

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 4

DIVINE PUNISHMENT



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy

The ark becomes nothing but trouble for the Philistines. They try moving it from city to city, only to see death hit each city. Finally, they do a “return to sender” to Beth Shemesh. The people of Beth Shemesh start out right by making sacrifices.

But then they look into the ark, which brings death and destruction to their town.

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! Samuel, Week 4 — Divine Punishment
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1 1 Samuel 5:6–12

But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.” Therefore they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines, and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?”

And they answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath.” So they carried the ark of the God of Israel away. So it was, after they had carried it away, that the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them.

Therefore they sent the ark of God to Ekron. So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!” So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people.” For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

The Hebrew word translated as “with tumors” (בַּעֲפָלִים, ba-ah-pahl-eem) is vague. (This is typical of Hebrew.) It’s a reference to hills, thick places, or swellings. Because of a later mention about rats (in 1 Samuel 6:5), many have speculated that the Philistines were afflicted with the bubonic plague.

That cannot be known for sure. We only know that the affliction was severe enough that the Philistines said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people.”

People were dying to get rid of the ark—literally.

The real lesson here is in the astonishingly stupid moves the Philistines make with the ark. It starts out in Ashdod, in the temple of Dagon. This does not go well, especially for Dagon (who is apparently a statue, or at least was until he fell apart in the presence of the ark.)

But then comes the fun part. The *lords of the Philistines* decide to send the ark to Gath, the city of Goliath. They don’t say why this would make any sense. They can’t; it doesn’t make any sense.

They were better off when the ark was busting up some silly statue. Now the people of Gath are getting the brunt of the affliction. So, what do these geniuses do next?

They send the ark to Ekron—another Philistine city. What happens there is just what you’d expect. So, the Ekronites cry out, telling the *lords of the Philistines*, “Get that thing out of here!”

The *lords of the Philistines* are out of their depth.

2 1 Samuel 6:1–9 (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.”

If the *lords* can’t figure out what to do with the ark, maybe *the priests and the diviners* can. Of course, these guys are no more qualified to give advice than the *lords*.

So they make up something that feels related to the problem they’re solving. Tumors and rats have been the problem. So, in the manner of their polytheistic beliefs, they make idols of tumors and mice—NKJV says “rats”—out of gold. They make five of them *according to the number of the lords of the Philistines*.

None of this has anything to do with fixing the problem. It’s all just showmanship in the manner of their craft. At least it’s better than shuttling the plague around from city to city. Then they make up a curious way to let the ark tell them if it’s an active agent in all this. It sounds just as silly as everything else they’ve said, but it actually makes some sense.

Their plan is to put the ark and the gold idol “offerings” on a cart pulled by *milk cows which have never been yoked*. The milk cows have no history of going anywhere, so where they go won’t be affected by their past. The cows may just not go anywhere. They don’t pull things; they eat grass and make milk.

So if they take off in one specific direction, instead of all the other possibilities, that’s a sign.

God will end up honoring this request for a sign. That may be surprising, but it shouldn’t be. God answers our prayers and requests for a sign in a similar manner. While our concerns may seem trivial from a heavenly perspective, God honors our requests—even commands us to bring them before Him.

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. — Philippians 4:5b–6 (ESV)

3 1 Samuel 6:10–12

Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. And they set the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors. Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh.

Is it significant that the cows were *lowing as they went*? And what does “*lowing*” mean anyway? Other than the song “*Away in a Manger*,” who uses the word *lowing*?

First off, if inspired scripture mentions that they were *lowing as they went*, it must mean something. Every word in scripture has a purpose. As for the meaning of *lowing*, it’s somewhat archaic, but it just means normal cow sounds. It’s almost synonymous with “mooring” except that if the passage said “*mooring as they went*” it would carry the sense of constant (i.e., excessive) mooring.

So, scripture mentioning that they were *lowing as they went* just means that the cows were acting normally. They were walking towards *Beth Shemesh*, not in a hurry or in a state of panic or doing anything else unusual.

So, the *lords of the Philistines* watch all this from a safe distance and see the cows head to *Beth Shemesh* in a completely unnoteworthy manner. They see this as confirmation of the priests and diviners’ theory that the “*great harm*” was from the LORD.

But note that this does not cause the Philistine lords to get a clue. What happens is in perfect accordance with their polytheistic worldview.

They conclude that the LORD (or maybe just the ark) is a god, not the God.

Worldviews can be a tricky thing. Everyone has one, and our understanding of all things is colored by it.

The tricky bit is that it’s hard to communicate with someone whose worldview is different from your own. You have to speak their language for them to understand. If what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense in their worldview, your message either won’t be understood or will be misunderstood.

This is especially important in evangelism. Our view of how the world works is radically different from the non-believer’s worldview. Thus, our attempts to communicate can go wildly wrong.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. — 1 Corinthians 1:18

One of the keys to effective evangelism is listening. It takes time to figure out someone’s worldview and learn to speak in their language.

This is what Paul was doing when he spoke to the people of Areopagus in Acts 17:22–34.

4 1 Samuel 6:13–16

Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone. Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices the same day to the LORD. So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day.

Imagine the surprise of the people of Beth Shemesh as they're out in the field harvesting wheat, and the long lost ark of the testimony just comes sauntering up, pulled by two cows. These folks definitely know the difference between a cow and a bull, so the scene is instantly ridiculous in their eyes.

Beth Shemesh is a Levitical city (see Joshua 21:13–16) specifically set aside for the descendants of Aaron, so they're a priestly bunch. Their response to this bizarre turn of events is about what you'd expect—sacrifice. However, there are a few details to sort through.

The name "*Joshua of Beth Shemesh*" has no connection to anything that we now know of. It's one of those details in the Old Testament whose relevance has been lost to history.

Also, it's curious that the text doesn't say that the cows *came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there* but, rather, that the *cart* did. This adds to the sense that the cart was driving. The cows seemed to be just following orders.

It's also notable that *the five lords of the Philistines* stayed long enough to see the sacrifices. Once the cows had pulled the wagon straight to Beth Shemesh, the priests and diviners' theory was confirmed, plus they were rid of the ark. Why stick around?

Well, since the priests and diviners included the golden idols as a *guilt offering*, they might have wanted to see if they were accepted in that spirit. Or they might have stayed because they were simply curious.

Actually, that's commendable. Recall that these *lords* were in charge of cities (i.e., mayors). They had just been stumped by a severe problem and needed to bring in other "experts."

They should be trying to learn from this incident.

No one is born wise. Wisdom comes from learning, and the right attitude is critical to learning.

Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;

Teach a just man, and he will increase in learning. — Proverbs 9:8b–9

People grow by admitting their errors and seeking to learn from them.

5 1 Samuel 6:17–19

These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; and the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel on which they set the ark of the LORD, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter.

The second paragraph in today’s passage is reminiscent of the climactic sequence of “*Raiders of the Lost Ark*” where the ark is opened and Indiana Jones tells Marion to not look at it. This saves her life.

Everyone else dies.

Opening the ark and looking *into* it would be way over the top, even for the high priest inside the tabernacle. It’s insane for anyone else. However, the Hebrew word translated as *into the ark* (בְּאֶרְוֹן, ba-ah-ron) is translated as “upon the ark” in some other translations (e.g., ESV).

But it would be impossible to set the ark on *the large stone of Abel* without looking at it in some sense of the word. So, if “upon” in what is meant, the looking must be something excessive—like staring. In any case, the response is shockingly severe. The LORD *struck the people with a great slaughter*.

As usual, holiness is more serious than we know.

This is the great challenge for Christians. We take salvation for granted. We’re supposed to take salvation for granted.

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, — 1 John 5:13

But this tends to make us complacent about all things related to God. This is especially true of all things holy. We’ve lost the “awe factor.”

Yet we couldn’t stand in His presence for five seconds without being destroyed. We couldn’t even stand in the presence of one of His angels without freaking out. How did we get this way?

Technology. Technology has become “wow” in our lives. We see things every day that would have been impossible just a few decades ago. We’ve become used to phones that know where we are and can tell us the fastest route to where we’re going. We are hard to impress.

This has numbed us to everything impressive, especially God.

Even answered prayer is just one of the blessings we’ve come to expect.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you seen punishment from God?
2. When have you seen God respond to a request for a sign?
3. Have you ever encountered a communication barrier that wasn't a language barrier?
4. When have you learned from a mistake?
5. What blessings do you take for granted?

Items for prayer: