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1 Samuel 6:13-7:2

Eleventh Message

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WHEN GLORY COMES HOME: THOSE WHO SEE BECOME BLIND

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

We are continuing our studies in 1 Samuel 4-7, tracing God's mysterious circle tour among the Gentiles. These verses give us a window into God's passion to reach the nations and his method for world missions. To this end the narrator has three objectives in mind.

First, by making a dramatic shift from the tragic to the comic, the text lampoons the pride of those who trust in the bullying power of their vaunted weaponry. Satire is a powerful tool to subvert evil by unmasking all that is false. When we see the ridiculous lies behind the world's idolatrous systems of power, we cease to be intimidated by them. We laugh as we watch the great war machine of the Philistines being brought to its knees, their leaders becoming hysterical over a box no larger than Oprah's suitcase. Thus the first objective is to remove our fear:

"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)

The second objective is to give an inside look at the process by which idol worshippers change their world view and come to faith in the living God, who smashes idols and afflicts people with weighty afflictions because 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. After the Philistines had carted off the ark as a war trophy, God wasted no time making the weight of his glory felt. He smashed Dagon, their chief god, into pieces, and for seven months ravaged the population with a plague. Through this humiliation the Philistines grew in their theological understanding. No longer enslaved by the destructive world view of idolatry, they acknowledged nationwide that Israel's God was unique, supremely powerful and holy.

The third objective, which comes with the surprising twist of the narrative, is to hold a mirror up to God's 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." (Isa 1:2b-3)**

In search of the truth about Israel's God, the Philistine diviners devised a test, using two milch cows to see if this God was truly unique and different than their idols. Taking two milch cows that had just given birth, they separated them from their young and bound them together in a yoke. With the cows' udders now overflowing with milk, the Philistine lords were commanded to "follow after" the mother cows to see if Israel's God was able to drive the cart home against the strongest of natural bonds. Fokkelman observes: "The Philistine leadership has taken the place of the young calves and obediently allow themselves to be led" by the cows to their true owner. Having no

revelation, they chose the path of utter humility, following animals that knew the way home to their Creator and Lord. By contrast, 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 now becomes the narrator's underground gateway to breach our fortified souls. Fully exposed, we are stunned into silence.

Today we will continue to look into that mirror as the narrator traces the ark's homecoming in Israel. When the day began, it must have seemed like one of those rare times when all the forces of nature converged into one harmonic celebration. After a dark and gloomy winter, the ark makes its appearance in Beth-shemesh ("house of the sun," which I will call Sunnyvale), at the time when the people are happily harvesting their wheat following the spring rains in late May or early June. Seeing the ark drawn by the two milch cows, the citizens of Sunnyvale break out into joyous, spontaneous worship. They immediately tear the cart into pieces, then chop up the wood and sacrifice the cows as a burnt offering to God, while the Levites gloriously display the ark on a rock next to the Philistines' offerings. After the Philistines return home, the gifts they gave as "guilt offerings" were collected and duly recorded by the county clerk.

I. Elation Recording the Victory (1 Sam 6:17-18)

These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwallled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh. (6:17-18 ESV)

Like the elation of a professional golfer who sinks a birdie putt on the last green to clinch the title, then strolls to the clubhouse to review his strokes on each hole, and then raises his pen in triumph, placing his signature on the scorecard, so was the joy in the clubhouse at Sunnyvale Country Club that day. The gifts of the Philistines are registered by a public notary as property that has been lawfully "transferred to the deity who has shown himself both master of their fate and that of their master (Dagon)."² The precision with which every single item is recorded, as well as the emphatic repetition of the exact time ("on that day," "that same day," "to this day") and place indicators ("the great stone," "the field of Joshua"), memorializes this event in the archives of Israel's sacred memory.

The impact of the day's surprising events must have been overwhelming to the citizens of Sunnyvale. It's not often in the history of mankind that one is able to witness the wholesale repentance of a nation. This would be comparable to witnessing the 16th century revival in Switzerland and Germany under the great reformers, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, or the Great Awakening that spread like wildfire in New England through the powerful preaching of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and the Wesley brothers. In Sunnyvale all was

well. The ark of the covenant had been returned, the damages paid in full, and Israel's books balanced. That night the citizens of Sunnyvale went to sleep secure, believing it was a new day in Israel for the Glory of God had returned.

The next verse comes as a shock.

II. The Sudden Shock of Death (1 Sam 6:19)

And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon (or "in") the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow.

After a rare respite from seven months of unspeakable sorrow and a day of ecstatic jubilation, the bomb explodes. Like a suicide bomber at a wedding, everyone's joy is jolted beyond belief as dead bodies litter the streets of Sunnyvale. God's weighty hand, which smote the Philistines with plagues of destruction (5:6, 9, 12), has come home and struck his people with severity. Three times the people of Beth-shemesh are the object of God's "striking" (twice as a verb - *nakah*, once as a noun - *makkah* "blow"). Although the exact body count is difficult to determine, as the Hebrew text reads "seventy men, fifty thousand men,"³ the harvest of happiness that was sealed in the memory of that "great" rock is now darkened under the shade of a "great" wound. The altar of reconciliation celebrating the ark's return to Israel becomes the ashes of a 9/11 memorial. The ark has returned, but there is no reconciliation and no glory.

What went wrong? Why was God so upset when his people welcomed him home with such enthusiasm and praise? The cause of the outbreak of the Lord's wrath is stated simply in terms of a casual "look," or careless "gaze." The identical verb was used in v. 13 when the citizens spontaneously "lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it." The only difference in v. 19 is the preposition *b'*, which has a variety of meanings ("in, within"). From the grammar we can't be certain if certain individuals merely looked disrespectfully "upon" the ark, or whether they were more curious and aggressively peered "into" it. Regardless of which it was, everyone in Sunnyvale probably felt the gruesome blow was disproportionate to the violation. Or was it?

Reexamining the day's events in light of this blow, we may find clues that the concert of praise in Sunnyvale was not as holy as we might have first thought.

III. Joyous Worship or Irreverent Entertainment? (1 Sam 6:13-15)

Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD.

Beth-shemesh was a Levitical city and home to the sons of Aaron (cf. Josh 21:13-16). With the predominance of the population being Levites, we should expect that the worship around the ark's return would be in accordance with the priestly provisions in the Torah. While the people were wholehearted in their joy and spontaneity, offering all that was at hand to the Lord, there were serious flaws in their worship. Fokkelman captures the clues from the artistry of the

narrator. He notes that once the cart has come to a halt at the spot of a great stone, things go into overdrive as "the actions of different groups occur independently of one another. There are three collective characters, and everyone does his own thing."⁴ The people quickly rush to the task of chopping up the cart and slaughtering the animals, with no Levitical direction or supervision. Though the totality of the sacrifice appears as a valid expression of thanks, it was in fact a reckless violation of the Torah, which said that only male animals were to be used for burnt offerings.

The fact that the sacrifice is recorded prior to the work of the Levites, who busy themselves with the sacred task of taking down the ark (an action which occurred prior to the destruction of the cart), paints a disorderly picture of worship. After the ark and the Philistine treasures were taken off the cart, they were put on public display on the great stone for all to see. The revelry rocked with more sacrifices and jubilation in what must have been Sunnyvale's hottest concert of praise ever. But was God pleased? Robert Bergen comments on the outrageous violations of God's sanctity:

According to the Torah (Num 4:5-6), no Israelites outside the Aaronic priesthood were permitted to see even the exterior of the ark, much less its interior. Even the Kohathites, whose God-given duty it was to transport the ark, were forbidden either to touch or view the sacred box. Thus, the duty of the Israelites—especially the Kohathites, whose charge it was to care for the holy things of Israelites worship—would have been to hide the ark from view while avoiding any physical or visual contact with it.⁵

As Numbers 4:20 makes clear, "the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die," the proper thing would have been for the priests to immediately cover the ark to protect its sanctity. But rather than covering it, they displayed it for all to see. This led to a greater violation as some of the men "looked into it," touching it in the process. The behavior of the citizens of Sunnyvale was similar to that of Ham, the son of Noah. When his father became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent, Ham, with unseemly curiosity, went inside his father's tent and "saw the nakedness of his father." Then, when he sought to exploit his father's nakedness with his two brothers, they would have none of Ham's perverse pleasure. Instead they restored the sanctity of their father:

Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (Gen 9:23)

In our day, Shem and Japheth would be crusaders against the evil of the pornography that uncovers the sanctity of young women for entertainment, thus desecrating God's holiness whose image they bear. They would have never used the Internet, watched TV or purchased an iPhone without stringent controls or filters lest they see a daughter's nakedness. But during Sunnyvale's praise concert, the ark of the covenant was exposed for all to see, like some Sports Illustrated model. If Eli's two sons were killed because they sexually violated the young women who were serving God "at the entrance to the tent of the meeting," how do you think God will respond when he is violated? God is serious about upholding the sanctity of his property and person. This would not be the last time an Israelite would lose his life for reckless treatment of the ark (2 Sam 6:6). From these events, Eugene Peterson draws the conclusion,

The ark is not to be toyed with; God is sovereign and takes care of himself; materiality is not incidental to God's revelation, but is a means of revelation, and so the way we treat things is part and parcel of the way we treat God. We do not cure superstition by get-

ting rid of things, by avoiding or marginalizing the physical—there remains holiness of place and thing.⁶

If this was God's reaction concerning the desecration of the ark, think of the horror he must have felt watching his Son being handed over to wicked men who stripped him, spat on him and mocked him. When he was hanging on the cross for our sins, passersby derided and stared at him, mocking him. Yet, even then the Son did not ask the Father to punish them, but forgive them. Once the price for sin was fully paid and he cried out "It is finished," God intervened to protect the sanctity of his body. He allowed only loving hands to bring Jesus' body down from the cross, to wash and anoint it for burial and place it in a rich man's tomb.

The Lord continues to protect the sanctity of his person beyond the resurrection into the church age. When Ananias and Sapphira introduced hypocrisy into the fledgling congregation by lying in order to appear more generous than they actually were, the Spirit of the Lord disciplined with the judgment of death (Acts 5:1-11). In Corinth, the Lord's love feasts were being desecrated as the greedy rich used them as an occasion for gluttony and drunkenness, while the poor went away hungry. Such actions did not go unnoticed; they were the reason "why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor 11:30).

IV. Sorrow with no Repentance (1 Sam 6:19-7:2)

A. Pain and denial (vv. 19-20)

And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked in the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?"

God's wrath silenced Sunnyvale's morning joy with unspeakable pain. The people mourned, but not for their sin but the "great blow" that the Lord inflicted upon them.

This is a terrifying experience that hurls the people into an abyss of dreadful uncertainty. "Who is able to stand before Yahweh, this holy God?" The pronouncement is so charged and crucial, that it can serve as a punch line for what all the people in chs. 5-6 have experienced, Israelites and Philistines alike. The line summarized the lesson that has to be learnt on both sides of the border.⁷

The irony is that when the Phillies were confronted with the Lord's holiness, they humbly admitted they had no answers and as a result grew in their theology. They learned that behind the symbol of God's throne was the living Lord, whose holiness has been offended. The ability to make the distinction between the person of God and the physical symbols he used to mediate his rule was an incredible breakthrough in a pagan culture.

The Israelites, on the other hand, when disciplined by the Lord, denied their privileged status and respond as if they had no access to revelation. When all their rituals failed, they conclude that if you get too close to God, you will always get hurt. "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" Did they not consider that Samuel was currently ministering in the presence of the Lord, standing in his holy presence? Therefore, if you are unable to serve in God's presence, the problem is not with God but with you. But instead of taking a good look at themselves and repenting of their sin, they take a page right out of the Phillies' playbook. Because God is no longer "safe," remove him as far away as possible. It's like that uncomfortable feeling of being trapped in a crowded elevator—proximity without intimacy. Unable to

look at one other, everyone stares upward at those little round lights that trace the elevator's progress.

Being brought face to face with someone you are not intimate with is uncomfortable at best. And when the hurt runs deep, the tension becomes unbearable. With God the downward slope of isolation begins when we stop talking to him. Prayer becomes perfunctory, then non-existent. Next we remove past reminders of the wonders of our courtship and marriage. Memories of old hymns and spiritual songs that once fed our souls are silenced and forgotten; photographs of special moments are put out of sight. Finally we distance ourselves geographically from God, dropping out of our fellowship groups and church altogether.

B. Deeper in denial (v. 21)

So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you."

Just as the Ashdodites passed the problem of the ark off to their sister city Gath, so the good citizens of Sunnyvale export their troubles to their neighbors in Morgan Hill. Given their belief that no one could stand before this holy God, the proposal to foist their problem on someone else demonstrates the depth of their depravity. Reading their terse e-mail, we observe a rather positive spin on the traumatic events in Sunnyvale, coupled with the deletion of one minor detail. The opening line sets a triumphant tone, making their request of retrieving the ark appear as if they were God's honorary destination. Of course there is nothing "untrue" in what they say, but what it conveys is a far cry from their mourning over the dead bodies in Sunnyvale. How could God's people justify such behavior?

Though Kiriath-jearim was located within Israel, it was a predominantly gentile city. Its second name, Baalah (Josh 15:9, 10), suggests that formerly it may have been a Canaanite high place of worship. During Israel's conquest under Joshua, it was part of the Gibeonite federation that used deception to make a covenant alliance with Israel (Josh 9). Once the deception was discovered, Israel was bound by oath not to destroy them, so they became servants at God's altar, hewing wood and carrying water (Josh 9:27). Could it be that the citizens of Sunnyvale were justified in their deception as an opportunity to return a measure of divine retribution? In any case, the reader is prepared for the worst. If removing the ark from city to city didn't work in Philistia, how could it possibly work in Israel?

C. Mourning in separation (7:1-2)

And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the LORD. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

Two French brothers, Jules and Gedeon Naudet, on assignment to make a documentary on the lives of rookie firefighters in Lower Manhattan, caught 9/11 on videotape. As I watched the unforgettable documentary, I'll never forget that terrible feeling of dread, seeing scores of firefighters in the line of duty ascending those towering infernos, unaware of the horror that awaited them. Knowing the devastation that followed the journeys of the ark, that same feeling seizes us as we read of the citizens of Kiriath-jearim accepting Sunnyvale's offer. In naïve obedience they arrive in Sunnyvale to transport the ark to their city.

But for the first time nothing bad happens—absolutely nothing: no ravaging plagues, no destructive mice, no decapitated gods in this predominantly Gentile city. Instead, the ark is brought to the home of Abinadab (“my father is noble”), who consecrates his son, Eleazar (“God gives help”), to “keep” the ark. This father and son duo seem to be the first to have given the ark a “noble” reception and, with “God’s help,” they are able to exercise proper care.

Here the ark remains in quarantine, and both parties are safe from further pain. The ark has come home. But there has been no reconciliation. If that is to occur, there will need to be honest discussion and drastic changes in the relationship. Until that time, this estranged couple (it seems neither party is up to talking) will remain legally separated in their separate spheres of pain.

How long will it take before someone breaks the ice? How long can you harden your heart to the one to whom you pledged your holy vows? For Israel it took twenty years, nearly half a generation. Yet during that time an unspeakable groaning rose to the surface, uniting the people in a wave of grief. For the first time in the books of Samuel we hear “all the house of Israel.” Still hurt and perhaps angry after two decades, as one people they longed for their first love with such an ache they could finally cry again.

When was the last time you cried in your longing for God?

Last week we learned that God so loves the world that when 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. This week we learn that even when his people are unwilling to serve in his cause of evangelism, he still loves them. Though they may be angry with him for whatever reason, he will patiently wait them out. And while you are waiting in your isolated corner of hurt, his emotions are deeply stirred for you. Can you hear his voice?

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.” (Hosea 11:8)

1 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), 283.

2 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 287.

3 “Historians are skeptical that 50,070 people actually resided in Beth-shemesh...Of course the reader is entitled to conclude that the textual controversies are somewhat miniscule compared with the theological controversy of the ‘striking’ within the boundaries of Israel—at least in the MT and LXX, more Israelites are struck by God because of the ark than numerous wars with the Philistines.” Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 61.

4 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 286.

5 Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 103.

6 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 49.

7 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 290.

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