

REDISCOVERING THE LOST ARK

1 Samuel 5–6

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Our Scripture today is taken from 1 Samuel 5 and 6. We will continue to apply God's Word to our lives. I'm going to read selected verses out of these two chapters. Keep in mind, many people today call the land of Israel "Palestine." Palestine is actually a corruption of this word "Philistine." You perhaps understand why the Israelites do not like to hear the land called "Palestine." They regard it as their land—the land of Israel—and not the land of the Philistines. "After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. 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. 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. 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.

The LORD's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. 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.' 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.

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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. 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.' 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. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven." (1 Samuel 5:1-12, NIV).

The Philistines had five major cities. The ark visited three of them. So in chapter 6, the Philistines consult their priests and diviners. The priests told the Philistines they first needed to make a guilt offering of five gold tumors and five gold rats. Maybe the plague that had broken out was something like the bubonic plague. So their guilt offering had to do with the visitation of the plague. Then in verse 7, they get a couple of cows who have just recently birthed calves and send them down the road. If the cows do not turn around, then they know it was truly God who sent the plague. But if the cows turn around to their calves, then they know the cows are just acting in their nature, and it was not God who sent the plague and they'll be alright.

Verse 13 says, "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." The succeeding verses tell us about them offering the oxen as a sacrifice and rejoicing that the ark was back with them. Then verse 19 kind of ends on a negative note, "But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD."

My sermon title this morning is "Rediscovering the Lost Ark." I'm not sure how many of you are

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familiar with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls that happened in 1946. It was an incredibly important find—the single most important archeological find of any century. What was found? An entire scroll of the Book of Isaiah, a copy of a commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, and a manual of discipline for the Essene community who lived in the first century. When the scholars got a hold of it, they realized they had a very important find on their hands. At that time in 1948, when the scholars first began to examine these scrolls, the oldest copy of the Hebrew Scriptures was from the tenth century after Christ. There were older Greek copies but not Hebrew. Here was a copy of the Hebrew Bible that was one thousand years older than any manuscript anybody had anywhere in the world. An incredible thing about the copy was the manuscripts of the tenth century had not devolved away from those in the first century. This showed the tremendous accuracy of the scribes in copying the Scripture. It was a fabulous find. If you think finding the Dead Sea Scrolls was important, the only thing that could top it that I know of would be finding the ark of the covenant.

What was so important about this ark? Why is its absence from Israel at this time so critical? What's going on? How does this relate to me? What did the ark of the covenant really represent? What was it saying to the Israelites at the time? What is it saying to us today? That's what I want to talk about—what this Scripture has to do with us today. There are three areas of interface between this Scripture and our own lives and our own walk with God.

I. The first truth is simply that every external object in the Old Testament represents a core spiritual truth.

When the truth is learned, the external object is no longer necessary. For example, the arrangement of the tabernacle and later the temple—the outer court to the inner court to the Holy of Holies talks to us about approaching God. When we learn about what that tabernacle and

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temple represented, then we have that truth permanently in our hearts—even though the external manifestation of that truth is now gone. Also, the sacrificial system is gone. It was an external reality intended to convey an internal truth. When we learn the internal truth, then there's no longer a need for the external appropriation of it. The same with the ark of the covenant. The ark was given by God to represent a very core spiritual truth about God and us.

This ark of the covenant was about 4 feet in length, 2.5 feet wide, and 2.5 feet tall. It was made out of acacia wood overlaid with solid gold. In it were placed the tablets of the Law—the commandments that were engraved in Hebrew in stone by the finger of God. Then there was also Aaron's rod that budded and a pot of manna—those two items later evidently disappeared from the ark. Covering that was a lid—it was not a flat lid, but it was called the mercy seat. It was made out of solid gold. It was shaped so that two angels or seraphs rose out of the ends of the lid and faced one another. Their eyes were downward, their wings upward, and they were tipping toward one another. This massive lid—four feet long and another couple feet high—was put on top of the ark of the covenant so that the tablets of the Law, the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded were enclosed.

In later times when Israel had a sanctuary, the ark of the covenant was the only item of furniture in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was entered into only once a year by a priest on the Day of Atonement. On that day, the priest would sprinkle blood on what is called the mercy seat. It was an atonement lid. Atonement—becoming one with God. In the Hebrew, atonement literally means “to cover.” God was covering sin through the application of blood on the mercy seat. There was an eternal truth represented in that external box of furniture. I want to especially concentrate on the relationship of the tablets of the Law to the mercy seat. All those aspects of God are fundamental.

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God is a God of righteousness and justice who has an unbending law of personal behavior that He himself lives by and that He wants His creation to live by. It is not a relativistic manner of making up the rules as you go. It is what you might call “black letter law.” It is Law that is fixed and concrete. It is Law that is revealed. He is saying to us by what is in that ark of the covenant that one vital aspect of His nature is that He insists on a standard of conduct—righteousness controls our relationship to Him and our relationship to one another. But He also says to us that with His Law, He has made a provision for us. When we violate His Law, we can still have relationship with Him and still be forgiven.

Let’s take a moment to appropriate what’s in that box. We don’t have the tablets of the Law today. But we do have the spiritual truth of the Law—the Ten Commandments. God requires the perfect standard of accountability and righteousness. That’s what the Law represents. God’s righteousness is without defect. He wants that righteousness to be a part of His people—a people without defect. What happens when you fail? Scripture says, “The soul that sins dies.” How do we die? We die in a lot of ways. We die physically, we die spiritually—separation from God, we die emotionally and psychologically—when we step into sin we bring judgment on ourselves. We have sociological death—we’re separated from other people because of our sin. All of these avenues of death—how can we ever pass this test? Nobody except Jesus has passed. How can you pass this test? How can you have relationship with God?

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat—because without the shedding of blood there was no forgiveness of sin. God accepted the death of the perfect, innocent One as a substitute for our own. He made atonement for us. Hebrews 9 goes into a whole description of this. I encourage you to read Hebrews 9 in association with 1 Samuel 5 and 6. It says the external sanctuary, the ark of the

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covenant, is gone but the eternal reality abides. Christ went into the Holy of Holies, not once a year, but once for all time. Not with the blood of animals, but with His own blood. There He interceded for us and made atonement for us. God is showing us a pattern. What God is saying to us by the ark of the covenant—containing the Law and on top of it the mercy seat—is that He is both just and merciful. He is righteous and gracious.

We often think of these as side by side, that they are of equal strength in God—His righteousness and His grace. But notice carefully the construction of the ark of the covenant. God has symbolically represented to us some very important truths. He has elevated His mercy over His Law. He wants to shine His light on transgressors through the filter of His mercy. We always need to keep that in mind when we're coming to God for forgiveness, and we feel like we can't receive forgiveness. God, in the ark of the covenant, was showing us the eternal reality that He is willing to subordinate His Law to His mercy. We just have to follow the avenue He has appointed for us to receive forgiveness. That's the eternal truth represented in this external box. This external box was taken—the glory left Israel.

I'm suggesting that in New Testament times, the glory leaves not when we lose the external box, but the glory leaves when we lose the eternal truth. We lose that truth, and then there's defeat and chaos in our life. We're no longer attempting to walk in the Law of the Lord. If we're sincerely trying to walk in the Law of the Lord, we realize there are steps we need to take from time to time to obtain mercy for violating that Law. We need to lay hold of both the justice and the mercy of God. That's the truth represented here. The second thing this passage shows us is simply the fact that the external passes away and the eternal is written on our heart.

II. The second thing this passage shows us is that the inspired Word of God has no effect unless it is lived out.

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The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It's inspired whether I believe it or not. But even though it is inspired, this Bible will have no effect on me unless somehow I take it and get it into me.

These words on the page become translated into thoughts, words, and actions. They must be lived coherently, as a result of ingesting the Word into my life. There are no originals of

Scripture. We depend on the copies. The originals aren't here anymore. I think there's good reason for that. If anybody had an original copy of Scripture, it would be venerated somewhere.

People would lose sight of God and get their focus on that instead. But here in the Old Testament

in these chapters are people who had an original autograph of Scripture. A good autograph—it was written in stone, engraved by the finger of God. It was the Ten Commandments. Just

because these people had the original didn't mean they were living it. They weren't.

The tablets in the box were like the Bible on the shelf. The Bible is no good if it's on the shelf.

For you, just like for Israel, the commandments in the box were no good unless they were being lived out. Some of the meanest and most ungodly people are people who believe in the

infallibility of the Bible. They claim there's not a single mistake in this Word. Why? Why could they claim that and then live so mean and vicious? It's because this Word has not gotten out of

the box and into their lives. Therefore, we must be careful that we do not have a split in our lives between what we believe and how we behave.

For ancient Israel, God was far more concerned that they keep the Word in their heart. They took this ark of the covenant and began to make it a relic and a superstition. They said, "If we use it in

battle, we'll win." Therefore, God took it away from them. They needed to be reminded that

there was something more eternally important about that ark than to use it as a magical talisman when they got into conflict.

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If you've studied the text, you might ask, "If God let the ark become lost to Israel, then why is there a big emphasis on the power in the box even when it's not in relationship to God's people?" Why, when the ark is sitting in a pagan temple, is their god falling down before it? Because there is power in that box. Sometimes we look at Scripture and because we've not had a similar experience in our own culture, we say, "Those were plain, simple, superstitious people. There's this grand myth of an idol falling down before the ark of the covenant. It's a nice mythical story." I'd like to remind you that there is real demonic power in non-Christian and non-biblical worship.

In 1924, my mother and her sister traveled to China to become missionaries. They were in a language school and the place they were staying at one night was infested with bedbugs. The host said to them, "There's only one other room available. It's upstairs, and there are two large idols in the room. There's room if you want to put a cot between them." They decided they'd rather face the idols than the bed bugs. They put their cots between the idols and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, my mother woke up to her bed levitating off the ground—floating. She had to plead the blood of Christ and the strong name of Jesus to get it down and have power over the demonic forces in that place. I've never had a problem with things like this happening as described in 1 Samuel 5 and 6.

But why was there power in this box—when He later takes the box away? It's not anywhere today. Why? Because God knew that in order for His people to learn a spiritual truth, they had to learn a concrete truth first. We have to learn the physical lesson, and then we go on to the spiritual lesson. God's people had not yet learned the physical lesson—that there was power in that box. There was power represented by the conduction of God's Law and His mercy. They needed to learn that—they needed to know wherever that box went powerful things happened.

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So God let powerful things happen so they would respect what that piece of furniture was—and thereby respect what it represented.

Whenever God's people let go of the external reality of God's Word, that it's really from Him—they let go of the inward reality, and then they begin to wander into myths. Sacred symbols are always that way. They can be nothing but a piece of jewelry—a cross, for example. If you wear a cross, let it be more than a piece of jewelry. Let it really represent what the cross stands for. As a Christian, you're called to a way of suffering—not life, liberty, and the pursuit of pleasure.

Instead, you are called to a path of duty and commitment—and if need be, endurance and suffering for His sake. That's the meaning of the symbol. The people had lost the meaning of the symbol. Therefore, God let the symbol itself be taken away. Then, they might again begin to respect the symbol and come to know the truth of the symbol. That is what's involved here.

The third thing that comes from this passage has a strange application. It has to do with the seventy people being struck dead for looking into the ark.

III. The third truth is that God's people always suffer when the wrong people look into the box of truth.

This is a strange situation. In looking at it from our perspective, God's response seems so out of proportion. What do we say about that? In the Old Testament, time and time again, God is letting an external event represent some deeper and more profound spiritual truth that determines, causes, or changes our relationship with Him. Here is what is happening in this particular instance—the Lord is simply saying, “Whenever the wrong people look into the box of My truth, death results.”

A contemporary application—Jim Jones. He was a person who began to look into God's truth and didn't know what in the world he was looking at. And before he was done, hundreds of

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people were dead. You can look at any aberrational teaching or ministry today, and you can see people looking into the truth of God's Word—and people are dying left and right. They are dying spiritually, dying emotionally, dying in relationship with God, dying in effectiveness to God—all because the wrong people are looking in the box of God's truth.

I think one of our strengths in Christianity here in America is our love of freedom. It flows out of our sense of American citizenship. We love to be free. But every great strength also has its great loss—its companion weakness. Along with freedom, the great danger is license and lack of discipline. We've seen that in the wave of church growth in the last number of years. There has been a bashing on those who are affiliated with organizations, denominations, and church groups. Some bashers will say, "If you are somehow involved with a church ministry that is more than one local church—it's interrelated—then you don't have freedom. You need to come out of Babylon—come out of the denominations into God's freedom."

But in actuality, many, many times denominations don't destroy freedom at all. When a church gets corrupt, then the denomination may take away freedom. Sometimes denominations destroy the wrong freedoms and protect the right freedoms. Denominations, for example, destroy the freedom for a person in ministry to live immorally. They destroy the freedom of a pastor to financially fleece the flock. They destroy the freedom of a pastor to preach false doctrine. I can't get up here and say anything that pops into my head and not be held accountable. That's protection, and we need that kind of thing. There's a lot of spiritual death happening.

As a teacher of God's Word, my constant prayer is, "Lord, help me to not look into Your truth in an inappropriate way. I do not want to lose Your anointing. Nor do I want to lead people into spiritual sleep and death."

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In a closing thought, let me address where the ark is. Here is the historical location of the ark—it once was in Israel. It once was on earth. That historical location was among people called the Philistines. We don't live among people today called Philistines. However, we do live with people who do not really know God and have very little accurate knowledge about God—and that's comparable. We're in that kind of setting—just like Israel's ark was. What happens when the ark falls into the hands of the Philistines? It causes them to sit up and take notice—to notice who God is, even though it's only a piece of furniture. What happens when God's people fall into captivity and fall into the land of the Philistines? God is telling us that He does not change in the process.

Something else the Lord is saying, which I think is important to remember, is that when God's people, like His ark, fall into captivity, the fallout is not necessarily all bad. Public leaders, whether religious or political, need a level of accountability. People who don't have a knowledge of God are sitting up and taking notice, saying, "There's a standard somewhere." They're not exactly sure what's associated with it, who's behind it, or who God is—but they're saying, "People ought to live up to what they profess." The loss can bring a benefit and not a detriment into the community. That happened in Philistia, and it happens now. The ark has a historical meaning that we can translate into today.

The ark also has a theological or spiritual meaning. It's represented in the heavens. It is the fact that God interfaces with us by a covenant, and He pledges to us through the representation of the ark that He is not a changeable being. He is going to be true. If He says that He has a standard of behavior and a standard whereby He grants forgiveness, He is not going to change the rules of the game. He's going to keep them, and He can be depended upon to be absolutely reliable. We can know who God is and how to rely upon Him.

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Additionally, what the ark represents should be carried in our hearts. Four centuries after 1 Samuel 5 and 6, the prophet Jeremiah ministers at a time when the ark of the covenant and the people of God are taken into captivity by the Babylonians. After that, the ark is lost. It's never been found since then. Jeremiah is writing to people who are inconsolable because of their captivity and because they've lost the ark of the covenant.

He says to them in Jeremiah 3:16, "In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land," declares the LORD, "men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made."

What's Jeremiah saying? By that time, the truth will so penetrate you that you won't need the external reality any more. The spiritual reality will remain. For me, the ark represents the fullness of the Lord's personality in my life—the God of justice and the God of mercy. I must keep these in proportion to one another. The degree that I keep the Lord's presence in my life is the degree to which I will experience defeat or victory in my life. If I let His glory fade from me—that aspect of His personality which I ingest through prayer, through the study of the Word, and through fellowship with God's people—if I let that glory fade, then I start getting into spiritual loss. Spiritual loss—like Israel here to the Philistines. If I appropriate who God is in my life through prayer, through the study of the word, and through fellowship and worship with God's people, then I am made strong.

So this ark of the covenant in 1 Samuel 5 and 6 represents something instead of loss. This was the box that led the way for the children of Israel to walk through the impossible—the Jordan River. This was the box which led the procession around Jericho—when the city fell. So this is what Scripture is saying—when you've got God's truth really deep within you, it gets out on the

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leading edge of your life. You can say when you face impossible circumstances, “Lord, I’m in relationship with You. I believe You are leading me at this time in my life. You’re going to go ahead of me. I am in victory. The external circumstances may not be promising, but there can be no defeat for me in the ultimate sense. You are with me, and I will not be led into loss.” That’s one of the great applications coming out of the ark to our own personal lives.

These two chapters of God’s Word are not our favorite in the Bible. But one of the advantages of going sequentially through Scripture is we have to hit dry holes every once in a while and see what they’re saying. They’re powerfully talking to us about truth we would normally neglect because it doesn’t seem to be exciting or immediately applicable. We must take time to go through the totality of God’s Word, so that we might know the totality of God’s heart and manner directed toward us.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we thank You today for Your Word. We thank You that You have given us a sure and fixed standard. And You’ve also given us a sure way of having relationship with You when we have violated Your Law. You made a covenant with us. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, a way has been opened for us to have direct relationship with You. We want to cherish the eternal truths that are out of the ark of the covenant. We’re so grateful, that in the midst of all of our failures of life, You have allowed mercy to hang over us. It is at that mercy seat that You commune with us. We thank You that there is always a way of mercy open to us. For anyone here today who thinks that they are a failure in life, You will forgive. Maybe they’ve violated every law in the box. May the truth of the mercy seat come to their heart today. For those who use Your method of atonement—who will come into total reliance on the sacrifice of Your Son—You will grant forgiveness and You will grant relationship. Then, Lord, there are others

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among us who are in great conflicts in life. There's not a single person in this room that is not in a conflict of some kind—conflict within, conflict with another, conflict with circumstances, conflict with You—all these areas of conflict. It is when Your presence in our life is diminished that we lose in those conflicts. It is when Your presence is enlarged in our life that we are led to victory. So enlarge Your personality in us, Lord. Give us full supply of the Holy Spirit to meet every challenge and conflict we face. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.