbled back to camp, the elders gathered in emergency session. Their question was the right one: "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?"**

But instead of waiting for an answer, instead of seeking God's face, instead of examining their hearts for sin, they jumped to a solution. **It was like a patient diagnosing themselves on WebMD and ordering their own treatment without consulting the doctor.** " Notice their answer in verse 3:

Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

The ark of the covenant—the most sacred object in all of Israel. It was a wooden box overlaid with gold, topped with two golden cherubim whose wings overshadowed the mercy seat. Inside were the tablets of the Ten Commandments. This was the throne of God, the symbol of His presence among His people. **Think of it as ancient Israel's equivalent of their most treasured national monument—imagine if the Statue of Liberty, the Constitution, and the Presidential Seal were all combined into one sacred object.** It had gone before Israel when they crossed the Jordan River. It had circled the walls of Jericho before they fell. Surely, they reasoned, if we bring the ark into battle, God will have to give us victory.

So messengers hurried the twenty miles to Shiloh and returned with the ark. But notice who came with it—

4 So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli the high priest. These were not men of God. Scripture tells us they were **"worthless men who did not know the LORD."** They treated God's offerings with contempt. They slept with the women who served at the tabernacle entrance. They were corrupt to the core. **It was like hiring security guards with extensive criminal records to protect Fort Knox.** Yet here they were, the guardians of God's holy presence.

5 As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.

The noise was like a stadium erupting when the home team scores the winning touchdown—that same electric energy, that same confident roar, that same assumption that victory was now guaranteed. It was impressive. It looked spiritual. It sounded like faith. It was so loud that the Philistines heard the shouting!

6 And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, 7 the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A god has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. 8 Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. 9 Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

And fight they did.

10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell.

The second battle was even worse than the first. Thirty thousand Israelite soldiers fell—seven times as many as before. Imagine a football team bringing their championship trophy onto the field, certain it would guarantee victory—only to suffer their worst defeat in franchise history.

Then the unthinkable happened! 11 And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

The ark that was supposed to save them was captured by the enemy. And Hophni and Phinehas, the wicked priests who had brought it, lay dead on the battlefield.

When the news reached Shiloh, ninety-eight-year-old Eli was sitting by the roadside.

12 A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. 13 When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. 14 When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, “What is this uproar?” Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. 15 Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. 16 And the man said to Eli, “I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.” And he said, “How did it go, my son?” 17 He who brought the news answered and said, “Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.”

Notice that Eli could bear the news of his sons being captured. But when the messenger added, “And the ark of God has been captured,” notice what it says happened then:

18 As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

It was as if his entire reason for living—his identity, his purpose, his connection to God—had been severed in that single sentence.

That same day, Phinehas's wife went into premature labor when she heard the news.

19 Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. 20 And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. 21 And she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 22 And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Repeat: With her last breath, she named the child Ichabod—"No glory"—saying, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." It was like naming your child "Abandoned" or "Forsaken"—a name that would forever commemorate the nation's darkest day.

Meanwhile, the Philistines triumphantly carried their prize to Ashdod, one of their major cities, and notice where they placed it:

1 When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon.

They placed it in the temple of Dagon, their fish-god, right beside Dagon's statue. It was the ultimate insult, the ultimate claim of victory: our god has defeated your God. But notice what happens:

3 And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. 4 But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.

As if their victorious god couldn't even stand up in the presence of the God of Israel.

And it got worse for the Philistines. The hand of the LORD was heavy upon them. A plague of tumors broke out in Ashdod. Think of it like a mysterious epidemic sweeping through a city—something like COVID-19 appearing suddenly, spreading rapidly, with no known cure. So, in panic, they moved the ark to Gath—and the plague followed. It was like trying to escape a contagious disease by moving to a different city, only to discover the disease had traveled with you. Then they moved it to Ekron—and the plague came there too. For seven months, the Philistines tried to manage the situation, control the

problem, handle the ark of God. They held councils. They consulted their priests and diviners. They moved it from city to city. Nothing worked. The hand of the LORD remained heavy upon them.

Finally, while the ark was in Ekron, the Philistines came up with a plan:

11 They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.” For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. 12 The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

In other words, they had had enough of the ark! So they decided to send it back to its own place. But notice how they did it:

3 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.” 4 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. 5 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. 6 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?

7 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. 8 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 9 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.”

Let’s consider what’s going on here? Instead of merely sending the ark back, the Philistines designed a cow test.

Imagine taking two mother bears who had just given birth, separating them from their cubs, hitching them to a wagon they’d never pulled before, and expecting them to walk in a straight line away from their babies—it goes against every natural instinct.

Why did they do this? They wanted to determine if their suffering was truly from Israel’s God or mere coincidence. They figured that untrained cows separated from nursing calves would naturally return to their young—unless divinely compelled. If these cows, against all natural instinct, went straight to Israelite territory without their calves, they would know it was truly the God of Israel who had afflicted them.

So, they returned the ark to Israel with a guilt offering—five golden tumors and five golden mice, representing the plague that had struck them. They placed the ark on a new cart pulled by two cows

who had never been yoked and whose calves had been taken from them. The cows went straight to a town called Beth Shemesh, in Israel territory.

When the ark arrived, the people there rejoiced to see the ark return. But then, seventy men looked into the ark—perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps to see if the Philistines had stolen anything from inside.

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?”

That question they asked in Beth Shemesh is the question that echoes across the centuries: “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?”

There is much to learn from this tragic story that spans these three chapters, but the one central truth that I would like for us to consider today is this:

God’s character demands worship, not manipulation.

All three locations and groups of people teach us this lesson.

Israel tried to manipulate God by bringing the ark—forcing victory through a religious symbol without repentance, without seeking God’s will, without genuine faith.

The Philistines tried to manipulate circumstances by moving the ark from place to place, thinking they could manage God’s presence.

The people at Beth Shemesh treated God’s presence casually, assuming familiarity gave them the right to handle holy things carelessly.

All of them—Israel, Philistines, and Beth Shemesh—learned the same devastating lesson:

God’s character demands worship, not manipulation.

And this story confronts us with an urgent question that echoes through every generation of God’s people: **How do we worship God’s character instead of manipulating it?** Israel had all the right religious elements—the ark, the priests, the rituals, the prayers—but their hearts were bent toward control rather than surrender. They wanted God’s power without God’s presence, His blessings without His lordship, His protection without His purity. We must ask ourselves: Are we any different? Do we approach God with genuine worship of who He is, or are we simply trying to manage outcomes we’ve already decided we want? Let’s discover five transformative truths from this story that will reshape how we relate to the God who refuses to be used.

POINT 1:

Let's return to that crucial moment when Israel's elders gathered after their defeat. The text tells us they asked, "Why has the Lord defeated us today?" It's a profound question that shows they understood God was sovereign over the outcome. But notice what they didn't do. They didn't fast. They didn't seek God's face. They didn't inquire of the prophet Samuel. They didn't examine their hearts or their nation's spiritual condition. Instead, they immediately moved to a solution of their own devising: "Let us bring the ark." Did you catch it? They didn't say, "Let us seek the Lord." They said, "Let us bring the ark." They had moved from seeking God to strategizing about God. They were no longer asking what He wanted; they were telling Him what He should do.

This wasn't faith—it was formula. They essentially said, "We know what went wrong. We know how to fix it. We just need to add the right religious element to the equation." They had already decided the outcome they wanted—military victory—and now they were devising a plan to make God cooperate with it. They wanted to trust God's power while dictating God's plan.

This is the essence of manipulation rather than worship. They had analyzed the situation, determined the desired outcome, and devised a plan to force God's hand. The ark represented God's presence, so in their minds, if they brought the ark, God would be obligated to fight for them. They were trying to control the circumstances by using religious means to back God into a corner.

But God cannot be controlled. He will not be manipulated. He refuses to be reduced to a tool in our toolbox, a resource we deploy when we need it. The devastating defeat that followed wasn't God abandoning them—it was God refusing to cooperate with their manipulation. He was teaching them (and us) a crucial lesson: His presence cannot be summoned on demand, and His power will not be harnessed for our purposes.

The tragedy is that they never considered that perhaps God had a different purpose in their defeat. Maybe He was trying to get their attention. Maybe He was exposing the corruption of Eli's sons who would carry the ark. Maybe He was preparing to judge a nation that had abandoned Him while keeping up religious appearances. But they never paused long enough to ask, "God, what are You doing? What do You want us to see? What are You teaching us through this defeat?"

Israel's words reveal their hearts: "Let us bring the ark...that it may save us." They were issuing commands, not making requests; they were dictating terms, not seeking guidance. *From their attempt to control God through religious means we learn this:*

1. We worship God's character by trusting His plans instead of forcing our own.

Let's consider the progression of Israel's sinful thinking: First, men said that God was in the Ark. Then they insisted that God was the Ark. Later they assumed that the Ark was God. Hence they relied on the Ark as a substitute for the God of their fathers. This is the slippery slope of manipulation—we move from recognizing God's presence to attempting to control it, until finally we replace God Himself with the symbols that were meant to point us to Him.

At this point, we must take a moment to consider if we do exactly the same thing? We experience a setback, a disappointment, a closed door, and we immediately shift into problem-solving mode. We pray, yes, but we've already decided what the answer should be. We might increase our church attendance, our giving, our Bible reading—not out of genuine surrender, but as levers we're pulling to get God to do what we've already determined is best. We treat spiritual disciplines like incantations: If I do this, then God must do that.

We pray for our plans to succeed rather than asking, "God, what is Your will?" We claim promises from Scripture without regard to context or conditions. We practice positive thinking and call it faith, believing that if we just speak the right words and believe hard enough, we can manifest the outcome we want. We've turned prayer into a technique for getting what we want rather than a practice of aligning our hearts with what God wants.

True worship submits to God. It acknowledges that God's wisdom exceeds our understanding, that His purposes are higher than our purposes, that His ways are better than our ways—even when we can't see it, even when it's painful, even when it doesn't make sense. Genuine worship means trusting that God's plan is better than ours, even when we don't like it. It means believing that the closed door might be His protection, that the delay might be His preparation, that the defeat might be His redirection. It means coming to God and saying, "I don't understand what You're doing, but I trust who You are. I surrender my agenda to Your wisdom. Not my plan, but Yours."

This doesn't mean we don't ask God for things—Jesus taught us to ask. But it means we hold our requests with open hands. It means we're more committed to God's glory than our comfort, more devoted to His kingdom than our convenience. It means we trust that if God says no, or not yet, or not that way, He has something better in mind.

The irony is that when we try to force our plans, we often miss what God is actually doing. Israel was so focused on winning the battle that they missed God's judgment on corrupt leadership, His call to repentance, and His greater purpose for their nation. When we cling to our own plans, demanding God bless them, we blind ourselves to the better story He's writing.

Submission is not passive resignation—it's active trust. It's fighting in prayer while surrendering the outcome. It's working diligently while holding our plans loosely. It's hoping fervently while accepting God's sovereignty.

This week, where have you been trying to force your plan rather than trust His? What defeat or disappointment have you been trying to reverse through religious activity rather than genuine surrender? What circumstance are you trying to control right now? What outcome have you decided must happen? Will you surrender it to God this week, genuinely telling Him that you want His will more than your way? Because **God's character demands worship, not manipulation.**

Well, that's the first thing we learn from them, but **Israel's failure to trust God's plans was compounded by another, even more dangerous tendency—their casual familiarity with His presence . . .**

POINT 2:

Fast forward to when the ark returns to Israel at Beth-shemesh. The Israelites are overjoyed. They offer sacrifices. They celebrate. The ark is back! But then something shocking happens. The text tells us, "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."

Why such severe judgment for simply looking? Because God had given explicit instructions that the ark was not to be looked upon. It represented His throne, His holiness, His very presence. The casual glance represented something deeper—a failure to recognize who God is. These weren't pagan Philistines who didn't know better. These were Israelites who had been taught God's law. They knew the ark was holy, set apart, sacred. But they treated it with casual curiosity rather than reverent fear.

And notice their response: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" Now they get it. God is not their buddy, their good-luck charm, their divine servant. He is the Holy One, the Other, the Almighty who dwells in unapproachable light. He is kind and gracious, yes—but He is also dangerously holy.

The men of Beth-shemesh approached the ark with the same presumptuous familiarity that had characterized Israel's entire relationship with God—they assumed they could handle holy things on their own terms. *From their devastating encounter with God's holiness we learn this:*

2. We worship God's character by reverencing His holiness instead of treating Him casually.

Dale Ralph Davis observes that "believers can fall into this same Beth Shemesh mode of thinking. We want our God to be casual and easygoing. He is 'the man upstairs' rather than the Lord of Hosts, chummy rather than holy. We want God to be the copilot, and we get worried when he wants to fly the plane. But God wants us to bow before his holiness with respect and reverence. There is a danger in being in the presence of the Lord of Hosts, especially when we come into his presence with arrogance or apathy."

We live in a culture that has lost its sense of the holy. We've been taught that God is our friend, our helper, our cosmic therapist who exists to make us feel better about ourselves. And while it's gloriously true that through Christ we can approach God with confidence and call Him Father, we must never forget that He is the Holy Father, the one before whom angels veil their faces and cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"

The loss of reverence shows up in how we approach worship. We stroll into God's presence with our minds on lunch plans. We sing songs about Him while mentally reviewing our to-do lists. We pray with one eye on our phones. We read His Word like we're skimming the news—looking for something interesting but not expecting to be transformed. We've domesticated God, made Him safe, reduced Him to a life coach in the sky.

But when we truly grasp God's holiness—His absolute perfection, His burning purity, His infinite majesty—it changes everything. We don't saunter into His presence; we approach with grateful awe that we're even allowed to come. We don't toss off casual prayers; we speak to the King of the

universe, overwhelmed that He listens. We don't treat church like entertainment we evaluate; we gather as people who have been granted an audience with the Divine.

This doesn't mean we're paralyzed by fear—not at all. Because of Jesus, we can "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16). But it's confidence born of Christ's righteousness, not casual familiarity that forgets who God is. It's the confidence of a child who knows they're loved, but never forgets they're speaking to a Father who is also the King of kings.

How can you cultivate reverence this week? Perhaps by pausing before you pray to remember who you're addressing. Perhaps by preparing your heart before worship rather than rushing in. Perhaps by reading Scripture slowly, expectantly, as the very words of the Holy God.

This casualness toward God's holiness reveals something even deeper—a tendency to rely on religious activity rather than genuine relationship with Him . . .

POINT 3:

Let's go back to Israel's initial strategy. When they decided to bring the ark into battle, they had all the right religious machinery. They had the ark—the most sacred object in Israel, the symbol of God's presence. They had priests—Hophni and Phinehas carried it. They had the proper procedures—the ark was transported according to protocol. They had enthusiasm—the shout when the ark arrived shook the earth. On paper, they did everything right.

But God wasn't in it. How do we know? Because God allowed the ark to be captured. He allowed His own reputation to be seemingly tarnished in the eyes of pagan nations. He allowed His dwelling place to be carted off as a war trophy. Why? Because Israel wasn't seeking Him—they were using religious ritual as a magic spell to get what they wanted.

The contrast with the Philistines is illuminating. When the Philistines suffered under God's judgment, their priests advised sending the ark back with a guilt offering, saying, "Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?" These pagan priests showed more spiritual wisdom than Israel's elders. They recognized they were dealing with a real God who demanded a real response, not just religious performance.

Israel had all the external elements of faith—the sacred object, the proper officials, the enthusiastic worship—yet they lacked the one thing that mattered most: sincere hearts seeking God Himself. *From their empty religious performance we learn this:*

3. We worship God's character by seeking Him sincerely instead of using religious rituals.

The pagan priests' statements express a knowledge of certain details of the Torah's narrative, theology, and ritual. The pagan priests understood, for example, that the Philistines needed to 'pay honor to Israel's god' and that one way to do that was by presenting 'a guilt offering.'" The stunning irony is that pagan priests—practitioners of arts forbidden to Israel—showed more genuine

recognition of God's character than did God's own people. The Philistines understood they needed to respond with reverence and repentance, while Israel simply tried to manipulate God through religious symbols.

This is where many of us live, is it not? We've learned the Christian vocabulary. We know the right things to do—attend church, read our Bibles, pray before meals, give our tithes. We've got the religious routine down. But if we're brutally honest, sometimes we're just going through the motions. We're checking the boxes, performing the rituals—not because we're desperately hungry for God, but because we think if we do these things, God will give us the life we want.

We pray, but it's more like reciting a grocery list than having a conversation. We read Scripture, but we're looking for inspirational quotes rather than encountering the living God. We worship, but we're evaluating the music rather than offering our hearts. We serve, but we're building our résumé rather than expressing our love for Jesus. The rituals are all there, but the relationship is absent.

God is not impressed by our religious performance when our hearts are elsewhere. He told Israel through the prophet Samuel, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). He wants you, not your religious résumé. He wants your heart, not your habitual spiritual practices.

Sincere seeking means coming to God because we want Him, not just what He can do for us. It means praying even when we don't feel like it, not to check a box but because He's worthy. It means worshiping because He deserves our praise, not because it makes us feel good. It means reading His Word because we're hungry to know Him better, not to feel spiritually superior.

Where have you substituted ritual for relationship? This week, try approaching one spiritual discipline differently—not as a duty, but as a privilege to connect with the God who made you and loves you.

Ultimately, all of these tendencies—forcing our plans, treating God casually, performing empty rituals, —stem from a single root problem: we trust in religious symbols rather than depending on God Himself . . .

POINT 4:

Here's the most ironic twist in the entire story: The ark—the symbol of God's presence—ended up being completely powerless without God's presence actually being in it. Israel brought the ark to battle, but they experienced crushing defeat. The Philistines took the ark into Dagon's temple, but Dagon fell before it and God struck the Philistines with plagues. The ark returned to Israel at Beth-shemesh, but people died for treating it casually.

The same object brought different results depending on whether God chose to act through it or not. The ark itself had no power. It was wood covered with gold. It was the God whose glory rested upon it

that held all the power. Israel had made the fatal error of trusting the symbol instead of the God the symbol represented.

When the men of Beth-shemesh cried out, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" they finally understood. It was never about the ark. It was always about the God of the ark. The ark was meant to point them to God, to remind them of His presence, to call them to faithfulness. But they had replaced God with the symbol, trading relationship for ritual, the real for the representation.

Throughout this entire saga—from Israel's camp to Dagon's temple to Beth-shemesh—one truth stands out: the ark was powerless to save, powerless to conquer, powerless even to protect those who possessed it. Why? because God's power resides in God alone, not in any symbol that represents Him.

From Israel's misplaced confidence in a sacred object we learn this:

4. We worship God's character by depending on His power instead of relying on symbols.

H.L. Ellison provides crucial insight about the tragedy at Beth-shemesh: The daughter-in-law of Eli "believed that the shekinah-glory of God had departed from Israel because of the death of her husband and father-in-law and the capture of the ark. But she was wrong. The glory had departed from Israel, but not because Phinehas and Eli had died, nor even because the ark had been captured. Instead, 'the ark had been captured because the glory had already departed.'" This is the devastating truth we must grasp: When we depend on symbols instead of God Himself, we've already lost His presence before we lose the symbol.

We do the same thing, don't we? We place our confidence in the Bible we carry rather than the God who speaks through it. We trust in our baptism, our church membership, our family heritage—"I was raised Christian"—as if those symbols guarantee God's blessing. We hang crosses around our necks, display Scripture in our homes, post worship lyrics on social media, all while our hearts are far from God. We've got all the symbols of faith without the substance of faith.

Or we trust in spiritual experiences—"I felt God's presence at that conference," "I had a powerful quiet time last week"—as if that moment can sustain us indefinitely. We become spiritual experience junkies, always chasing the next emotional high rather than cultivating daily dependence on God. The experience becomes our ark—we try to recreate it, return to it, rely on it—while God is inviting us into something deeper.

God's power is not contained in any symbol, any ritual, any experience, any object. His power is in His person. It's not in the Bible—it's in the God who breathed out the Bible. It's not in the cross—it's in the Christ who died on the cross. It's not in the sacraments—it's in the Savior the sacraments point to. The symbols are meant to direct us to Him, not replace Him.

True worship depends directly on God. It means starting each day acknowledging, "Without You, I can do nothing." It means approaching challenges not with, "I've got this," but with, "God, I need You." It means praying not just in emergencies but in everything, because we recognize our constant need for His power, His wisdom, His presence.

What symbols have you been trusting instead of God Himself? Is it time to move from depending on religious routines to depending on a real relationship with the living God?

Conclusion

Israel learned the hard way what we must learn too: **God's character demands worship, not manipulation.** He will not be controlled by our rituals, contained by our symbols, or coerced by our strategies. He is the Holy God, the Sovereign Lord, the Almighty One who does as He pleases—and what pleases Him is genuine relationship with His people.

This isn't a burden—it's liberation. When we stop trying to manipulate God and simply worship Him, we discover the joy of authentic relationship. We find peace in surrender. We experience the security of knowing we're held by Someone greater than ourselves, Someone who actually knows what He's doing.

Friends, in just a few moments, we're going to share the Lord's Supper together. As we take communion, we're not performing a ritual to earn God's favor. We're not manipulating God to bless us. We're remembering and worshipping. We're trusting in His plan of salvation, not our own efforts. We're reverencing His holiness—the holiness that required a perfect sacrifice. So, let us seek Him sincerely, not just going through motions. Let us submit to His will—"This is My body, broken for you." And let us trust in His power—the power that conquered death and gives us life.

So the invitation is open. The invitation to come to this table not with manipulation, but with worship. Come not to use God, but to honor Him. Come not with demands, but with gratitude. Come and remember that the God who refuses to be controlled is the same God who loved you enough to die for you. And that changes everything.

Let us worship Him together as we share the Lord's Supper.

Father, forgive us. We've tried to control You. Use You. Manipulate You with our rituals and plans. We come empty-handed now. No bargaining. No formulas. Just broken hearts desperate for Your mercy. Thank You for Jesus. Who trusted Your plan. Who revered Your holiness. Who opened the way we could never earn. Meet us at this table. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Bread

As we prepare to take this bread together, I want you to hold it in your hand for just a moment.

Look at it. It's simple. Ordinary. Just a small piece of bread.

Israel looked at the ark the same way we might look at this bread. As a symbol. As a tool. As something to use to get what they wanted from God. They thought the symbol itself had power. They were wrong.

This bread has no power to save you. It's not magic. It's not a good luck charm. It won't manipulate God into blessing you.

But it points you to the One who does have power. The One who gave His body. Broken for you. Broken for me.

Jesus said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Not in remembrance of your religious performance. Not in remembrance of how well you've been doing spiritually. But in remembrance of Him. The One whose plan was better than anything we could have devised. The One whose holiness required a perfect sacrifice. The One who didn't come to be used by us. But to save us.

When you eat this bread, remember: It's not about the symbol. It's about the Savior the symbol points to.

Let's eat together.

The Cup

Now take the cup. Hold it for a moment.

This cup represents the blood of Jesus. The new covenant in His blood. Shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Here's what's remarkable about this moment. We don't deserve to be here. We don't deserve to approach a holy God. Our casual attitudes. Our empty rituals. Our attempts to control and manipulate. Our substituting religion for relationship. All of it disqualifies us.

The men of Beth-shemesh asked the right question: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?"

The answer? No one. Not on our own.

But Jesus stood in our place. He submitted to the Father's will when we refused to. He trusted the Father's plan when we tried to force our own. He revered the Father's holiness when we treated Him casually. He sought the Father sincerely when we performed empty rituals. He depended on the Father's power when we relied on symbols.

And because of what Jesus did, we can stand. Not because we're worthy. But because He is. Not because we've manipulated our way into God's presence. But because Jesus opened the way through His blood.

This cup reminds us: We worship a God who cannot be controlled. But who chose to save us anyway. We worship a God who demands holiness. But who provided the sacrifice. We worship a God whose ways are higher than our ways. And we're so grateful they are.

Let's drink together. In remembrance of Him.

Benediction:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.