

## 1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

### 'Who can stand?'

#### Some worrying stories

##### *One from the Old Testament*

I want to start today's talk by telling you two different stories.  
Both of them come from a time when God has brought his people into a new situation.  
Both describe God's actions among his people.  
And both are stories that when I read I find worrying.  
So, let's go to the first story.  
It comes from the Old Testament and you can find it in Joshua 7.  
The situation is that God has just performed this incredible victory for his people.  
He has enabled them to conquer the city of Jericho.  
The one thing that he required of them in the victory is that they devote all the spoils of the war to destruction.  
Anyway, as the story goes, the people of Israel go on from this city to the next city.  
They presume that God will repeat what he did at Jericho.  
But he doesn't.  
And they begin to wonder what is going on.  
Eventually they find out that God has not given them victory because someone in their midst kept some valuable things after the victory at Jericho.  
They did not devote these things to destruction.  
And God tells Joshua and the people that they must punish this man and all his family.  
And so they do.  
This man and all his family are stoned.  
And then their bodies and everything that is theirs is burnt and buried.  
Let me say that when I read this story, my first reaction is one of fear and awe.  
It is clear that God is holy and righteous.  
He is not to be trifled with.  
And I find myself asking, 'Who can stand before a God like this?'  
If God is so holy and righteous, how can I, who am so sinful, live in his presence?

##### *One from the New Testament*

The second story comes from Acts 5.  
The events of this story happen very early in the life of the fledgling Christian church.  
The disciples of Jesus have watched Jesus live and listened to his teaching.  
They have watched his cruel death on the cross.  
They have witnessed his resurrection.  
And they have received the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.  
Bound together by a common bond in Jesus, the early Christians have begun to live radically.  
Some of them have begun to sell their possessions and have a common purse.  
Now there is one man called Ananias who sells his property.

Then, with his wife's full knowledge, he goes to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and makes a show of giving all of the proceeds of the sale to the common purse.  
However, the reality is that he has not given all the proceeds.  
The reality is that he and his wife have kept back some of the money.  
Anyway, it appears as though God gives some supernatural insight to the Apostle Peter.  
He tells Ananias that the property was his and that he had full rights over it.  
However, in making a public show of giving the money away while privately holding on to a portion of it, he had lied to God.  
And at this point the shocking this happens.  
Ananias dies on the spot.  
Soon after, his wife repeats the lie and she too dies.  
And verse 11 tells us that great fear seizes the early church.  
And well it might.  
For this story makes clear that the God who works in the New Testament is the same as the God who works in the Old Testament.  
And both Testaments make clear that this God is holy and righteous.  
He is not to be trifled with.  
And I find myself fearfully asking, 'Who can stand before a God like this?'  
If God is so holy and righteous, how can I, who am so sinful, live in his presence?  
Now it is these sorts of questions that are posed in our main passage for tonight.  
You see, in the passage that we read tonight from 1 Samuel, the people of God put this very question.  
After having dealt a very heavy blow to the Philistines, God deals a very heavy blow to the people of Israel at Beth Shemesh.  
And the men of Beth Shemesh cry out in fear and awe:  
*'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?'*  
This is our question for tonight.  
We are going to have a look to see what it means in its original context.  
And then we are going to search the Bible to see if God can help us with an answer.  
So, let's get started by turning to 1 Samuel 6 in your Bibles.

## **1 Samuel 6:1-7:1**

### ***What happens?***

Let's refresh our memories as to where we are.  
1 Samuel 1-3 told us about the birth and development of the prophet Samuel.  
1 Samuel 4-6 focuses in on the story of the Ark of the Covenant.  
However, as we have seen, the story of the Ark of the Covenant is really the story of how God himself interacts with the nation of Israel and the Philistine nation.  
The story so far has been that Israel lost in battle against the Philistines.  
Their reaction was to manipulate God into giving them victory over the Philistines.  
They did this by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into their midst.  
But they lost the battle in a shocking loss.  
And the Philistines took the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the temple of their god, Dagon.  
But God acted and humiliated the god of the Philistines by causing his image to fall on its face and to have its hand and head cut off.  
And God also acted against the Philistines by causing great plagues to come upon them.  
And in the end, the Philistines decide that the best course is to send the Ark back to Israel.  
This is where we find ourselves in 1 Samuel 6.  
The context is set by verses 1 and 2:

<sup>1</sup> 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." [1 Samuel 6:1-2 - NIV]

The religious leaders of the Philistines respond with 3 bits of advice:

1. A guilt offering is required (verse 3 – 'send a guilt offering').
2. Compensation must be paid (verse 3 – 'do not send it away empty').
3. Transport should be provided for the ark that leaves room to make sure that it is really the LORD who is responsible for what has happened (verses 7ff).

In verses 4ff, the Philistines ask the religious leaders what sort of guilt offering should be sent.

The religious leaders resort to sympathetic magic and tell the Philistines that they should send five gold tumours and five gold rats, matching the number of the Philistine rulers.

We haven't heard of the rats until this point, but it appears as though the Lord had not only afflicted the Philistines with tumours.

He had also sent rats to ravage the land.

Anyway, when it comes to the third piece of advice, the religious leaders come up with a great plan.

First, they do the appropriate religious thing that would show respect to the Lord.

They get a new cart and some cows that have never been yoked.

Next, they make sure that the cows are cows that still have calves dependent upon them.

It's a clever move.

They figure that if the cows act against the strongest of natural bonds...

If they act against nature itself...

Then they must be under a greater control.

They must be under the control of a God greater than nature.

And if he is active, then he must also have been responsible for all the bad things that have been happening to them.

And so it is that in verses 10 to 12, the plan is put into effect.

And the cows don't even look back.

They go straight up toward Beth Shemesh, a town on the border of Israelite territory.

The Philistines rulers hang around and watch from a distance.

In Beth Shemesh, the people see the ark.

They appropriately rejoice at its recovery.

Even though sacrificial animals were meant to be males, the wood of the cart and the cows are used for a sacrifice.

Appropriately, Levitical priests move the Ark to a large rock.

The Philistines leaders have seen the results of their divination and return home.

There are three more things that are noted.

First, verses 17 and 18 reminds us of the offerings that were sent.

Verses 19 and 20 tell us that a number of the people of Beth Shemesh either gaze upon the ark or lift its lid and take a look inside it.

And God acts in holy anger and these men die.

And the people mourn and cry out, 'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this Holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?'

The obviously implied answer is 'no one'.

No one can stand in the presence of the Lord, this Holy God.

The Philistines can't.

God's own people can't.

The joy of the people at seeing the ark again testifies to the fact that he is integral to their life.

They can't live without him and his presence.

But his actions towards his people and their fear at his presence testifies to the fact that they can't live with him either.

And so verses 21ff tell us how they resolve this problem.  
Just like the Philistines, they gingerly move it to an alternative location – Kiriath Jearim.  
They put the symbol of God's presence in a backwater, in a corner, until they can work out what they can do with him.  
And there the Ark stays for 20 years until David moves it up to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6.

### **What's it all about?**

So there we have the story.

Let's see what we can make of it.

Now the first thing I want you to notice is the references to Egypt that have occurred throughout this chapter and also in chapters 4 and 5.

And I want you to notice the allusions to the Exodus that occur as well.

The seven months of plagues in the Philistine territory may possibly be an allusion to the seven days of the first plague in Egypt in Exodus 7:25.

The sending of gold tumours and mice may be an echo of the way that the Egyptians send the people of Israel away from Egypt with great treasure.

The references to the hand of the Lord that occur in verse 5 and throughout chapter 5 are also common in the story of what God does in Egypt.

And the reference to the Ark being out in the cold may be a reference to the wilderness wanderings of the people of God after they left Egypt and before they came into the promised land.

But the strongest allusions to the Exodus are found in the direct quotes by the Philistines.

Take a look verses 5 and 6.

*<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? [1 Samuel 6:5-6 - NIV]*

This reference and the references in chapters 4 and 5 indicate that the Philistines seem to grasp Israelite theology a bit better than the people of Israel.

They know about what happened in Egypt.

They know that Pharaoh hardened his heart.

And they know that he paid dearly for this.

And so they determine not to harden their hearts.

They avoid Pharaoh's mistakes.

And, in a second exodus, they send the ark out of Philistine territory back to where they think it belongs.

### **Who can stand?**

But then come verses 19 and 20.

What is going on here?

Why does God turn what should have been a joyous occasion into an occasion of pain and mourning?

What is God saying?

I think the point is that the Israelites are still tying their hopes up with the physical and the tangible. The physical and the tangible can be manipulated and held at bay.

But God can't.

And every encounter they have had with God in these chapters has confused them and befuddled them.

He has shown himself to them as holy and free and sovereign.

And they just don't know what to do with him.

It is this confusion that is present in their words in verse 20.

And it is this confusion that is present in their mourning and seeking after the Lord in 7:1.  
The picture is of a people full of fear.  
Of doubt.  
And of uncertainty.  
They can't live without him.  
But they can't live with him.  
And so they just put him in a corner and mourn and seek him and cry out, 'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?'  
This is the main thrust of this passage.  
Israel is faced with the God who brought them out of Egypt.  
He is their God and they are his people.  
But he is sovereign and free and they don't know how to handle him or how to live with him.  
And the clear implied answer to their question is that no one can stand before this holy God.  
Now my own view is that these words in verse 19 are there for us as much as they were there for the ancient people of God.  
As we read the story of God's activity we too find ourselves asking their question – 'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?'  
And as we ask this question, we need to do so from the perspective of the New Testament.  
After all, the God of the Old Testament is also our God.  
But we have more revelation about this God because of Jesus Christ.  
So, let's go to the New Testament and see if our response can be a bit more constructive than the response of the Israelites in 1 Samuel 6.

## **Some help from Hebrews**

### ***Context***

Now I want to go to the book of Hebrews.  
You see, the book of Hebrews raises some of these very issues.  
And I think it will give us a framework for finding an answer to the question posed by 1 Samuel 6.  
So, let's set the context for Hebrews.  
The book of Hebrews is addressed to a group of people who are finding it difficult being Christian.  
They see the very visible and tangible elements of Jewish faith and are tempted to drift away from Christian faith to Judaism.  
In this way they are very like the people of 1 Samuel – a God who is not free and can be constrained to religious paraphernalia is much more manageable and easier to handle.

### ***Hebrews 12***

With this in mind, I want you to turn with me to Hebrews 12.  
Look at verses 18-21.  
Let me read them to you.  
[Read verses 18-21]  
The writer reminds his readers that they are Jews and not Christians.  
This means that they haven't come to an Exodus-like experience that was very tangible and very scary.  
No, they have come to a very real but very spiritual situation.  
They have come to a place where all the promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled.  
They have been brought into the very presence of God in heaven.  
And they have been brought there by the blood of Jesus Christ.  
And where Abel's blood cries out for vengeance, the blood of Jesus shed on the cross cries out for and promises forgiveness.

The writer of Hebrews then presses on in verses 25-28.

Let me read them to you.

[Read verses 25-28]

Throughout his book, the writer to the Hebrews has told his readers that Jesus and Christian faith is far superior to Judaism.

He has also indicated that Judaism and Christianity are in the end incompatible.

You either have one or you have the other.

You can't have both at the same time.

In these verses he goes a step further.

He tells them that a day is coming when God is going to destroy the earth and the heavens.

And when he does this, the tangible will be destroyed and only the eternal will remain.

And if you are found on that day clinging to the tangible but not to Jesus, you will be swept away.

Then, in verse 28 he captures both sides.

He tells them that if they are believers in Jesus that they will not be swept away.

They can therefore be thankful and worship God acceptably.

However, his final comment is a reminder that God hasn't changed.

He is still holy and righteous.

He is still a consuming fire.

### ***Who can stand?***

So, let's now return to our repeated question.

We read those rather terrifying stories of the Old and New Testament about God's awesome holiness.

And we read 1 Samuel 6:20 – 'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this Holy God?'

In 1 Samuel we are filled with doubt and uncertainty.

But in Hebrews, God gives us a clear answer.

'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this Holy God?'

We can!

If we are believers in Jesus and all that he has done through his death then we do not need to be fearful of God.

We can march into his presence with great boldness.

We can do much more than stare into the Ark and escape.

We can look God himself in the face.

We can stand in his presence with confidence and without fear.

We can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God, because of Jesus.

But what the writer of Hebrews is also clearly saying is that if you don't stand in Jesus then you won't be able to stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God.

God is still holy.

And if you don't trust in Jesus...

Or if you drift away from Jesus...

Then God will be to you a consuming fire.

And you will be swept away when the world is destroyed in the fierce heat of God's anger.

### ***So, what should we do?***

So, now let's turn to think about what we should do in the light of all that we have learnt.

I think that I have two bits of advice for us.

The first bit of advice comes from the Philistine priests and diviners.

It's a piece of advice that is picked up by the writer of the book of Hebrews as well.

Do you remember what the priests and diviners told the Philistines?

In the face of an awesome and holy God, they told the Philistines to remember the fate of the Egyptians and Pharaoh.

And they urged them to not harden their hearts.

In other words, they should not resist or stand against this God or they will surely reap some severe consequences.

Well, the writer of the Hebrews talks about this as well.

Instead of remembering Pharaoh and the Egyptians, he remembers the people of God in the wilderness.

In chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews, he remembers how the people of God hardened their hearts and tested God.

And he tells his readers not to repeat their mistake.

They are avoid hardening their hearts.

And they avoid hardening their hearts by listening to the gospel about Jesus Christ.

So, this is the first thing we should do – ensure that we continue to put our faith and trust in Jesus.

This will cause us to be able to stand in the presence of the holy God.

But the writer of Hebrews gives us another bit of advice.

In Hebrews 3:13 he tells us that we should encourage one another every day to continue on in Jesus.

You see, he knows that belief in Jesus is not just a one off affair.

Belief in Jesus is something you need to affirm every day.

Belief in Jesus involves swimming against the tide.

It is a long haul.

And if we are to continue in our belief in Jesus we need each other.

We need to meet together with each other regularly.

We need to encourage each other regularly.

And we need to check up on each other regularly.

For there is a constant danger that we will be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

And to drift away from Jesus is to be left on your own in the presence of a God who is a consuming fire.

So, let us encourage each other daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of us may be hardened by sins deceitfulness.