

1 Samuel 5

'The Stupidity of Idolatry'

The measure of a god

The passage we are looking at today is a passage that gets right into the whole idea of idolatry and gives it a very strong pounding.¹

And because of this, I thought we should set the context by examining the whole concept of idolatry.

You see, when God talks about idolatry in the Bible he is talking about 'the worship of a false god'. This is what the term idolatry means.

It means 'the worship of a false god'.

Now as soon as we say this, we assume that there is a whole world of possible gods out there.

And the writers of the Bible agree.

You see, in the Bible, the word 'god' is used as a functional term.

In the Bible, a 'god' is an external point of reference to life.

A 'god' is some entity that is external to an individual or a community that operates as a criterion for truth and a standard of value.

Do you understand what I'm saying?

When the Bible talks about a 'god' it means someone or something that you give power and influence.

It is someone or something that you look to for help, for guidance, for instruction, and for meaning.

When the Bible uses the term 'god' it is using it in a strictly functional manner.

You see, as far as the Bible is concerned, there is no such thing as a person who does not have a religion.

Humans are essentially religious beings.

Humans are worshipping beings.

They continually look for objects to which they can give their primary allegiance.

They look for persons or objects or ideas that will function as a guide for truth and a norm for conduct.

Every human has a god or a pantheon of gods.

Every human is a worshipper.

Every human is a religious being.

They may stay committed to one or more gods or they may swap gods incessantly, but every human has gods that they worship.

Now I guess that if we were to say to our non-Christian friends that they were religious and worshipped gods, they would strongly object, wouldn't they?

But the point is that you don't need to call something a god in order to treat it as a god.

For example, my own view is that a large part of our world worships science as a god.

After all, isn't it true that science operates in our community as a criterion for truth and a standard of value.

Isn't science something that we in the modern world have given supreme power and influence?

¹ The analysis here is indebted to an article by Edmond La B. Cherbonnier on 'Idolatry' in *A Handbook of Christian Theology* ed. by M. Halverson & A. A. Cohen, World Publishing Co., 1958, pp. 176-183. For an online version, see <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/cherbonnier/idolatry.htm>

Isn't science something that we look to for help, for guidance, for instruction, and for meaning? Science has its modern high priests in university professors and its parish priests in the local general practitioner.

But science is not the only deity in the modern world.

We are much more sophisticated than the people of the ancient world.

We don't generally bow down to carved images with extended bellies and emerald-studded navels.

But nevertheless, we have our own pantheon of gods.

And we worship them with just as much gusto as our ancient counterparts.

The gods at the top of our pantheon are political or economic ideologies such as democracy or communism or materialism.

But there are other gods.

There are the gods of sex and individualism.

Of family and patriotism.

Of sport and intellectual pursuit.

The writers of the Bible are right.

We are incredibly religious people.

We give power and influence to these things.

We allow them to define us and to give us meaning.

We modern people are worshippers of the gods too.

Now, with all this in mind, I want us to turn to 1 Samuel 5.

You see, 1 Samuel 5 is an examination of one nation's idolatry.

And it will teach us a bit about the idols of our own time.

So, let's have a look at it and see what God has to teach us.

The Ark in Philistine territory (1 Samuel 5)

Remembering where we were (1 Samuel 4)

First of all, let's remember the story so far.

Last week we heard about how the Israelites were at war with the Philistines.

We heard how God was at work and caused the Israelites to be defeated by the Philistines.

We then heard how the Israelites did some reflecting and reasoned that if they brought the Ark of the covenant with them into battle, God would not allow them to be defeated.

In other words, it seems as though the Israelites thought that they could manipulate God into acting in their favour by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle.

As it turns out, the defeat with the Ark of the Covenant present was much greater than when it wasn't present.

The Ark was captured and the sons of Eli were killed.

Eli the priest himself died.

And the people of Israel began to think that God himself no longer dwelt with them.

And so chapter 4 concluded with the birth of a son to the daughter-in-law of Eli.

And as she dies she gives her son a name that reflects this and she says, 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.'

Psalm 78 describes these events from God's perspective.

In verses 60ff we are told this:

⁶⁰ *He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent he had set up among men.*

⁶¹ *He sent the ark of his might into captivity, his splendor into the hands of the enemy.*

⁶² *He gave his people over to the sword; he was very angry with his inheritance.*

⁶³ *Fire consumed their young men, and their maidens had no wedding songs; ⁶⁴ their priests were put to the sword, and their widows could not weep.*

The Ark in Dagon's temple (1 Samuel 5:1-5)

This brings us to our passage for today – 1 Samuel 5.

Let's have a look at verses 1-5.

In verse 1 we are told that when the Philistines capture the Ark, they take it from the battlefield at Ebenezer to Ashdod.

The Philistines operated as a sort of confederation of city states.

There were five key cities, and Ashdod was one of them.

Anyway, verse 2 tells us that they carry the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.

From other parts of the Bible we know that this was a fairly common practice.

Conquering nations often took objects connected with the deities of the nations that they conquered in battle and placed them in the temples of their own gods.

The whole idea was that it was a symbol that not only had the nation been defeated but their god or gods had also been defeated.

Anyway, verse 3 tells us what happens between this seemingly defeated God and the apparently victorious god.

When the people of Ashdod get up in the morning, they find that Dagon has fallen on his face before the Ark.

In other words, the apparently victorious god has assumed a position of worship before the symbol of the God of Israel.

Anyway, the Philistines come to the rescue of their God.

They pick him up and put him back in his place.

But another night passes.

And the Philistines visit the temple again.

This time poor old Dagon has had another, more dramatic mishap.

This time he has fallen on his face again but this time his head and his hands have been severed.

The point is that where the Philistines attack Israel and win, the Israelite God attacks the Philistine god and wins.

The story is clear.

Israel may think that God has departed from Israel.

They may think that God was powerless in the face of the Philistine Gods.

But he is far from that.

Which in turn means that he was responsible for their defeat in battle at Ebenezer.

He is a God who is capable of looking after himself.

He is a God who will not be manipulated.

And he is a God who is in control.

Verses 1-5 close with a little comment by the author about an ancient practice by the Philistines.

The Ark and the Philistines (1 Samuel 5:6-12)

But let's now take a look at the rest of the passage before we pick up some of the key ideas of the passage.

If verses 1-5 tell us about how God interacts with the main god of the Philistines, verses 6-12 tell us how God interacts with the people themselves.

Just as the Philistines linked God with the Egyptians in chapter 4, so they link him with the Egyptians again here in verse 6.

And God does some similar sorts of actions as he had done in Egypt.

He sends some sort of plague that has very nasty consequences.

There has been some debate about what the plague was.

The mention of rats in 6:4 has led some people to the conclusion that we are dealing here with some sort of bubonic plague.

In this case, the tumours would be the swellings that occur with bubonic plague in lymph glands in the armpits, groin, and sides of the neck.

But there is another train of thought that finds some support in Psalm 78:66 and other places that says that the plague has do with their backsides.

In this case, the options are that God afflicts them with haemorrhoids or with dysentery.

No matter what it is, God's hand is heavy upon the Philistines and they suffer badly.

And so they get the Ark and treat it like an undiffused bomb.

Gingerly they shift it from place to place.

But by the time they get to city number 3, they realise that some more drastic action is going to be needed.

Look at verse 10:

¹⁰ *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." ¹¹ 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. ¹² Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven. [1 Samuel 5:10-12 - NIV]*

Psalm 78:60-66 summarises this chapter well:

⁶⁵ Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine.

⁶⁶ He beat back his enemies; he put them to everlasting shame. [Psalm 78:60-66 - NIV]

Key ideas in the passage

So, there is the story, now let's dig a bit deeper and examine some of the key ideas.

I've got three things I want you to notice.

- **Hands**

The first thing I want you to notice is the reference to hands and to the actions of hands throughout the chapter.

We learn in verse 3 that Dagon needs to be lifted up and put in his place by human hands.

We learn in verse 4 that Dagon has no hands before the greater might of the real God.

These verses are in stark contrast to the references to God's hands.

Look at verse 6:

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. [1 Samuel 5:6 - NIV]*

Now look at verse 9:

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. [1 Samuel 5:9 - NIV]*

And then look at the second half of verse 11:

For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy upon it. [1 Samuel 5:11 - NIV]

The implication is clear.

False gods need human hands and have no hands of their own.

But the real God has a very active hand.

- **The progress of the chapter**

The next thing I want you to do is to notice the progress of the chapter.

We start off with the Philistines having defeated Israel.

The clear implication is that God himself has defeated.

This is symbolised by the things of God being locked up in the temple of Dagon.

But then, in verses 1-5 the fortunes of the two gods are reversed.

First, Dagon does obeisance before the symbol of God, and therefore recognises his lordship and his greatness.

Second, Dagon is shown to be a helpless God who needs his worshippers to carry him.

This is a strong contrast with the real God who can act without any worshippers present.

Third, Dagon is defeated in battle and humiliated.

He is beheaded and his arms are cut off and he is left flat on his face before his victor.

And lastly, his people are humiliated and defeated without intervention by the people of God.

- Why is this here?

My third point has to do with asking why this passage is here.

My own view is that God has put it here for three clear reasons.

First, it is here to show the nature of God.

He is a God who is not bound or constrained by such things as a physical Ark, or the boundaries of the land of Israel.

He is a God who is independent and free and sovereign over all the earth, even over nations that do not worship him.

Second, it is here to show how Israel doesn't need anyone but him.

In chapter 8 of 1 Samuel, the nation of Israel will look at the surrounding nations and will ask God for a king.

They will ask because they feel insecure in the face of growing political and military pressure around them.

Well, this passage is here to show that they don't need a king.

God can win against the Philistines without an army and without a king.

And his people should know this.

And finally, this passage is here to reflect on the stupidity of idolatry.

You see, I don't think you can read this chapter without finding some humour in it.

There is a strong and humorous iconoclastic bent to this chapter.

There is the humour of Dagon falling on his face.

There is the humour of him needing to be lifted up and carried around.

There is the humour of the Philistines moving the Ark around from place to place and not even bothering to call upon the handless and headless Dagon to come and rescue them.

And there is the humour in the innuendo of the tumours affecting the nether regions of the Philistines.

This passage is clearly designed to make us laugh at the stupidity of idolatry.

The stupidity of idolatry

This display of the stupidity of idolatry is a common theme throughout the Bible.

One of the places where this comes out in its most vibrant form is the book of Isaiah.

Please turn with me to Isaiah 44.

I want to read Isaiah 44:9-20.

[Read and quickly comment on these verses]

Can you see what is being said here?

Isaiah's point is clear.

In the long run, the gods we worship are made by us.

They are formed by us, nurtured by us, protected by us, and carried around by us.

Now take a look at Isaiah 46:3-13.

Again, can you see the point?

God's claim is that a real God doesn't need to be carried and supported by humans.

A real God turns the tables.

A real God carries and supports his people.

He acts on behalf of his people.

He is independent of his people.

Now the point that is being made here is the same whether the gods you worship are images like Dagon or ideas or political entities.

In the end, they are made by humans and will die with humans.

They need humans to carry them around and protect them and stand up for them.

They are not eternal and they are not independent.

In the long run, no matter how sophisticated they look, they are no better than Dagon and their worshippers will fare no better than the Philistines.

A God worth worshipping

But 1 Samuel, Isaiah 46, and the rest of the Bible indicate that the God we worship is not like the false Gods.

They are empty, vain, nonentities.

But he is a God worth worshipping.

You see, the God of the Bible...

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not a God who needs to be carried and protected and mollycoddled.

He is not a God under threat by his world.

He is the God of all the earth.

He is not a God who started the world but who now sits in heaven helplessly wringing his hands while he waits to see how things work out.

He is the God who is sovereign over all the world and works in it for his good purposes according to his good will.

He is not a God who needs his kingdom to be brought in by earnest Christian people.

He is not dependent upon us.

He is the God we see active in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, we see a God who is not like the gods of the world.

He is a God who sees and acts.

He sees the people of the world.

He sees our need.

He sees our inability.

And he stretches out his hand to save.

He sends his Son.

He allows his Son to be paraded before the nations of the world and lifted up in ridicule and humiliation.

He allows him to suffer the most degrading death imaginable.

And through this humiliation he defeats death, sin, and the devil.

Through this humiliation he does what we could not do with our own hands.

He forgives sins.

He cancels the power of the written code and nails it to the cross.

He disarms all the spiritual powers and authorities and makes a public display of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

And he shows his great worth.

Can you see what I'm saying?

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ sees and acts in Jesus as he has done from all eternity.

He is not like the gods of our world.

He is free and independent and good and powerful.

He alone is worthy of worship.

He alone has the credentials of a true God.

All others are false gods.

All others are idols.

So, friends, let me urge you to follow the Apostle John's advice in 1 John 5:21.

Dear children, keep yourself from idols!