

Essential Elements

1 Samuel 6:1-20

Only one business was thriving in the walled cities and country villages of Philistia—the funeral business. For months the acacia wood chest the Israelites called the ark of the covenant had been shuttled from city to city.

Now the ark of the Lord had been in the country of the Philistines seven months. Verse 1

For more than half a year, the Philistines had been in the presence of God. Philistine soldiers captured the ark before planting time. Now it should have been harvest time. But the fields were stripped bare. There was quite simply nothing to harvest. Unimaginable hoards of mice had ravaged the fields.

Even if there had been wheat to harvest, the people were too sick to work in the fields. Bleeding anal tumors sapped their strength and filled every moment with agony.

Worst of all, in every fortified city and farm village, people were dying. God's presence had not brought life and light to Philistia. He had brought them poverty, pain and death. And that left them with a problem.

It is the same problem we all must face. How can we find deliverance from the death and damnation of God's judgment?

No Relationship

The Philistines reveled and rejoiced when their army captured the gleaming golden ark. But they were not celebrating any longer. They were not debating where to keep it or what to do with it, either.

They were trying to find a way to send it back to its owners, back to the enemy, back to Israel.

And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we shall send it to its place." Verse 2

Those pagan priests never claimed to know the God of Israel. But somehow they did know what to do.

They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but you shall surely return to Him a guilt offering." Verse 3

Those seers and soothsayers understood that the death, disease and destruction that had ravaged their land were caused by God. And they knew the reason why.

They had displeased and dishonored Israel's God by capturing the ark of the covenant. In a word, they knew they had sinned. And they were not too proud to admit it.

That is always a good beginning. If we would come to God we must see ourselves as He sees us: as we really are. We must face the fact that we are sinners in the eyes of our Creator. Then we must confess all our selfishness and sensuality, our lusts and lies to God.

Yes, that is a good start. But it is only the start. And the Philistines knew it. They also realized their sin could not be forgiven without some sort of offering to atone for their guilt.

More than that, the diviners declared the offering should be the very best Philistia had to offer. Gold!

Then they said, "What shall be the guilt offering which we shall return to Him?" And they said, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for one plague was on all of you and on your lords. Verse 4

In the end, the Philistine lords went far beyond the advice the pagan priests offered them. In addition to one golden mouse for each of Philistia's fortified cities, each village also sent one.

It was an admirable effort. But it was all wrong. Neither our work nor our wealth can atone for our sins and turn God away from His wrath. Only fresh, warm blood can do that. God's Word is clear about that.

...without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Hebrews 9:22

Turning from our sins and confessing them is never enough. Good intentions and earnest efforts cannot atone for our sins. That is why God sent His beloved Son to suffer and die. Only His pure and perfect blood can atone for our sins.

So we dare not content ourselves with confessing our sins. Even forsaking our sinful ways will not help. We must also trust in our Savior's sacrifice on the cross as the full and final payment for our sins.

The Philistines did not know that blood was the only guilt offering God would accept for their sins. So they impoverished themselves by offering gold to the God of Israel.

And we dare not make the same mistake. Neither sacrificial service nor selfless giving can turn away our holy God's wrath for our sins. Only the blood of His Son can cleanse us from our sins.

...the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin .1 John 1:7

But the Philistines also suffered from a more basic problem. They did not want to enter into a relationship with the God of Israel. They had no desire to worship and serve the God who dwelt between the cherubim.

All they wanted was to turn away His wrath and put an end to His judgments. They wanted to be rid of the tumors and the mice. They wanted to please God and send Him away, so they could go on worshipping their stone idol and doing as they pleased.

In the end, the Philistines were able to get rid of the arc of God. And after a while, the mice died off and their tumors healed. But when they died, they found that God's holy wrath was not turned away at all.

Then and now, God only smiles upon those who hunger and thirst to enter into a personal relationship with Him. So if we would experience the heavenly Father's forgiveness and be delivered from damnation, we must trust Him, love Him and serve Him as our eternal Father.

And we must live our lives with but one desire—to please Him.

No Repentance

It was a severe test. The pagan priests commanded that two milk cows be hitched to a newly made cart. Inside the cart was the arc. Beside it was another box filled with their guilt offering for dishonoring God.

The cows' calves were to be penned up. Then the cows were to be left alone to go where they would. With the calves calling for them in the pen, it was natural for the cows to return to their young. But they did not.

And the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left. Verse 12

The cows plodded down the road toward the border with Israel. So the diviners knew God was guiding them to bring the arc back home to Israel. And they were finally rid of it.

For ten long miles, the cows pulled the cart, turning neither to the right nor the left. Finally, the cart crested a hill. Below was a broad valley where the people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat.

Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes and saw the ark and were glad to see it. Verse 13

The harvesters dropped their scythes and sickles and ran to meet the cart. They were elated. The enemy had captured the arc. But God had returned it to them.

Each day as they worked in the fields, they had fretted that God had abandoned them. But now His home on earth was back among His people. So they offered their Lord sacrifices, praise and worship.

The cart came into the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite and stood there where there was a large stone; and they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. Verse 14

Beth-shemesh was a city of priests. So they called the Levites to kill the cows and offer them as sacrifices to God. Granted, the sacrifices were not what the Lord had commanded.

...for you to be accepted—it must be a male without defect from the cattle, the sheep, or the goats. Leviticus 22:19

Nevertheless, it was a blood sacrifice. And God's Law allowed them to offer a special sacrifice away from the tabernacle.

You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. Exodus 20:24

The people of Beth-shemesh believed that promise and claimed it as they offered the cows. And they added many more sacrifices to it. It seemed they did everything right that the Philistines got wrong..

First, they offered a blood sacrifice for their sins. But it was not enough. Before the sun set, the valley was littered with their bodies.

God is not one to show partiality, Acts 10:34

The presence of God brought death to the Philistines. Then He did the same thing among the Israelites. And He did so for the very same reason. Sin!

Yes, the Israelites did desire a personal relationship with the God of their Fathers. And yes, they did offer blood sacrifices to atone for their sins. But the Philistines did one thing which the Israelites did not. They acknowledged and confessed their sins.

All their lives, the Israelites had worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. They journeyed to the tabernacle at Shiloh and presented all the offerings the Law required. And that was good.

But they also bowed down to pagan idols just like the Philistines did. No, they did not serve Dagon. They worshiped Baal, the ancient harvest god of the Canaanites. They even worshiped the sex goddess, Ashtaroah.

They disobeyed the first commandment. Yet they never bothered to confess their paganism as sin. Neither did they have any intention of turning away from it. They believed God would be satisfied with the sacrifices they offered. But they were wrong.

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; Proverbs 21:27

Generations later, God's people still had not turned away from their wicked ways. They still offered Him blood sacrifices, too. But He not only did not receive those sacrifices. He refused even to look at them.

Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Amos 5:22

The people of Beth-shemesh thought they were forgiven and all was right in God's eyes. But they were mistaken. Then and now, no sacrifice is sufficient if it is not accompanied by sincere remorse and repentance.

The message for us is simple. If we would come to Christ to be forgiven and transformed by His blood, we must not only believe Jesus died on the cross for us. We must not merely confess our sins, either.

We must also turn away from our sinfulness and shun the sin we once served. If we do not, we

are indulging the same illusion the Israelites did. We assume we can be forgiven and live as we please.

And that is more than merely foolish. It is fatal.

No Reverence

It was a day of celebration for the people of Beth-shemesh. They offered sacrifices and rejoiced. They ate and drank and sang songs of praise. All the time, the ark sat nearby on a large stone.

And the people could not keep their eyes off it. They had heard about the gold covered chest. They also knew the high priest sprinkled blood upon the shimmering gold lid that covered it each autumn on the day of atonement.

But they had never seen it before. And they knew they would probably never see it again. So after a while, curiosity got the best of them. And they pried off the lid to look inside. That was when death came to Beth-shemesh.

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. Verse 19 (NIV)

It was not as if those harvesters did not know what they were doing was both forbidden and fatal. The Law of Moses is full of warnings and commands not to touch or even look at the holy ark of God.

...they shall not go in to see the holy objects even for a moment, or they will die. Numbers 4:20

...they must not touch the holy things or they will die. Numbers 4:15 (NIV)

The sin those Israelites committed was more than mere curiosity. They knew that God Himself had promised to dwell between the cherubim on the gleaming gold cover. It was his throne on earth. Nevertheless, those who died were willing to handle God's throne and lay it down on a weathered rock.

The source of their sin was their attitude. And that attitude was a natural outgrowth of how they saw themselves.

They did not look upon themselves as sinners who justly deserve to die and suffer the fullest measure of God's wrath. And if we do not see ourselves as sinners, we cannot grasp the holiness and righteousness of our God. Neither will we treat Him as He has commanded.

By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored. Leviticus 10:3

That was their real mistake. They treated God's throne as little more than a lid to a box. They treated God Himself as if He was no different than they were themselves.

And that is always a terrible sin. We must never forget that our Lord is high and holy, that He is a righteous God.

True, when we trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord, the great God of eternity becomes our Father. And we are commanded to come to Him as our Abba: our loving Papa.

But that does not mean we can come to Him without reverence and awe. He is the mighty God. And we are sinful men who have only been accepted because of His great love.

The people of Beth-shemesh had an "I'm Okay, You're Okay" relationship with God. And that is not only wrong. It is the faith of a fool.

We are to come to God as our high and holy Lord. We are to worship His precious Name. And just as Paul did, we are to lift Him up and strive to honor, exalt and magnify His Name in all we do and say and think.

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. Philippians 1:20 (NIV)

For three years, Thomas walked and ate and slept by Jesus' side. And he considered the Master his companion, counselor and friend. Yet when he finally felt Christ's wounds, Thomas did not treat his risen Redeemer as a friend. Instead, he fell down before Jesus as his Lord and his God.

Yes, Jesus is our Savior. He is also a Friend who sticks closer than a brother. His Spirit is our Comforter and Counselor. And His Father is our Abba who loves us and to whom we can always go for help.

But He is also our God. And in all we do and say, we must honor Him as God. Or He is not really our Lord at all.

No Redeemer

The people of Beth-shemesh were stunned and stirred when their neighbors fell to the ground dead. They knew they were no better than those who died. And that brought a terrible question to their minds.

The men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" Verse 20

The harvesters ran from the wheat field to meet the arc when they first saw it. They were filled with joy that God was among them. But their smiles soon turned to tears.

Suddenly, they realized what it took the Philistines seven months of poverty, pain and death to learn. They were too wicked and wayward to stand before God.

The Lord was personally present among them. And they could not stand before His holiness and righteousness.

They needed what God has graciously given us. They needed a righteous Redeemer who is so pure and perfect He can stand before God. They needed a high priest like our Savior.

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:15_16

In the end, the people of Beth-shemesh begged Levites from Kiriath-jearim to take the arc away from them. Like the Philistines, they decided they could not bear to have God's holy presence among them.

It is the glory of the Gospel that we do not have to send God away and suffer His wrath. His Son came to this world and lived a life that was perfect in every way. Then He carried all our sins to the cross and paid the price of blood and death that is the just penalty for our sins.

Now, just by trusting in Jesus, we can come to God boldly, confident that He will not only accept us. He will also forgive us and transform us. And He will give us a wonderful new life that will never, ever end.

But we must come to Him as He has commanded: confessing our sinfulness, forsaking our sins, and serving Him as our Holy God and loving Lord.