



# CAPITOL COMMISSION

## Learning from Difficulties (I Samuel 5:6—6:12)

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*Capitol Commission state directors are missionaries who teach weekly verse-by-verse Bible studies for legislators, lobbyists, and staff members. These Bible studies are hand-distributed to each legislative office, emailed, and made available throughout the Capitol community. The love and grace of God compels us to proclaim the truth of the Gospel with a heartfelt compassion for the Capitol community, to faithfully teach and apply the Word of God, and it is our desire to build meaningful relationships that bear fruit for an eternity to come.*

With the Bible as our foundation and authority, the mission of Capitol Commission is obedience to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) within the Capitol communities of the world. We are not a lobbying group attempting to garner votes or reform society. Our mandate is to see the hearts and lives of elected officials transformed with the Word of God. Capitol Commission is a ministry of the church seeking to proclaim the gospel message, and to help believers mature through the verse-by-verse teaching of Scripture. In the Bible, we see God's great love for the world, especially for those who have been placed in authority. This is the foundation for our ministry to you.

The church is instructed to submit and to honor government leaders (Rom 13:1-7), and as a matter of first importance, to pray for their salvation (1 Tim 2:1-4). Our desire is witness God transform the hearts and lives of elected officials, lobbyists, and staff members. We apply this mandate to four major areas of making disciples: (1) *evangelize* those who have not experienced saving faith in Jesus Christ; (2) *establish* those who desire to grow in their faith and knowledge of Scripture; (3) *equip* those called to spiritual leadership; and, (4) *encourage* churches to participate with us in ministry.

### Introduction

The difficulties that the Philistines experienced as custodians of the Ark of the Covenant is provided in chapters 5-6. The disasters are intense, which motivates the Philistines to return the Ark to Israel. Once the Ark is returned, it is "brought into the house of Abinadab" (7:1). The previous study revealed the utter folly when God's people have more faith in material things than the Creator of all things. We were reminded that failure is always lingering when God's people become dependent upon their abilities and gifts, as opposed to trusting the Lord in His desire to work through the resources He provides. God's promises and provisions are abundant, but there is a danger in presuming arrogantly and superstitiously in a manner that seeks to control God as opposed to being submitted to Him. Religion and ritual can become a replacement for the faith that pleases God. The people of God must always beware that assumptions and presumptions with regard to the Lord may actually be casting the living and true God in the image of Dagon.

### THE NEED FOR RESPECT

(5:6-12) In Ancient Near Eastern mythology, the "gods" are always dependent upon human beings. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains a narrative of Utnapishtim, who allegedly survived the great flood. The flood lasted a week, and all living things were destroyed, with the exception of Utnapishtim and his wife, together with the animals they took aboard an ark. Once the waters began receding, Utnapishtim exited the ark and offered a sacrifice to the gods on the top of a mountain. He relates the response as follows: "the gods smelled the sweet savor, the gods crowded around the sacrificer like flies." The lips of the gods were parched, "taking on a crust," because they did not have food or drink during the flood.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when Utnapishtim offered his sacrifice, the gods devoured the meal. The account is classic paganism, wherein the gods are dependent upon human beings to sustain them.

First Samuel 5 rebukes such thinking with regard to the God of the Bible. God's people are dependent on Him, and therefore He is to be esteemed to equip and strengthen His people. The narrative not only instructs the Philistines with regard to the exclusive sovereignty of God, but also instructs Israel that God's sovereignty is entirely independent of His people. God cannot be compared to the helpless idol Dagon, who needed the help of his worshippers.

C. S. Lewis wrote famously in his *Chronicles of Narnia* that God cannot be compared to human beings. In Lewis' allegory, Aslan is a Christ type figure. Mr. Beaver tells Lucy, Aslan "isn't safe [tame]. But he's god."<sup>2</sup> God is not controlled by our logic or will, but remains always incomparable, who is yet uniquely close to His people. The prophet Isaiah also reminded us that God is incomparable and insupportable. "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has informed Him?" (Isa 40:13). "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9; cf. Isa 45:7; Eccl 5:2; Hos 11:9; Rom 9:20). The only means to understand God is His Word, wherein He reveals Himself as holy, just, and loving, and infinitely beyond us. What joy to know that God is not a larger version of ourselves; rather, He is entirely distinct and separate from us. The Philistines had not conquered a tame God.

Although the Ark was captured by the hands of the Philistines, they did not realize that "now the hand of the

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LORD was heavy” upon them (5:6). God “ravaged them and smote them” with many similarities to the Exodus account (cf. Exod 3:20; 1 Sam 5:6, 9). (The Philistines were related to the Egyptians; see Gen 10:13-14 where “Mizraim” is the Hebrew name of Egypt.) Exodus 9:3 reads, “the hand of the LORD will come *with* a very severe pestilence.” The people of Ekron pleaded with the leaders to “send away the ark of the God of Israel” (1 Sam 5:11); the servants of Pharaoh pleaded similarly to release Israel (Exod 10:7). Just as “the cry of the city went up to heaven” (1 Sam 5:12), so “there was a great cry in Egypt” (Exod 12:30). The humorous account of 5:1-5 was now becoming deadly. The effect of these events was for the Philistines to “know” that God’s hand was against them (1 Sam 6:9). The Philistines were being taught respect for the Ark, which Israel should have demonstrated previously.

## THE NEED TO LEARN

(6:1-12) According to 6:1, it took “seven months” for the Philistines to learn divine respect, and therefore, their possession of the Ark was not a wise decision. Sometimes the lessons God desires to teach us may be painful if we delay obedience, and also fail to respect and honor Him. The Philistines learned that they had offended the God of Israel, and therefore believed that a guilt or reparation offering was necessary. Therefore, they consulted their “priests and diviners” (6:2) because without God’s Word to instruct them they did not know whether Israel’s God desired a guilt offering, nor what kind to provide. What outcome may be expected, however, when God is offended by our actions but priority has not been given to study His Word for instruction?

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The religious leaders warned the Philistine leaders not to harden their hearts “as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their heart” (6:6), but to “give glory to the God of Israel” (6:5). The Philistines would give glory to God, whereas Israel failed to glorify God (1 Sam 4:21-22; cf. Ps 29:1-2). Israel attempted to use the glory of God for their own purposes, but the glory of God would be declared by a nation that did not know Him.

The priests sent a guilt offering with the Ark to atone for their sin. The Philistines believed this would bring healing to their bodies, gods, and land. According to the “number of the lords of the Philistines” (cf. 6:17-18), “five golden tumors and five golden mice” were provided with the Ark (6:4). The Philistines also devised a test to determine whether it was truly the hand of God that struck them, or whether the troubles

occurred to them “by chance” (6:9). The test was made as difficult as possible.

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GOD’S MESSAGE THAT HE ALONE IS THE ONLY  
SOVEREIGN LORD IS UNMISTAKABLE.

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Verse 7 indicates the plan, “Now therefore, take and prepare a new cart and two milch [dairy] cows on which there has never been a yoke; and hitch the cows to the cart and take their calves home, away from them.” Even as a city boy and having recently visited a large dairy farm in California, I know that dairy cows will not leave their suckling calves at home. Nevertheless, “the cows took straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh [northeastern Shephelah (lowland) of Judah]; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left” (6:12). The Philistines witnessed the extraordinary event (6:12, 16). It was evident that the Philistines had experienced the hand of God against them. God’s message that He alone is the only sovereign Lord is unmistakable. God did not speak through a prophet, but used the cows to reveal truth to the Philistines. They would be accountable for their response because it was evident that God had destroyed their gods and land, and afflicted their bodies.

As we conclude this week’s study from the first book of Samuel, there must be an immediate curiosity with regard to the response of the Philistines to God’s unambiguous message. Upon returning to Ashdod, did they continue to worship Dagon? Did they seek the “five lords” to restore their land? Were the Philistines only relieved that the ordeal had ended? It is always easier to respond to our pain as opposed to the truth of a situation. Are we merely relieved when a difficult situation has ceased? Do we become wiser and more humble in our difficulties, and give God the glory He rightly deserves for His care and provision (cf. Isa 46:1-4)? Do not only respond to the pain of a situation, but also be wise and humble in responding to the truth of a situation.

C. S. Lewis wisely stated, “No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.”<sup>3</sup>

\* Thank you for allowing me the honor to provide the weekly Bible studies to you. If you have any questions, please feel free to talk with me, or contact me by email or phone. I am praying for you personally throughout the day and week (1 Tim 2:1-4).

<sup>1</sup> William W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill) 1:459-60.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950; reprint, New York: HarperTrophy, 1994) 86.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 93-94.