**THE LORD IS THE HOLY GOD**

1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1

Key Verse: 6:20a

“And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, ‘Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?’”

Today’s passage will reveal to us the holiness of God. In Samuel 3:21 it reads, “The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, **and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.**” Though God is physically invisible and seem to have no voice, he reveals himself through his word. He accomplished His work through His word. We learned how God spoke against the sin of Eli’s sons, yet Eli did not take God’s warning and rebuke seriously. God then called Samuel who confirmed God’s warning to Eli and His prophetic destruction of Eli’s family line. We shall see the final destruction of Eli’s generation due to not honoring the word of God. We shall be reminded about the holiness of God. The words of God may not be taken seriously because God is invisible and voiceless. But God is spirit and he is doing his work according to his sovereign will and purpose revealed in His word. We shall be reminded today about his power and holiness. Part I is about God’s glory departing from Israel, and Part II, the revelation of the Holiness of the Lord our God. May we learn who God is and honor God as God.

**Part I: God’s glory departs (4:1b-22)**

The passage today begins with a war between the Israelites and the Philistines [4:1b]. Not much is known about the origin of the Philistines. According to Genesis, they were the Hamites (Gen 10:14). They lived in the Southern Coastal area of Canaan, ruling some five city states, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Gaza. They were in possession of superior weapons of iron. In verse 2 we learn that, in the first round of the battle, the Philistines killed about 4,000 soldiers of Israel. Look at verse 3a, “When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?” The elders of Israel asked the right question, “why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?” They should have seriously thought about their broken relationship with God and disobedience to God’s words.

Remember how the situation was in Israel in the last chapter of the Judges, Judges 21:25 reads, “In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as he saw fit.” Even the temple in Shiloh had priests who did as they wanted, they slept with women at the gate and they chose the best portions of the meat that was meant for sacrifices before God. They completely dishonored God and Eli the chief priest was ruled by Humanism, instead of honoring God by rebuking his sons, he chose to honor his sons. This defeat from the Philistines, should have been a wake up call to Israel, to repent of their sinful lifestyle and turn their hearts back to God. They should have seriously asked for counsel of God and received God’s answer. However, they did not. Instead, they chose a wrong conclusion on how they could have God’s presence to win the war. They told themselves, look at verse 3b, “Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.” They perhaps remembered the old days when Israel crossed the Jordan river and conquered the city of Jericho by following the ark of God. They seem to have regarded the ark as some sort of good luck charm. They thought they could tame God’s presence with the ark. To them, it did not matter whether their relationship with God was broken, it did not mater their sinful lives, somehow, they believed God is where the ark is, no need for repentance, God will be with us and defend us because of the ark.

However, the ark of God was not a good luck charm. It was a physical symbol of God’s presence. It was simply a visible reminder of God’s special relationship with his people. Never to be a magical object of power. The ark was about 122 cm long by 61 cm high and 61 cm wide. It was made of wood and overlaid with pure gold. It contained the ten commandments, along with Aaron’s rod and manna. It was the most sacred piece of furniture. Later it was kept in the holy of holies in the temple. It was so holy that it was kept behind the veil and only the high priest was allowed to look upon it once each year when he offered the sacrifice for the atonement for the sins of Israel (Lev 16). This means no sinner could stand before God, and before the ark everyone should tremble and worship God.

However, the Israelites thought that if the ark was with them physically, God would bless them in spite of their sins. It is like believing that no matter how godless and sinful our lifestyles are, God will bless us. As long as we pray, attend church or are busy with church activities, or some good work, God should bless us. This is a wrong way to interact with God as we shall see what happened when Hophini and Phinehas brought the ark to them. Look at verse 5-10, when the ark arrived, there was a great shout, they believed that this time around they will defeat the Philistines. At the same time when the Philistines learned the ark was in the camp of the Israelites, they became greatly terrified. They heard the God of Israel struck the mighty Egyptians with all kinds of plagues. However, the Philistines were determined to fight against the Israelites. They fought and killed 30,000 soldiers of Israel along with Hophini and Phinehas. Moreover, the ark of God was captured.

Why did God allow Israel, His chosen people defeat? That was the question the elders asked earlier on. Israel as a chosen nation had God given privileges to serve, worship God and live in God’s blessings. But, they abandoned God and lived a godless life. Even when they experienced defeat, they thought the problem was not with them, but with God, that He was not with them. They thought they were ok with God, because they were a chosen people. And so they remained unrepentant and disregarded the holiness of God. These are the signs of habitual Christianity. God wants his people to have a love covenant relationship with Him. When we abandon God, his heart is broken. God awaits us to repent of our sins and return our hearts back to Him. Israel’s defeat was actually a blessing so that they could re-evaluate the priorities of their heart desires before God and possibly repent. Failing to always check if we are in the faith by the way we live in comparison to the Bible teachings, can result in us becoming spiritually numb or insensitive when God tries to discipline us. Then we blame others or God, not ourselves. But God cannot be manipulated or fooled by anyone. God is not like a mop or a dish rag that we call upon just to clean our mess and then forget about Him again. God is to be honored and worshiped by everyone. He must take first place in our hearts because God is holy. We must quickly repent, turn our hearts to God and restore our love relationship with him.

In verses 11-22, we learn of the death of Eli and his daughter in law. When Eli in Shiloh heard the shocking news about the death of his sons, especially the news about the capture of the ark, he fell backward from his chair and died [11-18]. His daughter in law, the wife of Phinehas also died after delivering her baby. Before she passed on, she named her baby, Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel.”[19-21] Ichabod, means “no glory.” She said, the glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured [22]. Though in reality, the Israelites abandoned God and kicked away His glory. Hophini and Phinehas had no fear of God and blasphemed against God with their wicked deeds. Eli honored his wicked sons more than God. In this way since they were leaders, the whole nation dishonored God and cast out God’s glory. God’s glory shines when we stop sinning and come to God. God’s glory departs when we stop seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness first, when we choose to live a life of sin. May we restore our hearts before God and ask God for his forgiveness of our sins. May God purify our hearts so that we can see God’s shining glory in our heart, in our ministry, across all campuses and in South Africa.

**Part II: The Lord is a Holy God (5:1-7:1)**

Look at verse 5:1, “After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.” Ashdod is one of the Philistine cities. They took the ark to Dagon’s temple and set it by Dagon [2]. Look at verse 3, “When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place.” But again the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord. However, this time his head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold [4]. What kind of a god has to be set upright and carried off for repairs? What kind of a god gets broken? The idol god of Dagon could not even stand in the presence of God. God did not tolerate any idol to stand within Him. God showed that he is the only true God and there is none other than Him.

Look at verse 6, “The Lord’s hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors.” God’s judgement was upon the Philistines. They began to realize that it was because of the ark of God. So they called on a meeting and decided to move the ark of God to Gath [7-8]. Look at verse 9, “But after they had moved it, the Lord’s hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors.” They then sent the ark of God to Ekron [10]. However the people of Ekron cried out, having realized God’s hand was heavy on all the places the ark of God was placed. Death had filled the city with panic. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven. They again called on a meeting to have the ark of God returned to Israel, they finally made a decision to send back the ark with guilt offering which was five gold tumors and five gold rats [5:11-6:6].

However, they were still not certain whether it was the Lord who had brought devastation in their cities. Look at Chapter 6:7-9, “Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. 8 Take the ark of the Lord and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, 9 but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us but that it happened to us by chance.” In this way the Philistines will know without a doubt that it was God’s hand that was upon them. Let us look at what happened when they did this in verse 12, “Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; **they did not turn to the right or to the left**. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.” The two cows did not go off to eat some grass or make a U turn to come back to their calves. Without any human forcing or guiding the two cows, they went straight up to the destination. Probably these cows cried many tears in order to deny their instinct and abandon their young. They did not become agitated by pulling the cart for the first time together with the unknown fellow cow. Against all odds, they headed straight for the road to the territory of Israel. The Philistines neither knew God nor obeyed the true living God. But these cows did and they obeyed God absolutely. Through the cows the Philistines knew that it was the hand of God that was heavy upon them. Through these cows God revealed that he was the true living God, although he was invisible.

The people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley when they saw the cows with the ark of God. They rejoiced and the Levites took the ark and offered the cows as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord. However, some people became curious and looked inside the ark. The Lord struck 70 of them to death because they had looked inside the ark. Let us read verse 20 for what they realized, they said, **“who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?”** They came to fear God in their hearts and sent the ark to Kiriath-Jearim. God did not make great earthquakes, or speak with thunderous voice. Rather He was silent. Yet through Israel defeat and through plagues among the Philitines God spoke loudly who He was. God is a holy God. He could not even be in a company of idols, the idol Dagon lost his head and arms. The people of Beth Shemesh confessed, **“Who can stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God?”** Hananah also prayed in Chp 2:2, “There is no one holy like the Lord…” Because God is holy he could not be with what is impure and sinful. He could not be with the ungodly Israelites and with the idolatrous Philistines and with the disrespectable people of Beth Shemesh. It did not matter whether they were God’s chosen people, God hates sin and cannot be associated with sin. Even His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, when our sin was imputed upon Jesus for our salvation, Jesus cried out, “Father why have you forsaken me”, God forsook Jesus. Because God is holy, he hates sin. God commands us to be holy. In 1 Peter 1:16, reads, “Be holy, because I am holy.” As God’s people we must seek God’s holiness and pray the Holy Spirit Changes us so that we my leave our filthy sins and become the holy people of God.

God’s holiness also means that, God is self sufficient. God single handedly returned the ark to its proper place. Eli fell on his back because the ark was taken, however God is self sufficient and mighty. God single handedly orchestrated all the events and did everything by Himself. He did not use any Israelite to return the ark. God created all things by His word, he is self sufficient and almighty. God does not need any human help. He can turn stones to be His servants [Luk 19:40, Matt 3:9]. Last week we learned about God’s calling of Samuel to serve in His work. It is not because God needs us, it is because God wants us to be holy and enjoy His glory. It is actually for our own good. He wants His people to know Him and participate in His heart and vision. This is really the true blessing any person can ever receive, even cows. The holiness of God calls for this.

In conclusion, today’s passage reminds us once again, that God is a Holy God. Although he is merciful and loving, we should never forget that he is actually holy and commands us to also be holy. The people in Beth Shemesh confessed, **“Who can stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God?”** One of the control systems Professor while we were having a chat, said, “we as humans are a broken complex system”. And this is because, we are people with many sins, just our daily thoughts are filled with sin. Which then begs the question, how then can we stand in the presence of God? How can we come before God in prayer? It is through Jesus Christ our Lord and savior, we come before God in the name of Jesus His Son. He experienced the full might of God’s wrath because of our sin. May the Holiness of God not make us despair and fall back, but may it bring us all the more to Jesus our true hope of salvation before God. God takes sin seriously as we have seen, may we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross and repent of our sin.