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1 Samuel 6:1-18

Tenth Message

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WHEN GLORY COMES HOME: THE BLIND SEE

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Over the last couple of weeks, my daughter has been requesting prayer for her community and colleagues at work. She is a teacher at Gunn High School, whose community has been traumatized with two identical suicides and an attempted third within the last two weeks. (One of the siblings has her for a biology class.) The immensity of the shock shatters all conventional foundations. What do you do? Where do you find meaning? How do you care? How do you proceed with classes, finals, and graduation? Does education really matter?

In these very turbulent times, it seems there is little left that we can count on. The only emotion that unites us is fear. The more important question, however, is, Where is God, and what is he doing in this chaotic world? Is God still sovereign when the unthinkable happens? The Bible is not shy in addressing these questions. The answers it provides do not dampen our pain or drug us with instant happiness. As we return to 1 Samuel 4-7, reflecting on the “Mysterious Adventures of the Ark of the Covenant,” we will get a window into God’s passion to reach the nations and his method for world missions.

The text has three objectives in mind. First, by making a dramatic shift from the tragic to the comic, it lampoons the pride of the Philistine war machine. As we have seen, satire is a powerful tool to subvert evil by unmasking all that is false. 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. With superb artistry the narrator makes us laugh in this theatre of the absurd—all at the idols’ expense—in order that we might never again live in fear of them. Knowing how prone we are to fall back under their intimidating spells, the Book of Psalms revitalizes our courage with the identical truth before we even begin the journey of prayer. Psalm 2 (which along with Psalm 1 serves as the introduction to the Psalter) gives poetic shape to this “theatre of the absurd” and, just like Samuel’s narrative, has the same objective: to remove our fear.

**Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them. (Ps 2:1-4)**

The second objective of our text is to get an inside look at the process by which idol worshippers change their world view and come to faith in the living God. Reading the news, you wouldn’t think that God loves the world, but he does. The reason he goes around smashing idols and afflicting people with weighty afflictions is that he wants to save them. That’s the work of pre-evangelism—subverting world views and opening blind eyes to see God’s glory in Christ. That’s not something we do; it’s what God does in answer to our prayers. When that work affects the hearts of people they become God fearers who are open to receiving the revelation of the gospel. That is where we come in—to complete the process that God has begun, for without revelation there is no salvation. It is vital that we understand this process and follow Christ where he has already been working.

The third objective will be seen in the narrator’s surprising twist at the climax of the story. For that, we will have to wait for the end of our message.

You will recall from 1 Samuel 5 that it was the Lord’s humiliation, not his strength, that permitted him to penetrate powerful strongholds of evil. After the Philistines defeated Israel in battle, they carried the Ark of the Covenant home like a war trophy and placed it in their temple beside their god Dagon. In chapter 5 we can trace how, after enduring the humiliation of defeat, God manifested his glory and the subsequent response by the Philistines (who, for simplicity, I will abbreviate as the Phillies, with no disrespect to our baseball friends).

God’s Glorious Work of Pre-evangelism Among the Phillies

1. **God’s glory manifest:** Puts the idols in their place – Dagon worships God.

Phillies’ response: Puts the idol back in its place.

2. **God’s glory manifest:** Decapitates and destroys the idols.

Phillies’ response: Venerate the death of the idol – priests – harden their hearts.

3. **God’s Glory:** Plagues upon the population.

Phillies’ response: Turn to politicians for help who, rather than dealing with the problem, just move it to another city.

4. **God’s glory manifest:** The plagues intensify in breadth and severity.

Phillies’ response: Seek spiritual answers (this is the breakthrough).

I. Spiritual Life in Philistia (6:1-9)

A. Seeking spiritual solutions (vv. 1-3)

When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory seven months, the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how (lit. “with what”) we should send it back to its place.” (1 Sam 6:1-2 TNIV)

The first plague in Egypt lasted seven days (Exod 7:25); in Philistia, God smote the people with a plague of ravaging tumors for seven months. During that time the people lost faith in their gods, and eventually their politicians, who had no ability to address the problem. Every decision from the national assembly of lords had only heightened their posterior pain. Finally, at the height of their desperation, the people turn to religious professionals for help. The fact that this group includes both priests and diviners suggests that the Philistines are open to help from any source, whether it’s mainline religion (priests) or the more questionable occult (diviners).

The questions they put to the religious council indicate that there is no question about what to do, but rather how to do it: “with what should we send it back to its place?” Over the previous seven months the people had achieved significant spiritual insight: there was more to that gold box than gold! Behind the symbol of God’s throne was the living Lord, whose holiness had been offended. If the Philistines had any possibility of surviving, then the ark must be put back in “its place.”

The ability to make the distinction between the person of God and the physical symbols he uses to mediate his rule is an incredible breakthrough in a pagan culture. In the idolatrous world of the ancient Near East, people were obsessed with image making. Behind this obsession was the belief that if you could manufacture the image of a god, you possessed the life of the god and you could therefore manipulate its power for your own purposes.

Living under the oppressive hand of Israel's God for seven months has forced the Philistines to "acknowledge the person and unique power of Yahweh."¹ The crushing "weight" of guilt has taught these idol worshippers that they cannot "send" the ark home in the same profane manner that they "took" it from Israel. Restoration involves not just admission of wrongdoing but also addressing the damages incurred because of the wrong. In this case, a "guilt offering" (*asham*) was compensation to God for violating his property. In Israel, whether one was conscious of the fault or not, one who had desecrated God's property was responsible to make compensation. But compensation was something the elders in Israel never considered—and what many Christians today fail to address when faced with their wrongdoing.

The *knowledge* that the people are seeking is, "What compensation is appropriate and adequate?" For this they turn to those who were supposed to be "in the know." In the longest dialogue of the ark adventures, we are privileged to attend the first ecumenical summit of Philistine theologians. As they grapple with new realities, they are forced to make radical re-adjustments in their theology because of their encounters with the ark. There was nothing in their religious education or magical rule books that addressed a god who wielded sovereign power and authority like Israel's God.

With no access to Israel's revelation, these theologians draw on history, the only source of *knowledge* left, to negotiate their way through these uncharted waters. Though Israel may have forgotten the lessons learned in Egypt, the Philistines had not. Like students studying for a final exam, they sift through the details of Israel's Exodus and make fresh applications to their situation as if their lives depended on it.

B. Phillies' attempt at atonement (vv. 3-6)

They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it back to him without a gift; by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you."

With little hesitation, these religious gurus sound like authoritative experts on what it takes to appease Israel's God: "If you plan to send the ark of the 'God of Israel' away, then it cannot be sent away empty."² Drawing on the events of the Exodus, they are reminded that when God granted his people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, they did not leave Egypt "empty-handed" (Exod 3:21). If in Israel no one was to appear before the Lord "empty-handed" (Exod 23:15; 34:20; Deut 16:16) for a worship festival, how much more when God had been offended! Therefore they explain that Israel's God *must* be appropriately compensated, with a "guilt offering," for the damages done to his person. Once his wrath is appeased, the Philistines will *know* why his hand had not been lifted from them. Their final statement, "then it will be known to you," adds an element of mystery. This is an admission that these religious professionals are as much in need of revelation as the people. It turns out their confidence is not so rock solid. These plagues also shook their world. This is a turning point in the spiritual history of the Philistines. It seems no one has answers.

The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?" (4a)

What is an appropriate "guilt offering"? That is the question that "weighs" upon every human soul with ever increasing intensity the older one gets. The words of T. S. Eliot ring so true:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age...
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.³

They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and give glory to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land." (4b-5)

For a guilt offering the priests and diviners propose making five golden "images" of the swollen tumors and five golden "images" of the mice that

were ravaging the land. Is this the best these depraved theologians can do? Manufacture idolatrous images of unclean animals and gross bodily swellings, 10 in number, and send them back in the ark of the Covenant (containing the Ten Commandments, the second of which is the prohibition against image making), hoping that God will accept this as a guilt offering? Any Israelite reading this text would laugh out loud at the Philistines' first attempt in the art of atonement. In a rather ludicrous mix of idolatry and occult magic, the whole proposal is doomed from the start.

But lest we get too carried away lampooning Philistine spirituality, the narrator gives us pause, for there is much to be applauded in their proposal. Though the image making with its magical beliefs is utterly false, their insistence on manufacturing items in gold signifies that they intend to give God their very best. Gold is costly, and the manufacturing process is not easy; it requires extensive attention to detail. Fokkelman observes, "The solidification, or fixation, of the trouble in gold is a recognition of Yahweh's weight in an astonishingly palpable and permanent form."⁴ Have you ever offered God the best you had to give?

Then consider the precision and care they give to their "arithmetic of atonement." Why do they insist on two sets of five images "for one plague"? The twin set of five juxtaposes the five rulers with the people, and their gods with their land. The way that Israel logs these gifts maintains the precision of the math.

The following were the golden hemorrhoids that the Philistines paid as an indemnity to the LORD:

For Ashdod, one;
for Gaza, one;
for Ashkelon, one;
for Gath, one;
for Ekron, one.

As for the golden mice, their number accorded with all the Philistine towns that belonged to the five lords—both fortified towns and un-walled villages... (6:17-18a JPS)

The point is that one plague has impacted everyone and everything in Philistia. No one escaped. Not one! This is quite an admission by Israel's arch enemy and the reigning military superpower. No such admission of guilt came from Israel's priests. Perhaps you can hear in their math a resonant echo from the future:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—" (Rom 5:12 TNIV)

Adding it all up, these spiritual advisors have but one goal in mind: to "give glory (weight) to the God of Israel. Perhaps He will ease (*lighten*) His hand from you, your gods, and your land." In contrast to Eli, Israel's high priest who stole God's glory and became "heavy," the Philistines are hoping "that the 'gravity' of the acknowledgement will lead to a lightening (i.e. removal) of pressure – the pressure of death."⁵ And unlike Israel, they do not presume on God or manipulate him. They're not positive this new equation is going to work; they've come to learn that Israel's God is sovereign and free to do as he pleases. So they humbly offer what they believe is the "best" they can give; then they wait and hope.

Like a good car salesman who refuses to let his customer go without a sale, the Philistine priests add a motivating history lesson to close the deal.

Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When Israel's god dealt harshly with them, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way? (6)

Though they can't be 100% certain their atonement equation will work, they have no doubt about the alternative. Refusing to give glory ("weight") to God is equivalent to "hardening" your heart (another form of the verb *kbd*) as Pharaoh did. Considering who was demanding Israel's release from Egypt, one thing was clear: there was never a question "if" Israel was leaving, but how long and how much devastation Pharaoh was willing to put his nation through. It took ten rounds of plagues and incredible devastation

before his stubborn heart was willing to give God glory. Why would you want to be that stupid? The Philistines get the point; they concede after just one plague.

C. Putting theology to the test (vv. 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. 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, 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.”

The diviners devise a test designed to see if Israel’s God is truly unique and different from their idols. Is Israel’s God a “self-starter”? Can he take the initiative? Is his power strong enough to override the natural world? So they decide to give Yahweh a driving test. With no experience behind the wheel, and no driver’s license, they allow him to do the test drive in a brand new pickup.

For the test a new cart is required, one that has never been used for profane purposes. This sets it apart as holy to God. Next, they are to take two milch cows that had never been yoked and had just given birth. With udders overflowing with milk, they were to be forcefully separated from their young and bound together in a yoke. Then they were to watch and see if Israel’s God is able to drive the cart home against the will and nature of the mother cows. (Beth Shemesh, “the house of the sun,” was the most direct route by way of the Sorek valley from the Philistine plain to the Israelite border.)

The test stacks the deck against the Lord in the extreme. In some measure it reflects a modern scientific mind in the way they seek to determine if the extraordinary events that occurred over the seven months happened “by chance” or by divine orchestration. The results of test are to be confirmed by eyewitnesses who are to follow the animals all the way to the border, so that “we will know...” It turns out that those who are supposed to be “in the know” now admit they are not “in the know.”

With no pride left in Philistia, and a willingness to give glory to the God of Israel, the nation is now open to the wondrous revelation of Israel’s Lord.

II. Glory Comes Home (6:10-7:2)

A. The ark sent home in glory (vv. 10-12)

So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. They placed the ark of the LORD on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. 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.

Just like Balaam in the book of Numbers, and later Saul, the Philistine lords are mysteriously led into the knowledge of the Lord by following the lead of animals. So what did they see by observing the behavior of these two milch cows for six miles? What they saw is a classic portrait of what happens when the Lord puts a yoke on someone: holy obedience.

1. **Holy obedience needs no prompting.** The cows take off with no prompting (the verb “sent” is absent) from their masters. The Lord’s call is irresistible. It’s as if he is driving the cart home, like a victorious hero returning from war.

2. **Holy obedience chooses the “right way.”** The verb “went straight” comes from the root *yashar*, whose literal meaning is “to be straight,” but most often it carries a figurative sense, meaning “right” ethics.

3. **Holy obedience overcomes our strongest natural affections.** Once yoked to the cart that is driven by Yahweh, the cows resist their strong natural inclinations, and with overflowing udders, exert extra effort to pursue their destination (“keeping on the road” is emphatic, the verb “to go” is

doubled, suggesting supreme effort). Though obedience is distressful and difficult (“lowing all the way”), the Lord’s call trumps all others. It is a call they cannot resist. It should come as no surprise to us that when Jesus calls the disciples to come under his “yoke,” they too leave all natural bonds of occupation and family to follow him (Mark 1:18-20).

4. **Holy obedience remains focused to the end, resisting all distractions:** “they did not turn to the right or to the left,” Robert Alter translates: “And the cows went straight on the way, on the way to Beth-shemesh, on a single road they went, lowing as they went, and they veered neither right nor left.” He then comments on the narrator’s artistry “[he] lavishes synonyms and repetitions in order to highlight the perfect geometry of the miracle: against all conceivable distractions of biology and sheer animal unknowingness, the cows pursue an arrow-straight northwest trajectory from Ekron to Beth-shemesh.”⁶

“They did not turn to the right or the left” also strikes an ethical cord:

So you shall observe to do just as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left.” (Deut 5:32; also 17:11, 20; 28:14)

“Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go.” (Josh 1:7)

The anticipation builds as the two cows press on toward Israel’s border, with no hesitation, getting further and further from the new life they left behind. Following behind these miraculous chauffeurs for six miles, you can imagine the Phillis asking, “Who is this that commands even the beasts of the field and they obey him?”

B. Blind eyes see (vv. 13-15)

Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. The Levites took down the ark of the LORD, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron.

It is the time of the wheat harvest in Israel, after the spring rains, in late May or early June. As the citizens of Beth Shemesh are gathering in their harvest, they look up and see the glory of the Lord returning home like a war hero after his new conquest over the gentiles. While the people cheer in jubilation, the milch cows head straight for the field of Joshua. Entering his field, they stop beside “the great rock.” Their journey is over. Yet their task is not yet complete. The people take the new cart apart, chop it up for wood, slaughter the two cows, and place them on the fire until they are entirely consumed. Like his ancient counterpart, Joshua has kept his faith alive in the midst of a depraved nation. He and his band of friends still know that the ark is for *worship*. It was an incredible homecoming for Israel that day. To highlight the uniqueness of “that day” in salvation history, it is memorialized on two fronts (vv. 15, 16) by two very different cultures. For Israel, it was a day to rejoice in sacrificial joy, but for the Philistines it was the day when “they saw it and returned.”

What then did the Philistine lords “see”? What knowledge were they given? The answer is more than their theologians had hoped for. Their experiment in theology proved to be a success. The Lord demonstrated that he is holy and unique, just as Hannah had proclaimed, “There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you” (2:2). Unlike their idols, Israel’s God takes bold initiative, and his “yoke” overcomes the strongest of natural bonds. Returning home, the lords can report with confidence that the plague was caused by Israel’s God, not by chance. But what about their *asham*, those golden tumors and mice? Did those images satisfy his holiness?

I imagine the report of the lords was mixed. Some were probably so relieved that those freeway cows just kept their engines revved all the way to Beth Shemesh, they gave it no further thought once they crossed the border. They just assumed that God accepted their “best.” It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

But the more perceptive stayed focused on the cows. When day was done, they realized that those new mothers abandoned new life to be yoked to a higher purpose and went straight to the altar of their destruction in the field of Joshua. Then the cart and both animals go up in flames on the altar as the Israelites celebrate in joyous worship. Perhaps at some point on the six-mile walk home the lords came to the realization that it wasn’t their gift of the golden tumors, it was life of the cows, which willingly dedicated their lives to destruction. Our best is never good enough to appease a holy God; it takes the shedding of innocent blood.

The good news we have to offer those who are seeking eternal life is that Christ offered himself as the guilt offering. Like the Philistine cows, Jesus willingly left his heavenly home, and the love bonds of his heavenly Father, to serve us. Then he set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem, lowing as he went, to become our sacrifice.

**But the LORD was pleased
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see his offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.
(Isa 53:10)**

The text has accomplished its purposes, removing our fears and giving an inside look at the process by which idol worshippers come to living faith in Christ. God’s sovereign power unmasks the lies that give world systems of idolatry their power. This is the work of pre-evangelism, transforming even the most closed-minded idol worshippers into God fearers who are open to revelation. Our task as witnesses of the gospel is but one thing: to grant them a new understanding of the *’asham*. Glory to God, for Jesus Christ has become our “guilt offering.”

But what is the third objective of our text? The text answers one more question: What happens when God faithfully does his work of pre-evangelism, making the fields ripe for harvest, but God’s people are drowning in darkness and there is no one to announce the good news? Is God’s work in vain? Here is the narrator’s surprising twist. So far he has been lampooning the pride of the Philistines, and we have been laughing out loud at the stupidity of their idols and their attempts to cope with the new reality of the living God. But suddenly the tables are turned and we discover we’ve been looking in a mirror the entire time. Who proved to be spiritually more perceptive, the Philistine lords or God’s chosen people? Isaiah’s very first description of Israel places the spiritual lesson of this story in poetic form:

**“I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its master,
the donkey its owner’s manger,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:2-3)**

“An ox knows its master, and even a donkey” (which may not be very obedient or attentive) at least knows where to stand to be fed, but God’s people do not know even this much; in fact, “my people do not understand at all.”⁷ Fokkelman captures this twist of genius by observing that the Philistines, in contrast to the Israelites, “are on the way to knowledge by following the way of the cows.” After the newborn calves were taken away “from following after” their mothers, “the Philistine leadership has taken the place of the young calves and obediently allow themselves to be led”⁸ by the cows to their true owner, and true food. Having no revelation, they chose the path of utter humility, following animals that knew the way home to their Creator and Lord, while God’s people had at their disposal several volumes of revelation but were drowning in darkness. Who was a better witness to the Philistines, God’s people or the cows? Laughter became the narrator’s underground gateway to breach our fortified souls. And now, fully exposed, we are stunned into silence.

At Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the disciples were singing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Some of the Pharisees told Jesus to silence his disciples, but Jesus replied, “I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40). God so loves the world that, if he makes a field ripe for harvest and his people fail as witnesses to the gospel, he will make the animals speak or the rocks cry out.

1 I have leaned heavily on Fokkelman’s outstanding work for my insights on this text. 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), 262.

2 Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 57.

3 T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 54.

4 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 278.

5 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 269.

6 Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 32.

7 Adapted from James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, Parallelism and Its History* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 9.

8 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 283.

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