

PROPHETS & JUDGES

IN THE PROMISED LAND

“If we would not have the Scriptures clouded to our understanding, so that the plainest truths shall not be comprehended, we must have the simplicity and faith of a little child, ready to learn, and beseeching the aid of the Holy Spirit.” {Steps to Christ, p. 110}

WEEK 12 - THE ARK CAPTURED

I. The Ark in Philistia

1. Why did God allow the ark to be captured by the Philistines?

2. Today, many rebel against God and still seem to have a good life—rejoicing in the “rewards” of unrighteousness. But what is reality?

3. Why was the acknowledgement of the power of God by the Philistines useless? How do sinners do the same thing today?

4. What blessings fall directly from God upon the righteous, the backsliding and half-hearted, and even the wicked?

5. What is God saying in these blessings?

6. Many try to justify a worldly life (seeking earthly houses, careers, fun, and wealth) by giving offerings to God. Why is this insufficient?

II. The Ark Restored

1. The people welcomed the ark, offered sacrifices, and worshipped God in celebration of its return. What would have brought His blessing to them?

2. What lesson can we learn from the irreverent curiosity of the men of Bethshemesh?

3. What does the Law of God do for us? What are we saying when we break it wilfully?

4. Read paragraph 14. What things about God's law impressed you?

The Ark in Philistia**January 12, 1882**

The loss of the ark was the heaviest blow which had fallen upon Israel since their establishment as a nation. Unfaithful to God as they had been, they still regarded this sacred symbol with awe and reverence, not unmingled with pride, as they recalled the glorious triumphs of the past. The tidings that it had been taken by the Philistines sent a thrill of terror through every heart, followed by the mute calmness of despair. Military power, could they command it, would not avail them now; and the strength of their men of war seemed paralyzed. {1.1}

But the Lord had not wholly cast aside his chosen, nor would he long suffer the exultation of the heathen. He had used the Philistines as the instrument to punish Israel, and he would now employ the ark to punish the Philistines. In time past the divine presence had attended it to be the strength, salvation, and glory of his obedient people. That invisible presence would still attend it to bring terror and destruction to the bold transgressors of God's holy law. {1.2}

The Philistines removed the ark in triumph to Ashdod, one of their five principal cities, and placed it in the house of their god, Dagon. They felt that now they had nothing to fear from Israel. In their superstitious ignorance they imagined that the mighty power which had hitherto attended the ark would be theirs, and this, united with the power of Dagon, would render them invincible. Attributing their success wholly to the favor of their god, they sought to show their gratitude by the most extravagant demonstrations of reverence and praise. {1.3}

Their rejoicing was of short duration. Upon entering the temple on the following day, they beheld a sight which filled them with consternation. Dagon their god had fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of Jehovah. Reverently the priests lifted the idol and restored him to his place. But the next morning they found him, strangely mutilated, again lying upon the earth before the ark. The upper part of this idol was like that of a man, and the lower part was in the likeness of a fish. Now every part that resembled the human form had been cut off, and only the uncouth body of the fish remained. {1.4}

Priests and people were horror-struck as they beheld their cherished deity thus mutilated and dishonored. They looked upon this mysterious event as an evil omen foreboding destruction to themselves and their idols before the God of the Hebrews. They now removed the ark from their temple, and placed it in a building by itself. {1.5}

The living God whom the Philistines had insulted and defied, had arisen to assert his authority and manifest his power. The divine judgments rested heavily upon Ashdod, and the inhabitants were smitten with a distressing and fatal disease. Remembering the plagues which were visited upon Egypt by the God of Israel, the people attributed their afflictions to the presence of the ark among them. Accordingly they assembled their leading men to consider what to do with the ark, declaring that it should no longer abide with them. It was decided to convey it to Gath. But the plague followed close upon its removal, and the men of that city sent it to Ekron. {1.6}

Here the people received it with terror, crying, "They have brought about the ark of the God of Israel to us, to slay us and our people." They sought to their

gods for protection, as the people of Gath and Ashdod had done. But the work of the destroyer went on, until, in their distress, “the cry of the city went up to heaven.” Fearing longer to retain the ark among the homes of men, the people next placed it in the open fields. There followed a plague of mice, which infested the land, destroying the products of the soil, both in the storehouse and in the field. Utter destruction, by disease or famine, now threatened the nation, and gloomy forebodings for the future added to the heavy burden of the present. {1.7}

In his dealings with the Philistines, God had shown how easily at his appointed time he can overthrow the stronghold of superstition, and sweep away the refuge of lies. The Lord often employs his bitterest enemies to punish the unfaithfulness of his professed people. The wicked may triumph for a time as they see Israel suffering chastisement; but let them be assured that the wrath of God will ere long fall with crushing weight upon themselves. However the sinner may now rejoice in the rewards of unrighteousness, the blind eyes will yet see, the hard heart one day fell, that a life of rebellion against God has been a terrible mistake. {1.8}

For seven long months the ark remained in Philistia. During all this time the Israelites made no attempt to recover the symbol of Jehovah’s presence. But the Philistines were now as anxious to free themselves from its power as they had been to obtain it. Instead of being a source of strength to them, it was a great burden and a heavy curse. Yet they knew not what course to pursue; for wherever it went, the judgments of God followed. The people called for the princes of the nation, with the priests and diviners, and eagerly inquired, “What shall we do to the ark of the Lord? Tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place.” They were advised to return it with a costly trespass-offering, that the wrath of God might be appeased. “Then,” said the priests, “ye shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you.” {1.9}

In India at the present day, when a pilgrim comes to a pagoda or temple to be cured of any disease, he invariably brings with him a figure of the member or part affected, in gold, silver, or copper, according to his means, and presents it as an offering to his god. A similar custom was in vogue among the Philistines; and in accordance with the prevailing superstition, the lords directed the people to make representations of the plagues by which they had been afflicted—“five golden emerods, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; for,” said they, “one plague was on you all, and on your lords.” {1.10}

These wise men acknowledged a mysterious power accompanying the ark; a power which they had no wisdom to meet. Yet they did not counsel the people to turn from their idolatry to serve the Lord. They still hated the God of Israel though compelled by overwhelming judgments to submit to his authority. Thus sinners may still be convinced by the judgments of God that it is in vain to contend against him. They may be compelled to submit to his power, while at heart they rebel against his control. Such submission may honor God, but it can have no power to save the transgressor. The heart must be yielded to God and subdued by divine grace before man’s repentance can be accepted. {1.11}

We are filled with wonder as we contemplate the long-suffering of God toward the wicked. The idolatrous Philistines and backsliding Israel had alike enjoyed the gifts of his providence. Rain and sunshine, objects of beauty, gifts for sustenance—the music of birds, the fragrance and loveliness of flowers, fruits without number, pleasant to the sight and good for food, golden harvests to clothe the plain and cattle upon the hills—all came to them from God. Ten thousand unnoticed mercies were silently falling in the pathway of ungrateful, rebellious men. Every blessing spoke to them of the Giver, but they were indifferent to his love. The forbearance of God was very great toward the children of men; but when they stubbornly persisted in their impenitence, he removed from them his protecting hand. They refused to listen to the voice of God in his created works, and in the warnings, counsels, and reproofs of his word, and he spoke to them through judgments. They rejected mercy, and the great I Am caused them to feel his power. {1.12}

How many there are today, who, like the Philistines, will present offerings to God, but refuse to give him their hearts, and cast away their idols. How many with idolatrous delight set their affections on sparkling vanities, that must ere long be consumed, turning away from the only treasure worth possessing. {1.13}

God still bears long with the wicked. He still surrounds them with temporal blessings. It is his hand that provides the bounties upon their tables. He gives them raiment and dwellings. There are rich fields for the harvest; there are flocks and herds, gold and silver, friends and health. Let God but remove his providential care, and what want, desolation, and inexpressible wretchedness would result! A blight would come upon the fields, every creature that ministers to our comfort would perish, and man himself would be swept from the earth as by a devouring plague. And yet men enjoy God's blessings, and, like the soulless beasts, return to him no grateful acknowledgment. They feel secure in their possessions, when a word, a breath, the slightest accident, might deprive them of their earthly all. No bounty or blessing can men claim as their own. All are committed to us as a trust, which, if not wisely improved, God will remove. {1.14}

The Philistines hoped by their offerings to appease the wrath of God, but they were ignorant of the one great sacrifice which alone can secure to sinful men the divine favor. Those gifts were powerless to atone for sin; for the offerers did not through them express faith in Christ. Not a ray of hope, no proffer of mercy, no token of God's favor, could have been ours, but for the cross of Calvary. Justice must have cut men off forever from temporal and spiritual blessings, separating us from God both here and hereafter, closing the door to all the joys of earth, and forever shutting out the brightness of Heaven. For us, Jesus trod the wine-press of God's wrath. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Let every son and daughter of Adam unite to exalt the name of Christ, as our King and our Redeemer. "For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." {1.15}

The Ark Restored**January 19, 1882**

When it was proposed among the Philistines to return the ark to its own land, there were some who stood ready to oppose the plan. Such an acknowledgment of the power of Israel's God would be deeply humiliating to the pride of Philistia; some way to evade it was eagerly sought. Many urged that none would dare risk their lives in removing that which had brought such destruction upon the land. Still others denied that their calamities had been caused by the ark, and protested against surrendering so famed a trophy. {2.1}

The "priests and diviners," whose counsel had been sought on this occasion, admonished the people not to imitate the stubbornness of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and thus bring upon themselves still greater afflictions. A plan in which all concurred, was now proposed, and immediately put in execution. The ark, with the golden trespass-offering, was placed upon a new cart, thus precluding all danger of defilement; to this cart, or car, were attached two kine, upon whose necks a yoke had never before been placed. Then, their calves having been tied up at home, the cows were left free to go wherever they pleased. If the ark should thus be returned to the Israelites by the way of Beth-shemesh, the nearest city of the Levites, "then," said the Philistines, "the God of Israel hath done unto us this great evil; but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that smote us; it was a chance that happened to us." {2.2}

No sooner were the kine set free than they turned from their young, and, lowing as they went, took the straight road to Beth-shemesh. Guided by no human hand, the patient animals kept on their way. The Divine Presence accompanied the ark, and it passed safely on to the very place designated. {2.3}

It was now the time of wheat harvest, and the men of Beth-shemesh were reaping in the valley. With great joy they beheld the ark approaching; and when the kine of their own accord stopped near a great stone, some of the Levites present offered them up as a sacrifice to the Lord, the cart itself being used as fuel for the burnt-offering. {2.4}

The lords of the Philistines, who had followed the ark to the border of Beth-shemesh, and had witnessed its reception, now returned to Ekron. The plague had ceased, and they were convinced that their calamities had been a judgment from the God of Israel. {2.5}

The men of Beth-shemesh quickly spread the glad tidings that the ark was in their possession, and the people from all the surrounding country flocked to welcome its return. The ark had been placed upon the stone which first served for an altar, and before it additional sacrifices were offered unto the Lord. Had the worshippers, with penitence and humiliation, put away their sins, the divine blessing would have attended them. But they were not faithfully obeying the law of God; hence, while they rejoiced at the return of the ark as a harbinger of good, they could have no true sense of its sacredness as the repository of that law. Instead of preparing a suitable place for the reception of the ark, they permitted it to remain in the harvest-field. As they continued to gaze upon the sacred chest, and to talk of the wonderful manner in which it had been restored, they began to conjecture wherein lay its peculiar power. At last, overcome by curiosity, they

removed the coverings and ventured to open it. Their joy was quickly changed to mourning. {2.6}

All Israel had been taught to regard the ark with awe and reverence. When required to remove it from place to place, the Levites were not to so much as look upon it. Only once a year was the high priest permitted to behold the ark of God. The heathen Philistines had not dared even to remove its coverings. Angels of Heaven, unseen, ever attended it in all its journeyings. The irreverent daring of the people at Beth-shemesh aroused the anger of the Lord, and a great number were instantly destroyed. {2.7}

The terror of the survivors was equaled only by their former presumption. Yet they were not led by this judgment to repent of their sin, but only to regard the ark with superstitious fear. Eager to be freed from its presence, yet not daring to remove it, the Bethshemites sent a message to the inhabitants of Kirjath-jearim, inviting them to take it away. They consented, and the ark was accordingly removed. {2.8}

The spirit of irreverent curiosity still exists among the children of men. Many are eager to investigate those mysteries which infinite wisdom has seen fit to leave unrevealed. Having no reliable evidence from which to reason, they base their theories on conjecture. The Lord has wrought for his servants and for the upbuilding of his cause at the present day as verily as he wrought in behalf of ancient Israel; but vain philosophy, "science falsely so called," has sought to destroy faith in the direct interposition of Providence, attributing all such manifestations to natural causes. This is the sophistry of Satan. He is asserting his authority by mighty signs and wonders in the earth. Those who ignore or deny the special evidences of God's power, are preparing the way for the arch-deceiver to exalt himself before the people as superior to the God of Israel. {2.9}

Many accept the reasoning of these would-be wise men as truth, when in fact it undermines the very foundations which God has laid. Such teachers are the ones described by inspiration, who must become fools in their own estimation, that they may be wise. God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. By those who are guided only by human wisdom, the simplicity of his mighty workings is called foolishness. They think themselves wiser than their Creator, when in fact they are victims of finite ignorance and childish conceit. It is this that holds them in the darkness of unbelief, so that they do not discern the power of God, and tremble before him. {2.10}

Though the ark had brought judgments both upon the inhabitants of Philistia and of Beth-shemesh, yet the men of Kirjath-jearim welcomed it with joy. They knew that while it was a precursor of wrath to the transgressor of God's law, it was the pledge of divine favor to the obedient and faithful. With solemn gladness they brought it to their city, and placed it in the house of Abinadab, a Levite. This man appointed his son Eleazar to take charge of it, to see that it was kept from injury or pollution. Thus it remained for many years. {2.11}

The Israelites as a nation still continued in a state of irreligion and idolatry, and as a punishment they remained in subjection to the Philistines. During this time Samuel, who was already recognized as a prophet, visited cities and villages

throughout the land, seeking to turn the hearts of the people to the God of their fathers. He faithfully set before them the claims of the divine law and their sin in transgressing its precepts, the long-suffering and mercy of God, and his assurance of favor to those who confess and forsake their sins. {2.12}

These efforts were not without good results. The hearts of the faithful were encouraged, and apostates were led to return to the Lord. The mirror of God's law, held up before the sinner, gives him a correct view of his own character. The greater the reverence felt for that law, the keener will be the sense of condemnation on account of sin. Every willful transgression is an act of rebellion against its Author. Every one who assumes this attitude, is by his practice saying to the people, "The requirements of God are exacting and severe, a yoke of bondage. Let us break this yoke from off our necks, and be at liberty." {2.13}

The law of God was not given to the Jews alone. It is of world-wide and perpetual obligation. "He that offendeth in one point is guilty of all." Its ten precepts are like a chain of ten links. If one link is broken, the chain becomes worthless. Not a single precept can be revoked or changed to save the transgressor. While families and nations exist; while property, life, and character must be guarded; while good and evil are antagonistic, and a blessing or a curse must follow the acts of men—so long must the divine law control us. When God no longer requires men to love him supremely, to reverence his name, and to keep holy the Sabbath; when he permits them to disregard the rights of their fellow-men, to hate and injure one another—then and not till then, will the moral law lose its force. {2.14}

Answer Hints

Section 1: | 1) 1.2 | 2) 1.8 | 3) 1.11 | 4) 1.12, 1.14 | 5) 1.12 | 6) 1.13–15 |

Section 2: | 1) 2.6 | 2) 2.9–10 | 3) 2.13 | 4) 2.14 |

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