

The Freedom of God to be God

1 Samuel 5:1-7:1

Are you ever tempted to put limits on God's freedom to act as God? Or to put limits on where God's present and where He's not present? Or to put limits on when God may act – on the sorts of conditions that have to be met before God can do His thing? Or to think God's present only to comfort you and not to confront you?

- Some people think God's present in a church building and so prayers made in church work while prayers made outside church don't – or that God's more present in a church building so prayers made inside church are more likely to work or more likely to work fully.
- Some people think God can only use super-good people to achieve His purposes in the world – people like super-saints – and that He can't use ordinary people or He can't use bad people.
- Some people think God pays more attention to their prayers if they go on a prayer walk – that somehow there's more value or more effectiveness in praying on site than praying somewhere away from the site.
- Some people think God can only bring revival if there's a group of righteous people praying for revival – that if God can't find a group of people like that, then God's not allowed to send a revival.

Sometimes we need to be opened up to the possibility that God's bigger than we imagine – and that He's free to act in ways that are broader than our understanding – and that He's not boxed up in our particular sets of rules and regulations. God has His own agenda – and He's the One who sets that agenda. He's not dictated to by us humans.

As we saw last week, the ark of God went into exile. The Philistines captured it. They took it back to their own cities.

- Does this mean God's left Israel?
- Does this mean God's now beaten?
- Does this mean God's helpless until His people build up their military strength and recapture the ark?

They're the sort of questions hanging in the air as we come to 1 Samuel 5. Surely the defeat of Israel's a big blow to God. It's damaged His reputation. It's shown He was powerless to act – powerless to save His special people from defeat at the hands of the Philistines. Now God's helpless and stuck in enemy territory.

The Ark in Exile

Look at things from the Philistines' point of view. They had their own gods. They believed Israel had their gods. They believed the Egyptians had different gods yet again. They believed that, when they went into battle, they fought against whatever human enemy was at the other end of their spears. They believed that, at the same time, their gods fought against their enemy's gods in some unearthly arena. Whoever won that unearthly battle, determined who won the battle down below. They'd just beaten Israel – so, under their logic, their gods must have beaten the Israelite gods – and that can't be good for God's reputation.

Thus, they take the ark of God back to the temple of their chief god – the temple of Dagon.

- It reminded them that the power of Dagon was greater than the power of Israel's god.
- It celebrated the victory Dagon gave them.

- It expressed their thanks to Dagon for helping them out in battle.
 - It reminded Israel that their god was beaten.
- Perhaps they had plans to have the Israelite leaders make a pilgrimage to Ashdod every year – just so they could be reminded that their God lost.

They put the ark in the temple of Dagon. Next morning, they turn up at the temple – perhaps to prepare a great celebratory feast or perhaps simply to gloat – and they find Dagon face down. What's happened?

- Maybe someone bumped their god during the night and knocked him over.
- Maybe it's some vandals getting up to mischief.
- Maybe there was a slight earth tremor during the night and some temple servant hadn't properly attached Dagon to the wall.
- Maybe it's an indication that their god's not as great as Israel's god and he's bowed down before the greater god.
- Maybe it's an indication that Dagon died.

The Philistines aren't quite sure which of the possibilities to opt for and so they put their god back in his place and go about their business for another day and then settle down for a peaceful night's sleep.

The next morning they find Dagon face down again – except this time he has no face because his head's been cut off, as have his hands. There can be little doubt about this not-so-subtle message. Dagon's lost to Israel's God. It's the victors in battle that cut off the heads of their beaten enemies – and sometimes they also cut off their hands to show their enemies no longer have any power.

Yet, the Philistines think there could be different explanations. Maybe there's a crack team of Israeli commandos that keep sneaking in at night. Perhaps they desecrated Dagon's temple. Perhaps it's a subtle Israeli plot to undermine their confidence in Dagon. After all, Dagon gave them victory on the battlefield – so Dagon must be the more powerful god. The proof's there in black and white – in the stark red of the blood. The battlefield still has plenty of Israelite bodies scattered on it if you want to check out the evidence.

But as time goes on, the people of Ashdod become convinced that Israel's God has not lost. God sends a plague on the city and the surrounding villages. People today argue back and forth about the exact nature of this plague – was it some form of bubonic plague? Was it haemorrhoids? Was it some special form of tumour? It doesn't really matter. The important thing is it was a plague and the people recognised it came from Israel's God. The narrator puts it in terms of the *hand* of God being *heavy* upon them. There are two word plays going on here:

- The first you can see in English. It's the repetition of the word *hand*. Dagon's hands have been cut off. He has no power to help his people. God's hand, on the other hand, still has plenty of power – and that power's being exercised against the Philistines.
- The second doesn't come across in English. The one Hebrew word can be translated either *glory* or *weight*. At the end of chapter 4, we're told the *glory* has departed from Israel. The *glory* headed off to Philistia. Yet, when it arrives there, it's *heavy* on the Philistines – as it has been on Israel for those who have the eyes to see it.

As chapter 5 continues, we find the Philistines taking the ark on a tour of triumph – sort of like taking the Cricket World Cup to each of Australia's major cities. That's what it's supposed to be like – showing off this great prize they won in the Israel wars. Instead, it turns into a disaster. Wherever they take their trophy, the plague follows. Finally, they cut the tour short – because the cities that haven't yet seen the great trophy decide they're better off not seeing it. They don't want it anywhere near their town halls.

Now, as the Israelites read this story, you can imagine them having a good chuckle. These stupid Philistines – who do they think they are that they can have God under control? Do they think they've beaten God just because they've got His ark? Do they think the false god Dagon is any match for the God who made the heavens and the earth? What a stupid bunch! Of course God'll show up their stupidity in the way He treats them. No way will God allow them to dictate terms to Him. No way will God allow them to treat Him as some trophy they've captured and can use for their own purposes.

Yet, the humour has a subtle barb to it. For don't the Philistines treat the ark in a similar way to the Israelites – as something that'd allow them to express some control over this God they'd captured? Isn't that similar to what the Israelites thought when they took the ark to the battlefield in chapter 4? Aren't we seeing the same sort of superstitious behaviour and thinking? And is it possible that same thinking's still present in our minds from time to time?

The story shows us God's quite capable of taking care of Himself without any help from Israel. He doesn't need them. He's a big God – He can look after Himself.

- Israel was supposed to declare God's glory to the surrounding nations. They failed – because they failed to give honour to God by doing what God told them.
- Yet, that doesn't stop God from getting these Philistines to show Him some honour. They don't have God's words in the way that Israel does – yet they recognise God's hand acting against them. And they're forced to act in a way that shows they acknowledge God's actions in their midst.

What's more, God's quite capable of taking care of Israel without any help from them and while they're blundering around without any human leadership. Israel's been beaten by the Philistines. They've suffered large casualties. Normally, you'd expect the Philistines to carry out a few mopping up operations and to finalise their conquest of Israel. Yet, they don't. God keeps them busy down in their own cities – battling tumours and putting Dagon back together again.

But we haven't got to the end of the story yet. The ark's still wandering around the Philistine countryside – and that doesn't seem the right place for it. How will Israel get the ark back? Will they get it back? Or has God gone into exile permanently? Has God got so sick of His people that He's deserted them?

The Ark Returns Home

Chapter 6 tells us that, after seven months, the Philistines have had enough of this Israelite religious symbol. They

want to get rid of it. So, they call in the theologians to solve their problem. The **first** thing the theologians tell them is that, if they've made up their minds to send the ark back, they'd better send some sort of offering back with it. God's hand's been heavy against them. They want relief from His plague. Send an offering as an indication that you're acknowledging His hand against you and you're requesting relief. What sort of offering? They come up with two things:

- five gold tumours; and
- five gold mice.

They pick five because there are five major Philistine cities. You can see some sense in that. They pick tumours because that's what they've been afflicted with. They pick mice because ... Well, we're not totally sure why they pick mice. There's nothing mentioned about them back in chapter 5.

- Some people think it's because the tumours were part of a bubonic plague and that sort of plague's carried by rats and so the offering brought the two together. But they didn't know about the connection between rats and plague back then.
- Others think that around the harvest time a plague of mice appeared to eat their crops – since Dagon was lord of the harvest and he didn't seem able to protect their crops anymore – and so they threw in the mice for good measure in case that was also connected to what Israel's God's doing to them.

Whatever the reason, that's the offering they picked to send back. It fitted in with their understanding of religion and had associations with ideas of sympathetic magic – that there was considered to be special significance in shaping the offering in terms of the problem.

The **second** thing the theologians tell them is to make it relatively difficult for the ark to get back to Israel. They still want to leave open the possibility that this plague's just a coincidence. Their theology tells them they beat Israel's God on the battlefield. They've got fairly convincing proof of that. Subsequent events have them questioning their theology – but they just want to make sure. They ask for a miracle. This is not a "Lord, if You want me to do this, let the sun come up in the east" sort of deal. It's more a "Lord, if You want me to do this, let the sun come up in the west" sort of deal.

- They get two untrained cows and hook them up to a cart together.
- The two cows both have calves that are penned up to stop them going with their mothers.
- They just let the cows wander where they want.

And they head straight for the closest border town. The Philistines are convinced Israel's God powerfully got His religious symbol back to Israel.

Thus, after His seven month exile, God takes the ark back to Israel. What's more, He does it without any help from the Israelites. God's quite capable of doing that without needing their intervention on His behalf. God has beaten Israel's enemies into submission without any help from Israel. The people of Israel didn't have to lift a finger. God shows He's the true leader of Israel – an issue the narrator comes back to in a couple of chapters.

Before we leave the Philistines, it's worth asking what they've learnt – and what they haven't learnt?

- They've learnt God is powerful. Look what God did to Dagon. Look what God did to their bodies. Look what God did to get His ark back to Israel.

They honour God's power. They don't make the Egyptians' mistake and harden their hearts. At that level they submit to the God whose power they recognise as greater than their own and greater than that of their gods.

- They haven't learnt the requirements of this God. As you read through what they did, so much of it's against the law.
 - They consult diviners – who were forbidden by God.
 - They make gold models of mice as guilt offerings – an animal the law declares unclean.
 - They make gold models of tumours – something else considered unclean.
 - They put the ark on a cart when it's supposed to be carried.

There's so much they get wrong. That's the problem when humans make up their own rules for what should be acceptable to God. The only real way to find out is to listen to what God says is the proper way to honour Him. They could have asked the Israelites – but they don't. They just get it all wrong. Yet, God, in His grace, seems to accept their actions. He doesn't strike them down. Presumably, the plague's removed from the Philistine cities.

- They haven't yet learnt to truly honour God. At the end of this story, we don't find the Philistines smashing all their idols of Dagon and adopting the religious practices of Israel. Nowhere do we read of them bowing down to the God of Israel. They're not converted. At one level, that seems strange. After all, Dagon wasn't originally one of their gods. They adopted him when they migrated to the

coastal plain. One's left with the question: Why don't they adopt Israel's God? They see His power. They see the miracles. Yet, it doesn't change their hearts. Perhaps a God who's freely sovereign – a God who's not domesticated to human wills – is of no use to them. Perhaps they don't want a God they can't manipulate – a God who won't dance to their tune. Such a God may be too dangerous.

For them, this was a golden opportunity to change gods – but they blew it.

The Ark back in Israel

What happens when the ark gets back to Israel? Two things we're told.

- The people of Beth Shemesh rejoice; and
- The people of Beth Shemesh offer sacrifices to God – under the proper supervision of some Levites.

And that seems an appropriate end to the story. The ark's been returned to its proper place. The people are happy. The people offer sacrifices to God. It's got that "they all lived happily ever after" feel to it. God's taught the Philistines a lesson. God's taught His people Israel a lesson. Now they can get on with things as they should be. God has acted in a way that brought honour to Himself.

But the story doesn't finish there. Verse 19:

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.

So much for they all lived happily ever after. What did these men do that was so wrong?

- Some, like the NIV translators, think they looked into the ark. That's the most common interpretation.

- Some think they only gazed on the ark – that they took the opportunity while the ark was out in the open to have a good look at it.

Either way, they didn't show appropriate respect for ... the ark? I don't think that's the proper way to put it – for that returns to superstitious-type thinking about the symbol. Rather, they didn't show appropriate respect for God's instructions – and therefore they didn't show appropriate respect for God. Numbers 4 gives detailed instructions for transporting the tabernacle furniture and not even those Levites responsible for carrying the furniture were permitted to go in and have a look at it. It was to be appropriately covered before they got near it. They failed to honour God – and they suffered the consequences as outlined in the law.

And so we read in verse 19:

The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them, and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?"

They're in exactly the same situation as the Philistines. The hand of God's heavy on them, they're struck down just like the Philistines, and they want to know how they can get rid of the ark.

The reason they don't all live happily ever after is that Israel hasn't really learnt anything from this whole incident. Some things have changed.

- Eli's sons are dead – according to God's word.
- The temple at Shiloh is no longer central – and may have been destroyed.
- They've gone through a period of distress – when

they're beaten in battle and the ark's captured. But their hearts haven't changed. They still don't allow God to call the shots.

- Before, they tried to force God to do what they wanted by taking the ark into battle.
- Now, they ignore what God says about how the ark should be treated and do their own thing.

They don't treat God as God.

How do you react when you read this bit about God killing seventy Israelites? Do you think that's a bit unfair of God? Do you think God's being a bit harsh? Perhaps your God shouldn't do those sorts of things. After all, these were God's people. They'd just offered Him some great sacrifices. Surely God should be happy with them. Surely God should be dancing in heaven with delight that His children have honoured Him with such a great time of religious celebration. Surely He should be ecstatic that His ark's back in the right territory and He's escaped those pesky Philistines. Surely He should overlook a few curious men who let their eyes linger on the ark too long or had a sneak peak inside. To strike them dead seems so negative on what should be a positive day.

We want to box God into our rules. We want to domesticate Him so we've got Him under control. We want God to conform to our standards – and to accept us on our terms. We're slow to treat Him truly as God.

The law was quite clear on the treatment of the ark. The law was quite clear on the consequences of failing to treat the ark properly. God told them what to do – and they failed to take God's instructions seriously. They weren't serious about acknowledging God as God. They

wanted a genie, not a God.

God's concerned that we understand His holiness – His uniqueness, His separateness, His complete difference from His creation. God's concerned that we understand that He alone is the Creator and we're His creatures. While it's quite true we're made in His image and while it's quite true we can relate to Him, He remains and always will remain on a separate plane from us. We never get to His level. We never will get to His level. He will always be far superior to us. It's important we remember that – not for His sake, but for our sake. We must remember that He is God and there's no other like Him.

The appropriate response is:

- The humility of the creature before its Creator.
- The respect of the creature for its Creator.
- The submission of the creature to its Creator.

That means we pay attention to God's words – even if we don't understand the rationale behind them. If God says not to look on the ark, that should be sufficient – simply because that's what God says and I'm His creature.

Is this sort of thing still a problem for Christians today? Do God's people today still take God lightly? From time to time, you hear various stories.

- You hear of the young person who seems to be on fire for the Lord and who's a leader in his youth group and goes off to beach missions and who's sleeping with his girlfriend.
- You hear of the church board member who fervently teaches an adult Sunday School class each week who's physically abusing his wife and has been for

years.

- You hear of the church's "worship leader" whose face radiates her love for God each Sunday morning who's having an affair with the church organist.

When such people are challenged about their behaviour, they often don't think it's a problem. It seems our culture has more influence over our thinking and our moral standards than God's word. Our morality's become as fluid as the people around us.

But you don't have to rely simply on the stories – all you have to do is look at your own heart.

- What are those bits of the Bible you avoid because you don't really want to submit that part of your life to God?
- What are those sins you hang onto because you don't really want to give them up and, besides, they're just a part of everyday life?
- When are those times when you think God should be satisfied with you offering Him a few songs and a few coins and He really shouldn't bother about all those legalistic bits dealing with how you behave?

If God is God, shouldn't He call the shots? If God is my God, shouldn't I be trying to let Him call the shots in my life?