

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

Title: A Holy God

Sermon Summary: Drawing from 1 Samuel 5 and 6, this sermon examines what happened when the Philistines captured the ark of the Lord and placed it in the temple of their false god Dagon. Through three movements, the sermon establishes that God will not share His glory with idols, will not be manipulated or coerced by men, and reigns as the supreme ruler over all creation. The Philistines discovered through painful judgment that the God of Israel is not a religious object to be displayed alongside pagan gods, nor a force to be controlled or shuffled away. When God miraculously returned the ark to Israel through two unbroken milk cows, and then struck down fifty thousand in Israel for treating the ark casually, both nations were forced to ask the defining question of the passage: "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" The sermon calls believers to examine whether they have placed idols alongside God in their lives, whether they have attempted to use religious activity to manipulate God, and whether they are wholly surrendered to Him rather than treating Him casually.

Key Points:

- God will not share His glory with any idol, whether a physical statue or anything in a believer's life that competes with God for worship, affection, attention, and obedience
- God will not be manipulated or coerced by men, whether through pagan ritual, religious activity used as leverage, praying for God to bless self-directed plans, or attempting to use Scripture to justify personal desires
- God is the supreme ruler over all creation and exercises His will without needing kings, priests, armies, or human strategy
- Treating God casually is dangerous; both the Philistines and the men of Bethshemesh suffered severe consequences for failing to honor His holiness
- The proper response to God's holiness is full surrender, repentance, and wholehearted devotion rather than partial commitment or religious performance
- God specializes in using circumstances where the odds are stacked against Him to demonstrate His glory, as illustrated by the milk cows making a straight path to Israel

Scripture Reference:

- 1 Samuel 5 and 6 (primary passage)
- Exodus 20:1-5 (the first two of the Ten Commandments, God as a jealous God)
- 1 Kings 18:25-29 (Elijah and the prophets of Baal)
- Acts 12:1-3, 21-24 (Herod struck down for accepting glory belonging to God)

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

- Daniel 4:35 (Nebuchadnezzar's declaration of God's sovereign dominion)
- Psalm 115:3 (God does whatever He pleases)
- Isaiah 6:3 (the seraphim declaring the holiness of God)
- Romans 6 (shall we continue in sin that grace may abound)
- 1 John 1:9 (God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse)
- Romans 10:9-13 (confessing Christ and calling upon the Lord for salvation)

Stories:

- The ark of the Lord placed in the temple of Dagon, whose idol fell face down before the ark two consecutive days, losing its head and hands on the second day, leading the Philistines to begin a practice of not stepping on the threshold of Dagon's temple
- The ark moved from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron as the Philistines attempted to escape God's judgment, with each city suffering emerods and destruction
- Two milk cows, separated from their calves and never before yoked, pulling the ark on a new cart in a straight line to Bethshemesh without turning aside, with the lords of the Philistines following behind as witnesses
- The men of Bethshemesh struck down for looking into the ark upon its return, resulting in a great slaughter and prompting the question of who can stand before a holy God
- Elijah mocking the prophets of Baal as they cried out all day with no response, contrasted with God's immediate answer by fire
- Herod accepting the crowd's declaration that his voice was the voice of a god, and being immediately struck down and eaten by worms
- Nebuchadnezzar humbled by God until he lifted his eyes to heaven and declared God's everlasting dominion
- Nadab and Abihu consumed by fire for offering strange fire before the Lord
- Uzzah struck dead for reaching out to steady the ark when it nearly fell during transport to Jerusalem
- Isaiah's vision of the throne of God in Isaiah 6, causing him to cry out in awareness of his own unworthiness
- The Exodus from Egypt, referenced by the Philistine priests themselves as historical evidence of what happens when men resist the God of Israel

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

Discipleship Questions

The Philistines immediately connected their suffering to the presence of the ark, yet they spent seven months shuffling it between cities rather than surrendering to God -- in what ways do we recognize God's hand in our circumstances but still delay full obedience?

The sermon describes Israel treating the ark like a lucky charm or religious superstition rather than as a representation of the living God -- how might modern believers fall into a similar pattern of treating spiritual practices as formulas for getting what they want rather than as genuine worship?

God allowed the ark to be captured when Israel tried to use it manipulatively, yet He powerfully defended its honor among the Philistines -- what does this tell us about the difference between God protecting His own glory and God endorsing our self-serving religious strategies?

The first commandment warns against having other gods, and the sermon argues that an idol does not have to be a physical statue -- what things in your life most compete with God for your worship, affection, and dependence, and how do you recognize them?

Dagon fell face down before the ark twice, with increasingly severe consequences the second time, suggesting God gave a clear warning before bringing greater judgment -- how do you discern when difficulties in your life might be God's warning to redirect your path?

The priests devised a test that stacked every natural odd against the cows returning the ark to Israel, yet the cows went straight there without turning aside -- how does this account challenge the way you assess what is possible when God is involved in a situation?

The men of Bethshemesh rejoiced at the ark's return but were then struck down for looking into it, prompting the question 'Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?' -- in what ways does the modern church risk treating God's holiness too casually, and what are the consequences of doing so?

Nebuchadnezzar declared in Daniel 4 that God does according to His will among the inhabitants of the earth and none can stay His hand -- how should this truth reshape the way you pray and make plans, particularly when you are tempted to ask God to bless decisions you have already made?

The sermon draws a parallel between Dagon's decapitation and the biblical imagery of God ultimately crushing the enemy's head, from Genesis 3 through to David and Goliath -- how does seeing these connected threads throughout Scripture strengthen your confidence in God's sovereign plan over history and over your own life?

The sermon closes with the call to surrender fully to Jesus Christ rather than trying harder through religious effort, stating that God wants you rather than your idols or your religion -- what would it look like practically for you to move from partial devotion to being wholly devoted to the Lord?

Small Group Guide

"A Holy God" | 1 Samuel 5-6

How to Use This Guide

Read through 1 Samuel 5 and 6 before your group meets. Work through the questions at a pace that fits your group, and do not feel pressured to cover every section in one sitting. The goal is honest conversation and genuine reflection, not simply completing a list.

Opening Discussion

Begin your time together with one or two of these questions to help the group warm up and engage with the passage.

- What is something from this passage that surprised you, confused you, or stood out to you when you first read it?
 - Before this sermon, how would you have described God's holiness in your own words? Has your understanding shifted at all?
-

Part One: God Will Not Share His Glory

1 Samuel 5:1-5 | Exodus 20:1-6

The Philistines brought the ark of God into the house of Dagon, placing God's ark beside their idol. By the next morning, Dagon was face down before the ark. By the following morning, Dagon's head and hands were severed.

Discussion Questions

1. The sermon pointed out that the Philistines did not destroy the ark. Instead, they placed it beside their own idol. What does that tell us about how they viewed God? What does it tell us about human nature in general?
2. God's first commandment is that His people shall have no other gods before Him, and He describes Himself as a jealous God. Why do you think God uses the word "jealous" to describe Himself? What does that reveal about His relationship with His people?
3. The sermon said that an idol does not have to be a statue, and that Dagon represents anything that competes with God for your worship, affection, attention, and obedience.

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

With that definition in mind, what are some common idols people place beside God today, even without realizing it?

4. God gave the Philistines a clear warning on the first morning when Dagon fell. They reset the idol and waited. On the second morning, the warning was more severe. Have you ever experienced a moment in your life where you recognized God was trying to get your attention, and you initially ignored it? What happened?
-

Part Two: God Will Not Be Manipulated

1 Samuel 5:6-12 | Daniel 4:35

Rather than repent, the Philistines tried to shuffle the ark from city to city, hoping the problem would simply go away. Each city they sent it to experienced the same heavy hand of God.

Discussion Questions

1. The sermon described the Philistines' strategy as playing the shell game, moving the problem around rather than dealing with it. In your own life, what does it look like when someone tries to avoid dealing with God rather than surrendering to Him?
 2. The sermon listed several ways believers can unintentionally try to manipulate God, including praying for God to bless plans we have already decided on, using Scripture to justify what we already want, and using religious activity as leverage. Which of these is most tempting for you personally, and why?
 3. Nebuchadnezzar declared in Daniel 4:35 that God does according to His will and none can stop His hand. How does truly believing this change the way you approach prayer, decision-making, and hardship?
 4. The sermon said that God is not a vending machine where you put in prayer, church attendance, money, and good deeds and expect to receive what you want. What is the difference between faithfully obeying God and using obedience as a tool to get what you want from Him?
-

Part Three: God Is the Supreme Ruler Over All

1 Samuel 6:1-20

After seven months, the Philistines devised a test. They placed the ark on a new cart pulled by two milk cows that had never been yoked and whose calves were taken away, stacking every natural odd against the cart reaching Israel. The cows walked a straight line directly to the nearest Israelite city and stopped.

Discussion Questions

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

1. The Philistine priests deliberately stacked the odds against the cows going to Israel. They wanted to make it as unlikely as possible so that if it happened, they could not deny it was God. Despite this, the cows went straight to Beshemesh without turning to the right or left. What does this tell you about God's sovereignty over circumstances that seem impossible?
 2. The sermon said, "Don't measure what God can do by the odds you see. Measure the odds by the God you know." Is there a situation in your life right now where you are measuring God by the odds rather than measuring the odds by God? What would it look like to shift that perspective?
 3. When the ark arrived in Beshemesh, the Israelites rejoiced. But 50,070 people were struck down because they looked inside the ark. The people responded by asking, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" Why is this the right question? How does that question apply to your life today?
 4. The sermon observed that God did not need a king, a priest, a prophet, or an army to return the ark. He used two milk cows. What does that say about how God chooses to work, and what does it say about the posture we should have when we offer ourselves to be used by Him?
-

Key Takeaways

Review these summary points together and discuss which one resonated most with your group.

- God is a jealous God who will not share Himself with idols, whether those idols are statues or the more subtle things that compete for our worship and devotion in everyday life.
 - God will not be manipulated or coerced. He is not a means to our ends. He is the Lord of all creation, and He desires our full surrender, not our religious strategies.
 - God is sovereign over all of creation. He accomplishes His purposes without our help, and yet He chooses to use people who are wholly devoted to Him.
 - Holiness is not a peripheral concern. God takes it seriously, and His people are called to take it seriously as well. We cannot approach Him casually.
 - The right response to God's holiness is not to try harder through religious effort, but to surrender fully to Jesus Christ and allow Him to have His way in every area of life.
-

Practical Applications

Choose one or two of these to discuss as a group, or encourage members to choose one to apply personally before your next meeting.

Examine your idols. Take time this week in prayer and ask God honestly: What competes with You for my worship, attention, and obedience? Write down what comes to mind and bring it before God in confession and surrender.

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

Audit your prayers. Look back at how you have been praying recently. Are you primarily asking God to bless your plans, or are you genuinely asking Him what His will is? Spend time this week praying with open hands, asking God to direct your steps rather than confirm your own.

Identify where you are shuffling the problem. Is there something God has clearly spoken to you about that you have been avoiding or moving around rather than dealing with? Identify it, bring it before God, and take one concrete step toward obedience this week.

Measure the odds by the God you know. If there is a situation in your life that feels impossible or overwhelming, write it down and then write out what you know to be true about God's character and power. Pray over that list and ask God to help you trust Him rather than the circumstances.

Pursue holiness in a specific area. The sermon closed with the call to be holy because God is holy. Identify one specific area of your life where you know you are not living as set apart for God. Share it with a trusted person in your group and ask them to pray for you and follow up with you.

Closing Prayer

Close your group time by praying together. Ask God to reveal any idols that have taken His place, to guard your hearts against treating Him casually, and to give each person in your group the grace to surrender fully to Him. Thank Him that, though He is supremely holy, He has made a way through Jesus Christ for sinners to stand before Him.

For Further Study

- Exodus 20:1-6 -- The first and second commandments
- 1 Kings 18:20-40 -- Elijah and the prophets of Baal
- Daniel 4:28-37 -- Nebuchadnezzar's humbling and restoration
- Isaiah 6:1-8 -- Isaiah's vision of God's holiness
- Leviticus 10:1-3 -- Nadab and Abihu
- Romans 6:1-4 -- Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?
- 1 John 1:9 -- Confession and cleansing from sin

5-Day Bible Reading and Devotional Guide

Based on the Sermon: "A Holy God" from 1 Samuel 5-6

Day 1: God Will Not Share His Glory

Reading: Exodus 20:1-6; Isaiah 42:8

Devotional: The Philistines placed the ark of God beside their idol Dagon, assuming the God of Israel could simply coexist with their false worship. By morning, Dagon lay face down before the ark. God made His position unmistakably clear. He shares His glory with no one. This same truth applies to every believer today. Anything that competes with God for your affection, attention, and obedience is an idol, whether it is comfort, reputation, money, or ambition. The first commandment is not merely ancient instruction. It is a living call to examine what truly holds the throne of your heart.

Personal Reflection: What has been occupying the place in your life that belongs to God alone? Name it honestly before Him today.

Practical Application: Identify one area of your life where you have allowed something other than God to hold primary influence. Surrender it to Him specifically in prayer today.

Day 2: God Will Not Be Manipulated

Reading: Numbers 22:12-20; Jonah 1:1-17; Romans 6:1-2

Devotional: The Philistines did not repent when God brought judgment. Instead, they shuffled the ark from city to city, hoping the problem would simply relocate or disappear. But God was their problem, and no amount of maneuvering could change that. People have always attempted to manage God rather than surrender to Him, praying for His blessing on self-made plans, using Scripture to justify personal desires, or treating religious activity as leverage. God is not a vending machine. He is not moved by strategy or religious performance. He is moved by a surrendered heart. Running from God never leads anywhere except back to the same conviction you were fleeing.

Personal Reflection: Are there areas of your life where you have been shuffling a problem rather than genuinely bringing it before God in surrender?

Practical Application: Rather than asking God to bless your current plans today, spend time in prayer asking Him to reveal His will. Come open-handed and listen.

Day 3: The Holiness of God Demands a Response

Reading: Leviticus 10:1-3; Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Peter 1:14-16

Devotional: When the men of Bethshemesh looked carelessly into the ark of the Lord, the judgment that followed was severe and immediate. Their response was exactly right: "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" That question is not one of despair but of awakening. Isaiah asked something similar when he saw the Lord high and lifted up and immediately recognized his own unworthiness. Holiness is not a distant theological idea. It is the very nature of the God who dwells within every believer. Because He is holy, we are called to be holy. Casual Christianity is not a safe place to remain.

Personal Reflection: Do you approach God with reverence, or has familiarity caused you to treat Him casually in your daily life?

Practical Application: Before your next time of prayer, take two full minutes of silence to reflect on who God is before you say a single word. Let reverence lead you in.

Day 4: God Is the Supreme Ruler Over All Creation

Reading: Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 115:3; Ephesians 3:20

Devotional: God sent the ark back to Israel using two milk cows that had never been yoked, whose calves had been taken from them, pulling a cart they had never pulled, through unfamiliar territory, without a driver, directly to the border of Israel. Every condition was stacked against it. God did not need a king, a priest, an army, or a strategy. He used two cows. Nebuchadnezzar, after being greatly humbled, declared that God does according to His will among the inhabitants of the earth and none can stay His hand. When the odds in your life appear impossible, do not measure what God can do by the odds you see. Measure the odds by the God you know.

Personal Reflection: What situation in your life right now feels impossible? Have you genuinely placed it under the authority of the God who rules all creation?

Practical Application: Write down the circumstance that feels most overwhelming to you. Beneath it, write out Daniel 4:35 in your own words as a declaration of faith over that situation.

Day 5: Surrender to the Holy One

Reading: 1 John 1:9; Romans 10:9-13; Hebrews 12:28-29

1 Samuel – Week 6 – A Holy God – Bible Study Helps

Devotional: The entire account of 1 Samuel 5 and 6 builds toward one question: who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? The answer is not found in religious effort, golden offerings, or moral improvement. The Philistines tried to appease God with golden images of their own suffering, and it was foolishness. Our righteousness apart from Christ is no different. The only way to stand before a holy God is through the blood of Jesus Christ, who lived the sinless life we could not live and died the death our sin deserved. For the believer who has drifted, the call today is not to try harder. It is to confess, repent, and return. He is faithful and just to forgive.

Personal Reflection: Are you wholly devoted to the Lord, or have you been offering Him only a portion of your life while holding the rest for yourself?

Practical Application: Spend time today in honest confession. Name specifically what you have been withholding from God. Receive His forgiveness through Christ and make a deliberate choice to surrender that area to His lordship today.