

## GOD DEFENDS HIMSELF – 1 Samuel 5:1-6:13

### From Ichabod to Ebenezer #2

It was 2 weeks after Christmas and the Burgess family was sleeping soundly in their ranch house at 200 Alfred Street in Gilford County, North Carolina. Kenneth and his wife, Sandy, were exhausted after their busy day. Young Ken junior was resting peacefully in his room just down the hall. But very suddenly, at just about 4 in the morning, a chiming clock sitting on the mantel in the living room woke Ken up. He lay there in a state of semi-consciousness for a moment, but then suddenly sat upright in bed. Instinctively, he knew something was wrong in the house. “Sandy, Sandy, wake up”, he said. “Something’s not right in the house.” “What’s wrong,” Sandy murmured sleepily. “I don’t know. The chimes of the clock on the mantel woke me up. I just think something is wrong.” Ken and Sandy got up out of bed and went first to their son’s room down the hall. Ken Jr. was sleeping very soundly. Then they proceeded from room to room, checking everything out. Everything seemed to be normal, as normal as anything could be at 4:00 in the morning. Finally, they came to the den. In the den, they had a wood burning stove. They had enjoyed a nice fire throughout the previous evening. But when they looked at that stove now, they saw and smelled a bit of smoke that was billowing out from behind it. Ken quickly detected that somehow, embers had burned through the stove pipe into the wall. In a flash, Sandy dialed 911 and firefighters were on their way. They got there just in time to put out the embers before they could burst into flame, putting the entire house and the Burgess family in danger. Fire Chief Bryant confesses, “In my 40 years of firefighting, I have never seen anything quite like what happened on Alfred Road.” A potentially tragic scene was avoided where an entire sleeping family could have been silently killed in a house fire during the night. But the Burgess family was delivered by an old battery operated mantel clock that woke up Ken with its chimes. A clock that had not run nor chimed for 3 years. A clock that didn’t even have batteries in it. If you ask Ken and Sandy Burgess about that January night today, they will tell you their belief that God saved their family from potential disaster.

Now God doesn’t always choose to save his people from house fires. We have 2 members of our church who have suffered house fires in these past several years. But the Herrygers and Winnes have both testified to me of their seeing God’s hand in their fires. Both didn’t have any family members home when the fires occurred so none of the family members were in danger. And both got newly remodeled homes as a reward for their inconvenience. But when God chooses to do so, He is able to use creative and remarkable means to accomplish His will and protect His people. In fact, when God decides to act, nothing can stand in His way. And there are many illustrations of this sprinkled throughout the entire Bible.

One of these illustrations is found in the passage that we are going to look at this morning. We saw last week the faithlessness of the Hophni and Phinehas and the children of Israel. In their disobedience, they not only lost a significant battle against the Philistines at the cost of many Jewish lives, but they also lost the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was captured by the Philistines. For the first time in recorded history, the Ark of the Covenant was in foreign, pagan hands. What was going to happen now? Would the Ark be destroyed? Would God be so angry with His people that he would leave them to be consumed by the Philistines? Would God's people cease to exist? It is exciting to see how that in spite of the faithlessness of His people, God still remained faithful. And it is also encouraging to see how God was able to defend Himself quite adequately against these pagan peoples and their gods. God's creativity never ceases to amaze us. Follow along with me as I read this most interesting account found in 1 Samuel 5:1-6:13. It sounds like a very long passage, but in reality it is only 25 verses – just the size of an average chapter.

READ 1 Samuel 5:1-6:13:

1SA 5:1 After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. <sup>2</sup> Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. <sup>3</sup> When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup> But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. <sup>5</sup> That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.

1SA 5:6 The LORD's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. <sup>7</sup> When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god." <sup>8</sup> So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, "What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?"

They answered, "Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel.

1SA 5:9 But after they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors. <sup>10</sup> So they sent the ark of God to Ekron.

As the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people." <sup>11</sup> So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, "Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people." For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy upon it. <sup>12</sup> Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

1SA 6:1 When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory seven months, <sup>2</sup> the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it back to its place."

1SA 6:3 They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you."

1SA 6:4 The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?"

They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. <sup>5</sup> Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and pay honor to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. <sup>6</sup> Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?"

1SA 6:7 "Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. <sup>8</sup> Take the ark of the LORD and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, <sup>9</sup> but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the LORD has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance."

1SA 6:10 So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. <sup>11</sup> They placed the ark of the LORD on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. <sup>12</sup> Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.

1SA 6:13 Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight.

Now isn't this a remarkable story? The Israelites had lost the precious Ark of the Covenant through their presumption and carelessness. They had been given the stewardship of the ark by God himself. They had been commissioned to cherish and protect it. But their leaders had failed to maintain a close, personal relationship with God. So in trying to use the ark as some kind of magical, good luck charm, they had lost it to their bitter enemies. What was going to happen to the ark now?

Well, in this unique scenario, God Himself begins to defend His ark. And he does this in 3 miraculous ways.

1. First, he challenges Dagon, the chief god of the Philistines, to a dramatic duel and wins it hands down (or we might say hands off).

The Philistines react predictably at first, don't they? Another god is now in their possession. They will just add this god to their pantheon in their temple. The temple is called the temple of Dagon because he was the chief god in the Philistine pantheon. Dagon was the god of agriculture insuring a productive harvest. This was most critical for the Philistines who lived in an agriculturally based society. Dagon was pictured in the form of half fish, half man – as you can see from this ancient picture recovered by archaeologists, he had the body, arms and legs of a man with the head of a fish. Sometimes he was depicted with the head of a fish and the body of a man. The half-man part identified him with the Philistine people. The half-fish part revealed the Philistines dependence upon the sea – remember, they lived in the coastal region right along the Mediterranean Sea. Fish was a staple in their diet. They also used dead fish for fertilizer to make their grain grow. So Dagon was associated with fertility and life in their minds.

The Philistines would have been overjoyed to add the ark to their temple because of their belief that this would just makes them stronger as a nation. In addition to all of the power that they had before from Dagon, they now have the Israelite god as well. Israel is weaker, they are stronger.

But what happens? God starts to defend Himself doesn't He? After the first night, Dagon has been knocked off of his pedestal and is lying prostrate in worship before the Ark which represents the true and living God of the Bible. You can see how the Philistines might think that this was just an unfortunate coincidence. This has never happened before, but there is always a first time. Dagon must have just slipped off of his pedestal and fallen to the ground. Perhaps somebody bumped him by mistake as they were putting the ark in its place. So they put the idol back up on its stand once again. Perhaps they offered a sacrifice to appease Dagon so he wouldn't be angry because of their carelessness. But when they come back in after the second night, Dagon had not only fallen off of his pedestal, he was now lying prostrate in worship before the

Ark, and both of his arms and his head are broken off. This would have huge symbolic significance in the ancient world, symbolizing complete victory and domination. It was a common practice for a conquering ruler to cut off parts of the hands or feet of a vanquished foe. After those wicked assassins brought the head of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, to David thinking that they would receive a reward, David had them killed for their treachery. And then their hands and feet were cut off and they were hung in Hebron as a sign to others (2 Samuel 4:12). In the first chapter of Judges, after the Canaanite King, Adoni-Bezek, was captured, the thumbs of his hands and big toes of his feet were cut off. He didn't complain at all about it because it was the accepted practice of his day. Rather he admitted as recorded in Judges 1:7: "Then Adoni-Bezek said, '70 kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have eaten scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them.'" Now we obviously feel that this practice is barbaric today, but we must realize that it was customary back in these ancient times. And we can see the logic in the practice. The conquered king would be rendered powerless for battle again without the use of his limbs, but his continued presence as a servant would be a reminder of the victory that had been achieved.

Now my whole point in mentioning this ancient custom of disabling conquered foes is not to gross you out this morning, but rather to emphasize the significance of what God did in Dagon's temple. For Dagon to be found prostrate before the Ark with his hands and head broken off made a huge statement to these Philistines. This was the symbol of complete victory or domination. The Philistines might have defeated the Israelites in battle, but Jehovah had just defeated their god in their duel.

Now you would think that having seen this, a light would come on in the minds of the Philistines, wouldn't you? You would think that it would begin to dawn on them that the God represented by this Ark was stronger than their god, Dagon. You would think that they would consider worshiping this new God who had proved himself to be the superior. But amazingly, instead of recognizing the power of the true and living God, they make the place where Dagon fell a holy place. They begin to worship the ground upon which Dagon had fallen. Such is the spiritual blindness of these pagan Philistines.

But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained.<sup>5</sup> That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold. (1 Sam. 5:4,5)

We often hear the challenge from unbelievers that if God would only produce a spectacular miracle, then everyone would believe that He is the true and living God. Here we have an example of just such a happening, and it didn't cause the Philistines to leave their pagan foundations. The problem is not with a lack of evidence that God has provided, the problem is with our unwillingness to see or acknowledge that

evidence. It is only as spiritual eyes are opened that spiritual truth can be seen. No amount of evidence can convince a person who cannot see the truth.

Every single day, we witness innumerable miracles that we all just take for granted. When the sun rises every morning at a distance of 865,000 miles from the earth and maintains its temperature of 5,510 degrees Celsius and the earth continues in its orbit around it right on schedule, it's a miracle. If we were any farther from the sun or if the sun dipped even several hundred degrees in temperature, we would freeze almost instantly. If we were any closer to the sun or if the sun rose even several hundred degrees in temperature, we would be fried like a sizzling sausage. And every day, we experience thousands of other miracles as well. But the vast majority of us take them all for granted and go about our daily lives oblivious to God working all around us. But we must quickly move on to see a second way that God defended himself.

2. God brought about a Deadly Disease among the Philistine people. Now this is significant as well, because you might recall the response of the Philistine soldiers as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into battle from last week. Do you remember how they responded to the roar of the Israelite army when the ark came into their camp? Let me remind you again from 1 Samuel 4:5-8:

1SA 4:5 When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. <sup>6</sup> Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, <sup>7</sup> the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. <sup>8</sup> Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert.

The Philistines knew all about the exodus. They knew all about the plagues and how God had used them to deliver his people. Remember, Egypt was the dominant country in all of the Middle East at this time. For 3-4 million slaves to waltz out of their country to freedom was huge news. Even though it had happened about 3-400 years ago by this time, the Philistines still remembered it clearly because it was such a significant world event. And here it was happening again – Jehovah was bringing a plague upon them. And this was a serious plague. Probably it was something like the great Bubonic Plague that almost wiped out Europe broke out in Philistia.

Most of us have heard of that great Bubonic Plague that devastated Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. It originated in the Middle East and spread to the southern shores of Europe in 1348. For 3 years the plague spread across the European Continent killing more than 25 million people. They didn't understand as much about the plague back then as we do today. They associated the plague with rats but didn't know exactly how it was spread. We know today that the source of the bacteria was found in rodents – particularly

rats. Fleas transported the germs from one rat to another. And then fleas likewise transferred the germs from the rats to humans. It is very likely that God used a similar plague with the Philistines for when the Ark was returned to the Israelites, 5 golden models of both tumors and rats were included as a gift to the God of Israel, one for each of the 5 main cities that made up the Philistine nation. This gives us a clue as to the nature of this deadly disease. The Philistines would have made the tumors and rats in an attempt to appease the God who brought on this plague. They recognized that this plague had been caused by the Israeli God. The golden rats would have shown their recognition of the source of the disease, and the golden tumors would have shown their recognition of the effects of the disease. It is clear to them that God had initiated this plague – even the Philistines recognized this to be the case.

So they came to the conclusion – we have to get rid of this ark. At first, they had been so proud to have captured the Jewish God. But then, when he defeated Dagon in the duel in the Temple, and when he started killing them with this devastating plague, they quickly came to the conclusion that we have to get rid of this Ark. But how to get rid of it was the question? They would have loved to destroy it – but they feared to do so. So they came up with a plan to destroy the ark without laying their hands personally upon it. But again, they underestimated the power of Almighty God.

3. And this brings us to the **third** way in which God demonstrated His power and defended himself. This is in the delivery of the Ark back to Israel. This is often overlooked but I want to conclude by looking at it briefly with you this morning. It's clear that the Philistines would have loved to destroy that Ark by the method that they devised to send it back to Israel, but they obviously were fearful of laying their own hands on it. After all, Jehovah had demonstrated such power that they were afraid to raise their hand towards Him. So the Philistines decided to try to let the Ark be destroyed by natural means so that Jehovah wouldn't blame them for it. They first of all made golden sacrifices to appease the God of Israel so he wouldn't be upset with them. And they decided to send the Ark back toward the Israeli territory, but they did so in the way that would naturally have destroyed it. They took 2 cows that had never been yoked before and had just had calves. They hooked those cows up to a cart, put the Ark on the cart and sent it away down the treacherous road up towards Jerusalem. We all know what happens when an animal is first yoked. Until an animal gets used to the yoke and is broken for its use, the animal is wild. And especially at this time when the cow is forcibly removed from her new calves, this would be the case. And anyone who has seen the terrain in Israel knows what would be likely to happen if wild animals were sent pulling a cart down those mountain roads filled with hairpin curves. Remember, the Philistine territory is right about at sea level – on the Mediterranean Sea. Jerusalem is about 40 miles or so away and at 2,500 feet above sea level. So the road that this cart was to travel would average going up over 60 feet per mile into rugged, mountainous terrain. What the Philistines were

undoubtedly hoping for was a natural accident, the cart and cows and ark tumbling off of a cliff somewhere. The animals and cart would be sacrificed, of course, but the Ark would be destroyed. The Philistines wanted to destroy the Ark without being responsible for its destruction.

But such a scenario was not to be, was it? Miraculously, these never before yoked cows began to pull together like that they been working side by side for years. They pulled the Ark directly into the Israelite Territory and delivered it back to God's people. So God once again proved Himself to be able to defend Himself and the Ark of His presence.

Now as we conclude this morning, we need to be reminded of the Sovereignty of God. We always need such a reminder, but especially so at such a time as this. We keep hearing that we are journeying through unprecedented territory economically as a nation. We keep hearing that nobody knows for sure when our economy is going to recover. Some are predicting another recession; others a jobless recovery; others rampant inflation. This continuous bombarding of uncertainty causes fear and anxiety in many people. We need to see the Sovereign God who was quite able to defend himself even after his people failed him miserably. Now trusting in a Sovereign God doesn't mean that we become complacent. We need to continue to pray fervently. We need to serve the Lord faithfully. But let us do so confidently, not fearfully, knowing that the God of the Bible is a powerful God who is capable of taking care of Himself and us, even in the midst of the most difficult times.