

The Arc and the Idol

1 Samuel 5:1-11

All of Philistia rejoiced. They had trembled in fear of the God of Israel. But all for naught. Their army not only vanquished the Israelites. They even captured their God. Or so they thought.

With singing and celebration and all the pomp and pageantry of a parade, they carried the gleaming, golden arc to the temple of their god, Dagon. Inside the temple at Ashdod, the air was smudged with smoke from incense. And high up above the altar stood the image of their god.

It was a statue of a man with a cone-shaped crown and a bushy black beard. But from the waist down, he had a fish's tail.

There in the temple, they set the arc down at the foot of the altar as an offering to their idol. The Israelites had carried the arc into battle. At the same time, the Philistines had carried Dagon with them. And their god triumphed. So they shouted praises to Dagon's deaf ears.

Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. Verses 1-2

The story is true. But it is more than dry history. God preserved this account of the arc's adventures among the Philistines for our instruction.

...whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, Romans 15:4

And that isn't all. Like all of the stories in the Old Testament, the account of the arc is also a shadow: a symbol of spiritual truths.

These are a shadow of the things to come, Colossians 2:17 (ESV)

The Power of the Gospel

Philistine priests and potentates carried the arc into the shadows and silence of Dagon's temple. But they had no idea what they were really doing. Never before had the presence of the living God, the Creator of Heaven and earth, graced the inside of that pagan temple. But when they carried the arc of the covenant into Dagon's temple, God's presence came with it.

It was a degenerate and degrading place for God to reside. But it was not nearly so filthy and foul a place for God come to live as our own human hearts.

And when any man, woman or child comes to Jesus Christ, that is just what happens. God's own Holy Spirit comes to live within the temple of a human body that is foul and filthy with sin.

It is important to note that the Philistines did not bother to clean up the temple before they carried the arc in. They merely brought it in and set it down at the foot of the stone statue of Dagon.

When we hear and believe that God loves us and sent His Son to die for us, that is what we do. We bring God in among our idols.

We are neither astute enough nor able to tear down all the ugly idols we have worshiped. So we merely invite Jesus Christ to come into our hearts and lives. We ask Him to live in us and with us. And idols of sin, sensuality and selfishness still sit proudly on the throne of our lives.

But like Dagon's image, they cannot remain there for long. The Holy Spirit of our God will not allow it. He will pull down every ugly thing we have entertained and adored, just as He pulled down Dagon.

When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. Verse 3

God loved the Philistines every bit as much as He loved the Israelites. So, just as He spoke to Jacob's descendants, He also spoke to the people of Philistia.

And He spoke to them in a way He knew they would understand. To them, Dagon's stone statue was the living presence of their god. So during the night, God cast that image down from its pedestal high above the altar.

Of course, neither the Philistines nor the Israelites had anything to do with the fall of Dagon. All by Himself, God pulled down the idol which all of Philistia worshiped.

And if we trust in Jesus Christ, His Spirit will also tear down the idols we have worshiped. No one will have to badger and berate us about our sinful ways. The God who loves us will tear down everything we have honored and adored. And He will do so without our help.

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. 1 John 3:9 (NIV)

That is why those who belong to Jesus do not keep on sinning. When God's Spirit sets up housekeeping within us, He not only points out our sinful attitudes, affections and actions. He also pulls them down.

The Spirit does that by changing our very nature. He transforms our appetites. And all we once treasured no longer attracts or entrances us. So we willingly leave our sinful ways behind.

When the priests of Dagon's temple opened the doors the next morning, they were more than a little shocked. God had spoken to them in a way He knew they would surely understand. Their half-man, half-fish idol was no longer sitting on its high and exalted perch. Instead, it was lying on its face before the arc.

The Philistines believed their god was physically present in that statue. So when they saw it on its face, it was as if their idol had prostrated himself to worship the captured arc of Israel.

That is what God's Spirit does within the heart and life of every believer. He not only pulls our idols down. He also brings us to the place that we commit them all to Christ. Then, instead of seeking and striving for empty aims and attitudes, we joyfully worship and serve our Savior.

But Dagon's statue did not tumble down while the people were still shouting and celebrating. It happened hours later. Only when the temple was dark and silent and empty, did the Creator bring down the idol.

In the same way, our sins are not always overcome at once. Quite often, it takes a while. But if we are truly saved, God will surely overcome and overpower every sin within our lives.

The message for men of all ages is clear. If we would come to Christ, we need not be held back because of any idol. No sinful habit or wicked way should be allowed to keep us from coming to Jesus Christ.

The Gospel demands that we repent: that we change our minds about our purpose for living, about our own selves, and about our sinning. But we need not wait to give ourselves to God because some idols of sin still stand within our lives.

The truth is, we do not have the ability to pull those idols down. They are energized and empowered by the prince of darkness. And he is vastly more powerful than we are. So as much as we might want to, we simply do not possess the power to pull down our idols. We are far too weak to forsake wicked habits and overcome ugly addictions.

But if we come to Jesus Christ, if we believe He died for us and rose again, and if we are willing to give ourselves to God, His Spirit will work His wonderful miracle in our lives.

He will pull down every idol we have worshiped.

The Progression of the Gospel

The message might have been clear. But the priests of Dagon refused to respond to it. It was obvious that Dagon was no match for the God of Israel. Indeed, Dagon seemed to be worshipping at the foot of the ark. So the priests should have simply thrown the old fish-man out and taken his place of worship before the earthly throne of the living God.

But they did nothing of the kind. The idol was utterly unable to help himself. So the priests carefully picked up their empty idol, brushed the dirt from it, and set it back up on its pedestal, high above the altar.

So they took Dagon and set him in his place again. Verse 3

Tragically, that is precisely what many Christians do. When Jesus comes into their hearts, His Spirit pulls down their sinful attitudes, affections and actions. But after a while, all too many believers make the same mistake those priests did. They go back to their sin.

Our sinful habits cannot come back and recover their control over us by themselves. So we do what they cannot. We go back to the sins we once entertained and return to the selfishness and sensuality we once indulged and delighted in.

And that is a grave error. It is both perilous and foolish to dig through the trash for the filth God's Spirit has discarded. No, if our Lord has overcome any ugly habit in our lives, we must leave it on its face on the floor.

But even if we do restore what God's Spirit has overcome in our lives, the battle does not end there. Just as He did with Dagon, God's Spirit will continue smash our every iniquity.

But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Verse 4

All that day, shopkeepers and housewives came to the temple to see the ark and honor the power of Dagon. But when night came, the priests locked the doors and went home.

Then once again Dagon was thrown down from his pedestal. But this time, he was not only tumbled to the floor. He was thrown across the sanctuary to the very door. And his head and hands were not merely broken off by the fall. They were cleanly cut off, as if someone had sliced them off with a sharp knife.

All that was remained intact was the fish's tail. And once again God spoke to the Philistines.

His message to both them and us is clear. All of us give ourselves and offer great effort and allegiance to some sort of idol. After all, Paul wrote that greedy materialism is little more than idolatry.

...covetousness, which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5 (ESV)

So we might well slave and strive for riches, worshipping our own idol of gold. But like Dagon's stone statue, money cannot help us. And when God's judgement comes, we will realize it.

They will fling their silver into the streets and their gold will become an abhorrent thing; their silver and their gold will not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord. They cannot satisfy their appetite nor can they fill their stomachs, for their iniquity has become an occasion of stumbling. Ezekiel 7:19

Mark it down. Being motivated by materialism and riches is worshipping an idol. And every idol is empty and impotent.

Dagon's head was sliced off to proclaim to the Philistines that their idol had no wisdom or understanding to offer them. And his hands were severed to tell them their idol was also powerless to act in any way to help them.

Dagon's temple was a place of tragedy and torment. Uncounted generations of Philistines had come there with heavy hearts. When little children were desperately ill, mothers would weep before Dagon's unseeing eyes and ask the idol for help.

When people were tormented with guilt, they would kneel in the idol's temple and beg for forgiveness. The confused would come and ask for insight and guidance. The troubled would come and seek serenity. And the dying would come and ask for peace and assurance.

But every worshiper who came left empty handed. It was not that they lacked faith. They believed in the power of Dagon with every thread and fiber of their being.

But there is no power in faith alone. Faith that is misdirected is little better than no faith at all. Then and now, wisdom and insight come from only from God. Faith is merely the conduit by which we receive His blessings.

God told the Philistines that their idol had neither power to help them nor wisdom to guide them. And the same is true of the idols we serve.

It makes no difference if our passion is for pleasure, profit or pride. No idol we seek and serve has the power to help us. More than that, the source of every sin we serve is from Satan himself. And he not only is unable to help us. He is utterly unwilling to do so.

God smashed Dagon's idol. And the Spirit of Christ within us will do the same thing to the sins we dig out of the trash. He will war against our sin. And He will never give up. Our Lord loves us far too much to allow us to pollute and poison our lives.

The Penalty of the Gospel

We might well excuse the priests of Dagon for their first mistake. After all, they could have easily supposed their idol had merely fallen.

But there was no way they could misinterpret the second time Dagon was pulled down. It was obvious that their little god was powerless before the mighty God of Israel. So we would expect them to turn away from the fish-man statue. But they did not.

Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day. Verse 5

It is amazing and inexplicable. The priests not only refused to turn away from Dagon. They went far beyond that. They honored the doorway where their broken idol's shattered form came to rest. And they taught their children to do the same.

Our God is the Lord of love. But He is also a holy, righteous God. And He will not allow His children to continue to sin. So if we do insist of returning to the sins we have vomited up, He will severely chastize us.

"For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? Hebrews 12:6_7

Twice, God admonished the Philistines to turn away from their empty, lifeless idol. He clearly demonstrated that He has power over their god. And when they refused to respond, He smashed Dagon so they could not mistake His message.

But they still refused to repent. So God spoke to them through poverty and pain.

Now the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. Verse 6

The offering the Philistines sent when they finally returned arc reveals the nation was overrun with rodents. Mice swarmed every grain bin. Housewives awoke to find the floor alive with them.

In a surprisingly short time, all their storehouses of food were eaten up. And they faced poverty and hunger. But that was not the worst of it.

They were also plagued by fast-growing malignant tumors in their private parts. And even that was a message from God.

Pagans believed that diseases which afflict secret parts of the body were punishments from the gods for trespasses committed against themselves. And that, God was telling them, was precisely what they were doing by clinging to an idol instead of serving the living God.

That is true for us as well. When we give our time and our talents, our efforts and allegiance to anything that does not honor God, we are not only dishonoring our Lord and sinning against Him. We are also punishing ourselves.

After all, our God has nothing but good in mind for those who serve Him. So when we turn away from Him and refuse to faithfully serve and completely trust Him, we are filling ourselves with pain and poison.

So the people of Ashdod writhed in pain and died in agony. And those who lived went hungry. But even then they did not turn away from Dagon.

They knew their troubles were brought on by the God of Israel. And they complained to the council leaders. But not only for their own sake.

When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god." Verse 7

They not only agonized over the mice and their tumors. They were also worried that their empty idol was being tormented and overcome by the God of Israel.

But the council leaders were still unwilling to send the ark back to Israel. So they sent it to Gath. The last remnants of a race of giants lived there. But even their massive size and strength were no match of the terrible judgement God was bringing upon Philistia. And all because they stubbornly refused to repent.

The people of Gath were tormented just as Ashdod was. But they were every bit as unwilling to repent as their neighbors were. So Philistia's leaders sent the ark on to Ekron. And there, the tumors and mice were even worse.

...there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. Verse 11.

The message for Christians is sobering. If we are determined to keep on sinning after faith in Christ's blood has delivered us, He will punish us. And the longer we refuse to repent and return to Him, the more intense and terrible the chastisement will become.

The only solution is to do what the Philistines steadfastly refused to do. We must leave all our idols on the floor where God has cast them.

And we must serve our Savior with a whole heart.

