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1 Samuel 5:1-12

Ninth Message

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WHEN GOD GOES ON VACATION

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

The movie “Taken” highlights the horror of a father’s worst nightmare. Bryan Mills, played by Liam Neeson, quits his job as a CIA operative to re-connect with his daughter Kim. At her birthday party he discovers that she is planning a trip to Paris with a friend. All too aware of the possible dangers of what can happen in a foreign land, Mills refuses to grant his permission. But, unable to face a daughter’s disappointment, he reluctantly relents. Then comes the dreaded phone call. He hears his daughter’s terrified voice, followed by screams as she is dragged away. She is drugged, and eventually sold as a sex slave to the highest bidder. Watching this vicious violation of a daughter “taken” by the underworld for profit, you can’t help but feel satisfaction in the swift and ruthless retribution this father carries out in her name. He infiltrates the seedy organization and confronts one of the many thugs profiting by trafficking innocence. The man pleads his case: “Please understand...it was all business. It wasn’t personal.” Bryan responds with a bullet, and then replies, “It was personal to me!”

I. Where is Glory?

To a far greater extent, consider how we ought to feel knowing that on more than one occasion, God was violently “taken” from his people and carried off into exile? The mysteries of God’s sovereignty and justice are much more complex and paradoxical than what we find in Hollywood.

At the end of 1 Samuel 4, when Eli’s daughter-in-law heard the news that the Philistines had routed Israel, that Eli and her husband were dead, and the Ark of the Covenant had been “taken,” she doubled over and went into premature labor. Giving birth to a son, with her dying breath she inscribes “the national catastrophe in her son’s name,” Ichabod (“Where is Glory?”), and with profound courage captures its significance: “The Glory has departed from Israel.”

She was right. After Israel’s defeat, Shiloh was destroyed as Israel’s sanctuary and the Mosaic tabernacle was never rebuilt. It was the end of an era in Israel. Where is Glory? How could God allow his holiness to be desecrated at the hands of pagans? Is God still sovereign? How can he manifest his glory among the nations when his own people fail to honor his name? Our text today addresses these questions.

While the Israelites are left languishing in a vast void of the unknown, we are privileged to travel alongside the ark as it “taken” across the border into gentile territory. In this mysterious circle tour among the gentiles we are given a brief snapshot of salvation history and the motivation for world mission. As we make that dreaded border crossing onto foreign soil, the tenor of the text unexpectedly shifts from human tragedy to divine comedy. It’s as if someone changed the channel and instead of the CBS evening news, we’re suddenly watching “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!”

With exquisite artistry the narrator lampoons the bullying power and pride of the Philistines as God “weighs in” against their lightweight, impotent idols. It takes only a few hours for God to display his winning “hand,” and the Philistine victory tour is turned on its head. The once vanquished deity held captive by the Philistine war machine instantly becomes a nationally acclaimed VIP, captivating audiences everywhere

as he tours three Philistine cities at government expense. For his first two nights he is given free lodging at their finest five-star temple, then it’s time to hit the road. Like a politician running for office, he makes personal contact with every citizen in each city, gaining access to their homes and the most intimate part of their lives. When the whirlwind tour is complete, a national assembly gathers to honor him at his departure. For his trip home they design a new, fully loaded, state-of-the-art limousine. To ensure a safe return, the five Philistine lords personally escort the limo to the border.

You can’t help laughing out loud as you read this. Satire is a powerful tool to subvert evil by unmasking all that is false. The prophets used it often in confronting evil empires. When we are able to see the ridiculous lies that lie behind the world’s idolatrous systems of power, we cease to be intimidated by them. This is why I’ve entitled our text, “When God Goes On Vacation.” If you’re planning a vacation this year, I suggest you go with God.

II. Dagon Faces Off Against the Ark (1 Sam 5:1-5)

Our first stop is Ashdod. Strategically located near the coast, on the Via Maris, the international highway that ran parallel to Israel’s coastline, Ashdod was the center of maritime trade. Around 1050 B.C., at the peak of the Philistines’ power, Ashdod was transformed into a military fortress to protect their confederation from the north. It was a massive undertaking, as Trude Dothan explains: “the houses that had dotted the northern slopes of the acropolis were systematically leveled to make way for a new, even more massive line of fortifications, a solid wall of mud-bricks, almost fifteen feet thick...[after its renovation] Ashdod became one of the largest cities in the entire country.”³ Ancient Ashdod would be like our Los Angeles and Norad rolled into one—a very impressive site.

A. The ark weighs in against Dagon (vv. 1-2)

Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. (1 Sam 5:1-2 NASB)

As Shiloh weeps over the news of Israel’s devastation, the Philistines journey home in jubilation, towing their prize-winning trophy of Israel’s ark behind them. In sports there is nothing more agonizing than, after suffering an ignoble defeat, having to endure the spectacle of the post game celebration of your hated rivals. While you just want to crawl into a hole and die, your opponents’ players are dousing one another with champagne, their fans shouting in elation, while their band blasts away its interminable drone of a fight song. In similar manner, the ultimate humiliation for a captured god was to be paraded through a city and then put on display in the victors’ temple. We can imagine their victory song (*’aron* = ark; *kavod* = glory):

Our GOD is DAGON

DAGON DAGON

DAGON beat ’ARON

Israel’s KAVOD serves in ASHDOD

ASHDOD ASHDOD GO DAGON!

After arriving in Ashdod, they put the ark on display in the temple beside Dagon, the god of fertility and grain and head of the Philistine pantheon. By placing the ark next to the statue of Dagon, the Philistines believed they could make use of the Lord's power in service of Dagon. Yahweh's defeat and the capture of his throne must have been cause for a full-blown celebration in Ashdod. The Philistine war machine had triumphed over Israel's invincible "warrior god" of the Exodus. With this new "atomic weapon" in their arsenal, the citizens of Ashdod slept secure that night.

Yet, if memory serves us, the last time the Philistines displayed an Israelite trophy in a similar temple to Dagon in Gaza, things did not fare so well. Their initial elation, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hands... even the destroyer of our country, who has slain many of us" (Judg 16:23-24), was quickly deadened under the devastating rubble of the temple.

B. Round 1: Dagon down (v. 3)

When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again.

When the Ashdodites wake up in the morning and head off to early mass, they make a shocking discovery. The text dramatically reads: "Behold Dagon was falling on his face toward the ground, before the face of the ark of Yahweh." The ark is no longer identified as "the ark of God" but as "the ark of the LORD," bearing his covenantal name. Remember the ark contained the Ten Commandments, the first of which commands, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod 20:3)—and Dagon is another god before the ark. Sometime during the night or pre-dawn hours, the Lord displayed the "weight of his glory." Dagon "repented" and is now bowing down in adoration.

The people of Ashdod think Dagon's first downfall must be accidental. So, in what can only be viewed as humorous stupidity, they carefully put their god back in its place. Fokkelman captures the irony: "Those concerned no longer manipulate the ark, but their own deity. He has to be helped into an upright position as if he were somebody who has missed his footing."⁴

C. Round 2: A knockout and lights out (vv. 4-5)

But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

The sweet sleep of the previous night is now mixed with disturbing doubts of the day's events. The next morning when the worshippers open the temple doors, they are shocked at what they see. Not only has Dagon returned to his posture of worship, but his head and hands are cut off so that only his trunk remains. This removes all possibility that Dagon's submission was accidental. It was a common wartime practice to cut off the hands and heads of one's enemies. Bodner adds a touch of imaginative humor: "The hands and head of the decapitated Dagon seem to have made it as far as the threshold of the temple. It is as though Dagon was attempting to flee (from his own house!), yet the torso is pulled back, but the hands remain—because the 'hand' of the LORD is heavy on the hands of Dagon."⁵

After such a "weighty" display of God's glory dethroning and decapitating the god you worship right in front of your eyes, one would think the citizens of Ashdod would repent en masse. After all, shouldn't the followers of Dagon follow Dagon's example? No, instead of admitting

their god is no god at all, they use the occasion of his demise to venerate the threshold where his dismembered parts lay. Fokkelman comments, "This is a fine example of the resilience of religion in its 'minus' variant of ineradicable addiction."⁶ Though we may laugh at such stupidity, consider how we venerate our sports stars or music idols, even when their lives end in addiction or suicide. This should teach us that apart from a divine miracle to open up blind eyes to faith, people are incapable of changing their worldview (2 Cor 4:6).

III. Ravaged Under a Heavy Hand (5:6-12)

A. A heavy hand in Ashdod (vv. 6-8)

Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god." So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines to them and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" And they said, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath." And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around.

Having soundly defeated Dagon in two rounds, the Lord leaves the temple and makes his "weighty" presence felt with ravaging tumors in every locale; even the most remote villages were not exempt. The description of the plague⁷, plus the mention of mice (6:4), suggests that this was the bubonic plague. While Dagon's hands are cut off, "the hand of the Lord" is exercising tremendous freedom and power. The phrase "the hand of the Lord" was first used in reference to the plague that God was bringing on the Egyptians. Israel's great warrior god, whom the Philistines thought they had subdued, was once again exercising his sovereignty with plagues of destruction against his enemies.

Now that "the 'aron has beaten dagon, and the kavod, which had departed from Israel, is in charge of 'ashdod,"⁸ the people of Ashdod are singing a different tune.

DAGON our god

decapitated by 'ARON

is now just "GON"

and Israel's KAVOD

is *crushing*

ASHDOD

ASHDOD ASHDOD

With the entire population suffering under the weight of the plague, "the men of Ashdod" are not about to wait for their politicians to take action. They initiate a town meeting to address the issue, and conclude that both they and their gods are no match against "the ark of the God of Israel." Therefore "the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us." This is typical worldly thinking. Rather than removing the idols that provoke God's wrath, we *remove* God as far away as possible so that we don't have to deal with our idols.

Like the current swine flu threat, the Ashdodites felt their plague could soon become a pandemic if measures were not taken on a national level. Therefore they demanded an immediate response from Washington. At their request the five lords convene a national assembly in Ashdod, and predictably they act just like politicians. With little thought or investigation they propose a swift solution. The first word out of their mouth is *Gath*.

Gath was situated about twelve miles east of Ashdod, "a city of early Canaanite origin where remnants of the Anakim, a race of giants, continued to dwell until after the time of Joshua (Josh 11:22)."⁹ Gath was the

birthplace of Goliath. “Take it round to Gath; let the big boys handle it.” Rather than addressing the cause of the problem, they merely pass the hot potato along to the next city. Is there too much radioactive waste in New York? Well then, just put it on a barge and dump it in New Jersey. The use of the verb *sabab* (“turn, go round, surround”) suggests that the politicians think that with their decisive action they will be capable of “turning the situation around.” To give the Philistine lords some credit, if they thought that mice were carriers of the pestilence, turning the ark inland away from the coastal cities and their seaports might have turned the situation “around.” Regardless, the narrator has the last word on what “goes around.” By repeating the verb *sabab* three times he creates the appearance that these politicians are merely “spinning their wheels,” and this “political spin” will be no solution at all.

B. Panic boils in Gath (v. 9)

After they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city with very great confusion; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.

As is often the case, the great political “turn-around” makes matters worse, and the plague hits with increasing severity in Gath. In Ashdod, no locale was exempt from the plague, but here in Gath, no age is exempt. Wherever you place “the hand of the Lord” its weight is too much to bear. Here its force is so great that ghastly tumors “break out” on them. The verb here is unique. Alter, following Jewish scholars and the King James Version, translates it as, “they had tumors in their secret parts”¹⁰—not a pleasant situation. The result was a “very great panic.” *Mehuma* (“confusion, panic”) is a technical term used in holy war to describe the confusion that God would create against his enemies as a sign to his people that victory was assured. “But the Lord your God will deliver them before you, and will throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed” (Deut 7:23; Isa 22:5). As Euripides once said, “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.” Yet sadly, God’s people were not present to witness the “weight” of God’s glory decimating the backbone of the Philistine power and pride. It was a solo concerto of divinity playing to an empty theatre.

C. Pained protest in Ekron (vv. 10-11a)

So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people.” (lit. “to bring death to me and my people”) They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, so that it will not kill us and our people.” (lit. so that it will not bring death to me and my people”).

With no other options left in their political grab bags, the Philistine lords send the ark off to Ekron, sister city to Gath. Ekron, known today as Tell Miqne, was strategically located in the Sorek Valley, eleven miles northeast of Ashdod and ten miles inland from the Mediterranean coast.

Located near the eastern edge of the coastal plain and the western edge of the shephelah, Ekron had both economic and political consequence. The cereal crops that grew well in this area played an important in its economy. But Ekron’s location near the border between the Philistines and the Israelites also meant that the city was subject to border skirmishes between the two groups. Also, the site was near important travel routes: one turned inland from the coastal plain highway and moved northward from Ashdod toward Gezer, and another was the Sorek valley, which was a major corridor that carried the inland route from the coastal plain eastward toward Jerusalem.¹¹

Like Ashdod, Ekron was a well planned and well-fortified city with a massive mud brick wall nearly 11 feet thick surrounding both its upper and lower cities (some fifty acres). It became a prosperous commercial

center for the production of pottery and weaponry. Its prosperity continued for centuries. In the 7th century, the Assyrians seized Ekron from Judah and made it “the largest olive oil industrial center in the ancient Near East... [with well over 100 olive oil installations they] ... had the capacity of producing at least 1,000 tons of olive oil annually, one fifth of Israel’s current level of export production.”¹²

This great city is now threatened with exposure to the deadly pestilence as the ark continues to make its “rounds” through Philistia. This time the ark’s notoriety precedes its arrival, as countless stories of the pestilence were running rampant in the news. In the face of the deadly threat, the people cry out in protest before the ark gains entrance to the city. The death panic has already ravaged the population on a scale that exceeds Ashdod and Gath. In Ashdod the pestilence impacted every locale; in Gath it broke through all the age barriers; but now in Ekron it has infected the entire population to a person, either with death or, at the minimum, swelling tumors. All this destruction and the ark had not even made it past the front gate. The people of Ekron are getting a first hand taste of Hannah’s theology: “There is no one holy like the LORD... The LORD brings death” (2:2, 6).

Horrified that their leaders had placed their city under a death sentence, and with no time to spare, the terror-stricken Ekronites take politics into their own hands. They recall the national assembly and, once it is convened, abruptly tell their leaders what to do: “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it *return to its own place*, so that it will not bring death to me and *my* people.” The situation is getting very “personal” in Gath. One can’t help hearing the irony in those words. Instead of returning Dagon to his place, they now see the need to return the ark to its own place.

D. Pain purges pride – First prayers in Ekron (vv. 11b-12)

For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

Flanked by physical pain and panic, with no hope in sight, the people of Ekron do the only thing left: they cry out for help. Persistent pain has a way of purging even the most adequate people of their pride. Such an abject cry for help, no matter what a person’s belief system, is favorably heard in heaven. It was a similar cry by the oppressed Israelites that set the Exodus in motion (Exod 2:23; 3:7, 9). The term is found several times in the prayers of the psalmist, expressing confidence that God faithfully hears our cries (Pss 18:6; 34:15; 39:12; 40:1). A cry for help, not political action, is what will turn the fortunes of the Philistines completely “around.” Now that they are in the humble posture of prayer, God will be able to teach them the “fear of the Lord” that leads to salvation.

IV. Where is Glory?

Why does God allow himself to be violently “taken” from his people, carried off into exile and his holy institutions destroyed? The paradox of the text is that God’s humiliation is his glory. It is the Lord’s humiliation, not his strength, that permitted him to penetrate powerful strongholds of evil. Few outsiders gain entrance to holy sites; none sleep beside their deities. It was Israel’s defeat and the ark’s seizure that made it possible for the weight of God’s glory to be felt firsthand by almost every Philistine in three of its major cities.

A. Different responses to the “weight of glory”

Now you might say that the initial responses don’t look very promising among these gentiles. Dagon’s decapitation seems to have had the opposite effect on the people of Ashdod, and in Gath we are all too familiar with that confident chap, Goliath. His giant ego and blustery bravado was no doubt fueled by his memories of tumors in his “secret parts.” But with a little more patience and diligence to press on with the

story for another generation, we come across Ittai, the Gittite from Gath. Ittai makes a cameo appearance at the lowest point in King David's life (2 Sam 15:17-22). After David had committed murder and adultery, his son Absalom orchestrated a military coup to take the kingdom away from his father. As a result David is forced to leave Jerusalem and take refuge in the wilderness. As he exits the city in brokenness and shame, he comes to the lowest point in the city, at the Kidron, where all his supporters cross in revue before the king. Having emptied himself of all dignity, David cannot believe what he sees: a recent convert from Gath attempting to cross over with him. In a conversation that is reminiscent of Naomi's words to that sweet clinging Ruth, also a foreigner, David bids Ittai the Gittite to return home with his family. But Ittai forcefully rejects the order and expresses his commitment to David in an oath that is reminiscent of Jonathan's earlier loyalty to David. Following in Ittai's footsteps were 600 men and their families—a significant proportion of the population of Gath!

B. The glory of Christ

The theme of God's holiness conquering rival gods and destroying their temples finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. After Jesus finished his discourse of parables he ventures to the east side of the lake, predominantly gentile territory, having a strong presence of idolatry and demonic forces. There he confronts a man possessed by a *legion* of demons. With but a simple word the demons are cast into a herd of two thousand swine (symbolic of the idolatry in the area), which rush headlong down the steep bank into the sea. The demons are no match against the weight of Jesus' glory, and the entire area is cleansed of its idolatry. Jesus did to the demons what the Jews were hoping God would do to the Romans—cast them into the sea just as he did to Pharaoh's army. But this new and greater Moses drowned the forces of the greater enemy, the devil himself. Here is the new Exodus that Israel was waiting for! But sadly, the townspeople, having just lost the source of their income, were overcome with fear. They asked Jesus to leave: "Send away the ark of the God of Israel." Jesus grants them their wish, but leaves the man behind to tell his story. This man with no name, whose significance in that region was as small as a mustard seed, obeyed. He went throughout the whole of the Decapolis telling all the great things that Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled, with many turning to Christ.

In his trial, Jesus, like the ark, is a political "hot potato" that Pilate wants nothing to do with. Pilate's wife, tormented by a dream the previous night, sent him word, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him" (Matt 27:19). But like the Philistine politicians, Pilate is unable to extricate himself from the situation. The final irony is that at Jesus' greatest moment of humiliation, when he is tied and bound to a tree, God's power is released, rending the curtain in Israel's temple that now, like Dagon's temple, is devoted to destruction. And when "they rose early on the next morning" expecting to find Jesus' body destroyed by the power of death, the women were shocked to find the stone rolled away. Jesus was alive!

The point of the story is, don't fear. This slapstick satire is designed to "break our dread density of despair... [by giving us] glimpses of this God who gives life beyond our timid boundaries and our fearful expectations."¹³

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him." (Luke 12:4-5 TNIV)

1 Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 25.

2 "Hand," a metaphor for power and authority, is found eight times in these stories (1 Sam 4:8; 5:6, 7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9).

3 Trude Dothan and Moshe Dothan, *People of the Sea, The Search for the Philistines* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972), 173.

4 J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols. (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 4:253.

5 Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 52.

6 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 255.

7 Tsumara addresses the confusion for two different readings in the Hebrew text for "tumor." "The terms swellings (*opalim*), originally 'hills, mounds,' came to be used euphemistically for referring to tumors as 'swellings that is hill-shape growths,' for it was often abominable to pronounce the actual name of the disease. Subsequently, the term seems to have experienced a further semantic change to an abominable sense, that is, taboo, 'swollen parts of the body' such as 'buttocks.' Hence, the MT (Massoretic Text) introduced, in Qere, the more straightforward term *tehorim*, 'tumors.'" David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 208.

8 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 256.

9 Joe D. Seger, "Gath," ABD, 2:908

10 Alter, *The David Story*, 29.

11 LaMoine F. DeVries, *Cities of the Biblical World* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 169.

12 Trude Dothan and Seymour Gitin, "Ekron," ABD, 2:415.

13 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 47-48.