

"THE ARK IN CAPTIVITY"

I. Introduction

- A. One of the things that you often hear about in sports is the significance of home-field advantage.
1. As a follower of the Pittsburgh Pirates, I was a little worried last weekend when there was the possibility that the Pirates would have to travel to Chicago to play the Cubs in baseball's wild-card playoff game.
 2. But I was relieved when Pittsburgh ended the season with one more win than the Cubs, which meant they would host the game instead.
 3. Unfortunately, their home-field advantage was nullified by the fact that they had to go up against one of the most dominant pitchers in baseball.
 4. They lost the game without scoring even one run.
- B. In the text we have just read from 1 Samuel, the Philistines thought that they had something like home-field advantage when they captured the ark of the Lord and brought it into their territory.
1. In their minds, the fact that they had defeated Israel in battle meant that their god was more powerful than Israel's God.
 2. They brought the ark to their home turf in order to demonstrate that their god was superior to the Lord.
 3. But they quickly learned the same lesson that the Pittsburgh Pirates learned this week: there is no such thing as home-field advantage when you are up against an opponent who totally outclasses you.

II. The Lord vs. Dagon

- A. The chapter begins by telling us that the Philistines brought the ark to Ashdod, which seems to have been the Philistine capital.
1. They were claiming the ark as a trophy of their victory and offering it as tribute to their god Dagon, a common practice in the ancient world.
 2. Dagon was the national god of the Philistines.
 3. As with the other gods that ancient people worshipped, Dagon had his areas of specialization.
 4. He was a god of grain and fish.
 5. The Philistines worshipped him because they thought that he was the one who provided them with their food.
 6. In other words, they gave Dagon the credit for doing something that the Lord did for them in his common grace.
 7. And here they are bringing the ark of the living God into the house of their false and powerless god.
 8. Poor Dagon didn't stand a chance.
- B. By bringing the ark of the Lord into the temple of Dagon, the Philistines were not only asserting Dagon's power over Israel's God.
1. They were also adding the Lord to their pantheon.
 2. They thought that they could tap into the ark's power and use it for their own purposes, similar to the way the Nazis thought about the ark in the first Indiana Jones movie.
 3. In doing this, the Philistines were guilty of the same sin that the Israelites committed in the previous chapter.
 4. They were trying to use the ark to control God.

5. As we saw last week, that did not turn out very well for Israel.
 6. They lost 30,000 men in battle, including the nation's spiritual leaders, and the ark was captured and taken away.
- C. There are plenty of ways in which people today try to use God.
1. It is even something that we can be tempted to do as Christians.
 2. We can end up focusing our prayers so much upon getting God to do what we want that we lose sight of the fact that Jesus taught us to pray "Thy will be done."
 3. We need to listen to the warning that this passage issues to those who try to use and manipulate the living and true God.
- D. The events that transpired while the ark was in Dagon's temple made a point that is clear enough for young children to understand.
1. There is even a note of humor in it.
 2. Dagon could not remain upright before the ark of the Lord.
 3. He was made to bow to the ground.
 4. He couldn't even pick himself back up.
 5. The Philistines had to put him back in his place.
 6. On the second night he not only fell face downward, but also had his head and hands broken off.
 7. This is especially significant because in the ancient world, severed heads and hands were sometimes taken as battlefield trophies.
 8. The Lord made it clear that he utterly vanquished Dagon.

9. And in doing so, he also foreshadowed what would happen to the Philistine's greatest champion.
 10. When Goliath went head-to-head with David, the giant fell face downward before David and then had his head cut off.
- E. God's judgment on Dagon illustrates the futility of serving other gods.
1. Idols are a burden on those who worship them.
 2. Dagon depended on the Philistines to pick him up when he fell down.
 3. The prophet Isaiah says of those who worship idols, "They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble." (Isa. 46:7)
 4. Dagon's powerlessness sets him in sharp contrast to the Lord.
 5. The ark of the Lord was taken captive, but God does not need any help from the Israelites in rescuing it.
 6. He is quite capable of doing that himself.
 7. This assures us that God is capable of saving us.
 8. Because he doesn't need us to carry him, we can trust him to carry us.
 9. As he says through Isaiah, "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isa. 46:3-4)

III. The Lord vs. the Philistines

- A. After the Lord vanquished Dagon in Dagon's own house, the Philistines started to play a game of hot potato with the ark.
1. The men of Ashdod wanted nothing to do with it, so they sent it on to Gath.
 2. The people of Gath suffered from terrible tumors while the ark was among them, so they sent it on to Ekron.
 3. And when the people of Ekron heard that the ark was headed their way, they cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people."
 4. Don't miss the irony here.
 5. The Philistines thought the Lord had fallen into their hands.
 6. But it was the other way around.
 7. They were under attack in their own land.
- B. You may have noticed that the phrase "The hand of the LORD was heavy" is repeated twice in the second half of the chapter.
1. There are a couple of things to note about this phrase.
 2. First of all, it sets up another contrast between Dagon and the Lord.
 3. Dagon's hands have been broken off.
 4. He is completely powerless.
 5. Yet the Lord's hand is heavy against the Philistines.
- C. The other thing to note about this phrase is how it relates back to something that was said at the end of chapter 4.
1. When Eli's daughter-in-law had her baby boy, she named him Ichabod (a name that means 'where is the glory?'), and she

lamented that “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

2. The reason why this is noteworthy is that the Hebrew term “glory” comes from the same root as the verb “was heavy.”
 3. This is easy to see in the original Hebrew.
 4. In Hebrew, “glory” is *kabod* and “to be heavy” is *kabed*.
 5. This leads one commentator to say, “Though the *kabod* had departed from Israel, it was certainly *kabeding* the Philistines.” [Davis, 62]
 6. The weight of the divine glory was crushing them.
- D. One other detail that bears consideration is the fact that the tumors that the Philistines experienced recall the curses with which the Israelites were threatened if they were unfaithful to the covenant.
1. Deuteronomy 28 says, “If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.” (vv. 58–60)
 2. The Philistines had not received such a warning.
 3. They had no idea who they were dealing with when they first captured the ark.
 4. They quickly learned.
 5. They learned by bitter experience that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31)

IV. Conclusion

- A. We saw last week how 1 Samuel 4 highlighted the fact that the Israelites saw the capture of the ark as a terrible tragedy.
1. Eli died when he heard the dreaded news.
 2. His daughter-in-law named her newborn son Ichabod before she died.
 3. Yet here in chapter 5, we see God making it clear that he doesn't need the Israelites to rescue his ark.
 4. He is going to bring it back from captivity all by himself.
 5. This whole series of events with the ark is a small scale picture of what the Lord will do when he restores Israel from the Babylonian exile.
 6. And that restoration is a picture of what the Lord does in redeeming his people from our slavery to sin.
 7. He doesn't bring about this great deliverance with any help from us.
 8. He does it by stretching out his powerful hand.
- B. One of the themes that gets voiced again and again in the American church is the contention that Christianity needs to adapt or else it will die out.
1. Liberal Christians argue that people won't take Christianity seriously if we believe in miracles, or that God created the world, or that there is such a thing as absolute truth, or that homosexual behavior is sinful.
 2. And among evangelicals, there is often a great deal of emphasis upon the importance of what is described as "cultural engagement"

in carrying out the church's mission.

3. But as one writer points out, "The widespread desire to be... 'culturally engaged' is often a distraction from the church's mission, not because it takes culture too seriously, but because it has not paid close enough attention to the actual state of our culture." [Ken Myers, "Waiting for Epimenedes," *Touchstone* (Jl/ Ag 09) 9-11]
4. First Samuel 5 reminds us that God doesn't need our help in carrying out his mission.
5. Of course the church certainly needs to be faithful in its ministry of gathering and perfecting the saints.
6. But this does not mean we should try to make the Bible's message more palatable to the world.
7. Instead, we need to take to heart the words that we sang this morning:

*Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below*