

**“Heart Idolatry”**  
**1 Samuel 5:1-12**  
**February 28, 2010**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

As we continue our series on the gospel-centered life, we are devoting two sermons to review the requirements placed upon us in order to center our lives on the gospel. Repentance and faith are the two steps God requires. Mark summarizes Jesus’ ministry of gospel proclamation like this. **“Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’** (1:15). It is more accurate to think of repentance and faith as two parts of the one act of coming to God, rather than two unrelated steps. They are two sides of the same coin. We draw near to God through repentance and faith. This is the case not just for unbelievers coming to God for the first time, but also for Christians who want to grow in their relationship with God.

We considered repentance in our last sermon, and we will be looking at faith in this sermon. The whole idea of faith has been corrupted in our day to mean something like positive thinking. To believe is to envision a desirable outcome. It would be hard to imagine something further from the biblical view of faith than this. The idea of positive thinking is actually closer to the biblical notion of unbelief than to faith. Biblical faith is to trust in God rather than yourself, and positive thinking is trusting more in yourself than God. To believe in the Bible is to place your trust in the proper object, in the God who reveals himself in the Bible. The opposite of faith is not no faith, but misplaced faith. We all trust something or someone. True faith is such because its object is the true God. Unbelief is faith in a false god, or an idol. That’s why this week’s lesson on faith is entitled “Heart Idolatry.” We fall into unbelief when we begin placing our trust in counterfeit gods. We return to God through repenting of our trust in these false gods and trusting instead in the true God.

This category of idolatry appears throughout the Bible. It is the very first of the Ten Commandments. **“You shall have no other gods besides me”** (Ex. 20:3). Martin Luther had a great insight when he saw that every sin was in some way a violation of this first commandment against idolatry. Luther said, “As [the First] Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed...so also its work, that is, faith or confidence in God’s favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all other [works] must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured.” The story of the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel 4-6 is very helpful in understanding these matters of idolatry and faith.

## I. The Rise and Fall of Israel's Idol

The central character in 1 Samuel 4-6 is the ark of the covenant. It is given its full name in 4:4 – **“the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim.”** The ark was a wooden box covered in gold that resided inside the Holy of Holies in Israel's tabernacle. It was the place where God had chosen to be present with Israel. It comes into our story as the Israelites were at war with the neighboring Philistine nation.

The Philistines were more than a thorn in the side of Israel. Their technology for warfare was superior to that of Israel, and they had often dominated Israel on the battlefield. That had led to Israel's impoverishment, and often to their fleeing to the hills to escape Philistine cruelty. Chapter 4 opens with a battle between Israel and the mighty Philistines, a battle which Israel loses, resulting in the loss of 4000 soldiers. Someone gets the idea to bring the ark to lead them into battle for a second round of fighting. It was the common belief in this day that battles between human armies was the playing out of the battles of their gods. These battles showed whose god was the most powerful. So Israel thinks that if their God is brought closer to the conflict, he will serve them more ably in bringing about the defeat of their enemies. As the ark comes into the camp, a great shout from the Israelite soldiers shakes the earth. The Philistines hear it, and wonder what is going on. When they discover that the ark of the covenant is there, they become terrified. The God of Israel is the one who brought low the mighty nation of Egypt so long ago.

It is at this point that the story takes a serious departure from our expectations. We expect to read next that Israel went forth now to do battle against the Philistines, and God brought a decisive victory against their enemies. The exact opposite happens, as Israel experiences a decisive defeat, losing thirty thousand soldiers. More tragically, the ark of God is captured and placed in the temple of Dagon, the chief god of the Philistines. The symbolism is unmistakable—Israel's God, Jehovah, is now to be in submission to Dagon, even as Jehovah's people are to be submissive to Dagon's people, the Philistines.

Why this unexpected reversal? The author wants to communicate that Israel has acted wickedly. They have been guilty of a type of idolatry. Instead of worshiping the true God, they have substituted a false god who performs at their bidding. They were trusting in the ark of God, instead of trusting in the God of the ark. We learn from this incident one of the chief features of all idolatry—the desire to control God. Israel wanted a God who would be under their control, and perform for them upon demand. They were viewing him like people view a lucky charm.

Perhaps you caught the story in the news this week about the killer whale at SeaWorld in Florida who unexpectedly grabbed one of its trainers off a

poolside platform and killed her in front of the entire audience. We would like to think that these animals can be tamed through the combination of the right techniques employed over a long period of time. Events such as this, though, remind us that there are limits to our control. Israel tried here to tame God, but he would not allow them to do so because it would mean that he is no longer God.

The attraction of idolatry is that it gives us a manageable god who can be controlled. This is the idol of those who know something of the true God, as did Israel, but corrupt that knowledge in order to get a God who will serve them. For example, we see the baseball player who crosses himself before each pitch, hoping by doing so to gain an advantage for his hitting. Or there is the person who thinks that if he can learn to pray in the right way, that God will automatically heal him of all physical maladies. This is the effort to tame God so that he will do our bidding. But this god who we think will do our bidding for us is a counterfeit god. The true God rules over all, and it is our duty to submit to him and do his bidding.

## **II. The Rise and Fall of the Philistine's Idol**

Dagon was the chief god of the Philistines, and chapter 5 opens with what appears to be his crowning achievement—the conquest of Jehovah, the God of Israel. The ark of the covenant is now inside the temple of Dagon. The significance of this in the minds of the Philistines is two-fold. First, Jehovah is in the place of submission. Second, if Jehovah had any power left, that power was now to be put to use for Dagon's purposes. But as so often happens, the downfall begins at the moment when things seem to be as good as they can be. Early one morning, the priests of Dagon find that their god had fallen face downward in front of the ark of the covenant. How embarrassing for them! Dagon is in the position of worship before Jehovah. So they quickly pick him up and restore him to his position of prominence.

One of the features of our idols is that they must constantly be propped up by those who look to them. Money is one of the idols of our culture. Its innate weakness has been evident to us all over the past 18 months. Many are trying frantically to prop it up and see it restored to its former glory. They may succeed for a time, but any success achieved will only be temporary because there is no inherent glory to it. Material prosperity is a gift from the only true God. To make money ultimate is to do what the priests of Dagon were attempting here—to put the true God in subjection to a false god. That effort will fail. This suggests a question I find helpful. Are you willing to let money fail, or do you spend yourself in the fruitless effort of trying to prop it up all the time? Or to word it differently, are you willing to be poor? I'm not suggesting that God would have us seek poverty, but if you are not ready to be poor, you're also not ready to be materially prosperous. You will devote yourself to

the service of this god and spend your life in the fruitless effort of propping up your god.

The fruitlessness of propping up our idols is seen in what happens next. After restoring Dagon to his place of prominence, they enter the temple the very next day and find things even worse. Not only has Dagon fallen again, but this time he has lost both his hands and his head. The imagery is unmistakably clear. The head speaks of the ability to think and plan, and the hands of the ability to carry out one's plans. Dagon has been decisively dethroned. But his fall is not yet complete. Verse 6 says, **"The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors."** Ashdod is the city where Dagon's temple was located. Dagon had lost his hands, but the hand of the Lord was heavy. The word for "heavy" is the same as the word for "glory". The Philistines thought that they could neutralize the Lord's power simply by removing him from Ashdod. So they took the ark to the Philistine city of Gath, but the results were the same. So they sent it to Ekron, another Philistine city. Instead of getting better, though, the plague only worsened. **"For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven"** (5:11-12). Dagon had failed completely and repeatedly.

Our idols are just like Dagon, failing completely and repeatedly. Though they are powerless to deliver us, we keep trying to find life in them, even though it never works. So the rich man is asked how much money is enough, and he offers the famous reply, "Just a little more." Instead of giving up on his idol when it doesn't deliver, he thinks he just needs more. Like the Philistines, who kept trying the same thing by moving the ark to different cities but always with the same result, we keep looking to our idols and they keep failing us. One of the most common idols of our day is the idol of individual self-fulfillment. Those who worship this false god have as their highest value the desire to feel fulfilled in life. Marriages are begun and ended based on whether one's spouse brings sufficient happiness into one's life. Jobs and careers are taken up and set aside, not as a calling from God, but purely out of a desire for personal fulfillment. God himself is called to serve this idol, so that his job is seen as that of increasing personal fulfillment. The irony is that the person serving this idol never feels fulfilled, despite repeated attempts to do so.

What should the Philistines have done? They should have done the same thing we are called to do: forsake their idols and worship the true God. God was breaking out against them because he is a holy God and they are a sinful people. He could not be in their presence, through the ark of the covenant, and not break out in judgment against them. So how could it be that the ark didn't have the same effect in Israel? In part it did. When the ark is returned to Israel, seventy Jewish men of Beth-shemesh looked into the ark, and God struck them in judgment for their act. And when, years later David was anointed king

of Israel, one of his first acts was to move the ark to Jerusalem. As it was being transported, a Jewish man by the name of Uzzah was slain by God when he touched the ark in an attempt to steady it after the oxen had stumbled while pulling the cart on which it was riding. No one dared approach it after that until David realized how it was to be transported. So priests were appointed to carry it, and every six steps of their journey an ox and a fattened animal were sacrificed (2 Sam. 6:13). It was the blood of the sacrifice that made the difference then, and it is the blood of the sacrifice that makes the difference now as well. Jesus is the true sacrifice that allows God to be near us in power, breaking out in blessing rather than judgment. The Philistines sought to get rid of this God because they didn't know about the blood. All who don't know and trust the blood of Jesus will do the same.

### **III. The Fall and Rise of the True God**

At the beginning of chapter 5, the ark seems to have fallen completely, shut up in the dark temple of Dagon. God's people also seemed to have reached a new low point. Their army has been defeated completely, and their priest, Eli, has died, along with his two sons. But most tragically, the ark has been captured by their enemies. But just when things seem their darkest, the light begins to dawn. Jehovah asserts his power over all enemies, and everything changes. Israel's enemies begin the chapter with their greatest victory, and end in a deathly panic (5:11).

Does this story remind you of another? More than a thousand years later, God would again be locked away in a dark place, with his enemies seeming to have won their greatest victory of all. The Son of God was confined to a dark tomb. All of Jesus' friends were hiding in fear, after having failed him completely. But just when things seem to be at a low point, everything changes. Jesus is raised from the dead, and our greatest enemy, death itself, is conquered.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Let me close with two applications. First, God calls us to repent of our desires to control him, and instead to submit to him. Israel tried to control God when they brought the ark into battle. God refuses to be controlled by us. But he willingly allows himself to be controlled by his promise. He has promised to give us his favor through Jesus, and he will be bound by his own promise.

Second, let us repent of looking to our idols of money, self-fulfillment, success, comfort, approval, and appearance. They will fail us. But God will not. He is mighty to save.