

1 Samuel 5-6

Intro Playing with Fire June 1, 2008

I can still remember the phone call that came to our house with the news. My mother listened intently, the furrowed brow and bitten lip as she received bad news. I was only 9, but I knew something was wrong. When she hung-up, she called my brother Mark into the room to tell him the news. Mark's friend, Mike Keppel was in the hospital along with another acquaintance, Keith Reese. They were both severely burned.

As the events of the tragedy unfolded, what happened became clear. Adjacent to our neighborhood were scores of new homes going up. Mike and Keith did what young boys are warned not to do, went into the a house under construction and were armed with fireworks and matches. There they found a bucket of rags, soaking in what they thought was water. Pulling a pack of matches from his pocket, Keith thought it fun to flick burning matches into the bucket, listening for the hissing sound of the extinguished flame in the water. The bucket held not water, but the paint and oil soaked rages seeping in gasoline. With one flick of the match, the room ignited in flames. Other propellants in the room burst into flames, covering the two twelve year olds in fuel. Rushing from the structure, Mike dropped to the ground, soon extinguishing the flames. Keith rushed around and suffered the worst of the burns. Both boys lived. Both lives were forever changed.

That event sticks in my mind, as throughout my elementary years through to graduation I would see Keith at school. His neck and face hideously scared. In the summer the sight of his twisted, deformed armed, was hard not to draw stares. My brother bumped into Keith just five years ago. He never outgrew the scars.

Forty years have passed since that summer phone call. But I learned the truth of that old adage, if you play with fire, you're gonna get burned. The truth of that proverb is reinforced by our passage, for as dangerous and foolish it is to play with lit matches around gas soaked rags, how much more volatile for us to play with God.

Last week we considered God's glory shining in the most horrendous of circumstances. God's glory is not exiled by the power of our sin. Instead, God's glory is most supremely seen when we turn from sin.

That begs the question, though. For you and I don't always repent when we sin. Far too often we play with God, enjoying an activity that is more dangerous than tossing a match in a bucket of gas, when we play with God's glory, when we ignore the conditions of His holiness.

Our passage continues the story from last week and spells out the danger of playing with God, a danger that is present for both believer and unbeliever alike. In the past few weeks we have seen how God's people toyed with their observance of His statutes and expected Him to give them what they wanted. Confronted by their enemies, the Philistines to the west, the Israelites sought to manipulate God by carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's glorious presence, filled with His promises to be their God, into battle.

But God was not going to be a talisman, a good luck amulet to ensure their success. That day some 30,000 of God's people died on the battlefield. The carnage did not end there, for when aged Eli heard the news, he fell over dead, weighed down by his corpulent glory. Next his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas nine months pregnant, upon hearing the news of her husband's death, as well as that of her brother and father-in-law's demise, in addition to the most horrendous news, that the ark was captured by the Philistines, goes into labor and dies. Shortly before her own death, she names the poor child Ichabod, meaning the glory of God has departed.

But she was not entirely correct, for God's glory was not in exile, but is evidenced when God's people repent. But the question then and now, is, "Will they?" In these next chapters we see that then, as today, it is more pleasurable to play with God, than to glorify God. But when we do so, we are playing with fire and we will be burned.

I always read the passage we are about to look at, but this Sunday we are going to cover two whole chapters and the narrative will best caught if we walk through it, unpacking what it is we are to see here, listening for the lesson in the story.

The ark is no longer in Israel. The temple at Shiloh is empty of its prize. The priesthood is decimated. While Phinehas' wife lay dying, the Ark is carted off to Ashdod where it is housed in the temple of Dagon (5:1).

Dagon, a Canaanite god the Philistines adopted, was a god of grain and war. The vanquished Yahweh set next to the victorious Dagon, as the battle's booty was a sign of Philistine superiority.

When the sun rose the next day, the time for the first set of prayers back in Shiloh, the Philistine priests in Ashdod discovered a horrific sight. Dagon collapsed face first onto the ground. Obviously; such a desecration could not be tolerated. So they lifted Dagon back up. They had to lift up their god...this mighty god of valor totters over, unable to raise himself back up. Interesting.

The next day the priests enter the house of Dagon (4). Once again the mighty warrior was down, but this time his head and hands were severed. In a style of an execution, the loss of the head and hands humiliated a defeated foe. Like Humpty-Dumpty, the lords of Philistia were impotent to save their all powerful deity. The *victor* is vanquished.

Where is God's glory? It's right here. All that is left of this mighty Dagon is Dagon, a powerless statute. But God is not done with these people who relished their victory over Him, for he has a lesson for those who play with God, refusing to bow in worship. They, like Dagon, will bow.

But nobody understands what happened. Their god was broken, but rather than seeking to serve the God of Israel, they dare not tread on the threshold of Dagon's temple. Yea, that's where the power is found. It's the threshold that should be worshipped.

Verse 6 tells us where God's glory is found next. The hand of the Lord (God has hands...not Dagon) was heavy (remember your Hebrew...*kabod*...weighty, glorious, serious) upon the people of Ashdod.

God terrifies the people by afflicting them with tumors. We're not sure what these tumors were. If you know the story from the King James, their guess adds to the humor. Whatever the problem, the people were in dread. They know not what is happening, but they know what they must do. It is time to pass the Ark of the Lord off like a hot potato.

The lords of the Philistines gathered at a great convocation (8). Ashdod was the primary city of their little nation. Such a tragedy cannot be confined there. While in chapter 3 the Israelite elders concluded that the ark was the answer to their problems, the elders of Philistia were convinced it was the cause of their difficulties. So it was decided that this difficulty should be moved to Gath. I can just imagine the lord of Gath, being voted down (4-1) by his fellow leaders as he now takes on God's fire.

No sooner did the ark arrive than did the problems in Gath. God's hand (9), again rubbing in the fact that this bodiless ark contains more strength than mighty Dagon, is now set against this city. Panic ensues as young and old break out in these tumors.

Spielberg and Lucas have nothing on what God does. There are no melting Nazis as in the old Raiders when the lid is raised; instead, there is the slow, painful demise just because the ark is housed in the local temple in Gath.

What's a Philistine to do? The capital Ashdod is broken by the ark's presence. Gath is crippled. When all else fails, send it to your friends in the neighboring town. So off it goes to Ekron.

Picture the cart rambling down the street, guided by tumor laden Gathites, driving the oxen down main street. Understandably the people cry out: "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people." Worse than unloading a nuclear waste dump in your neighborhood, the sense of NIMBY (not in my backyard) prevails. For good reason, too! What to do? Having another convocation of the political leaders of the land. Their conclusion is an easy one. Get rid of the ark; send it back to its own place.

Once again (12) we are reminded that God's hand was glorious there, it was heavy, serious, as panic filled the city. If men did not die, the still suffered from the tumors. For seven months the ark menaced the land of the Philistines. The lords of the Philistines knew they did not know enough, so when in doubt, call in the theologians.

It is not enough to send it back. The big question is, "How?"

The priests and diviners of Philistia were summoned to answer the key question: "with what shall we send it to its place?" They know enough that they've played with fire and are sufficiently burned. But it is not enough to dump it off at the nearest city gate in Israel.

Send away the ark of the God of Israel away, just don't do it empty. You've got to make nice, show God you're sorry and didn't mean to be so insensitive. Send a guilt offering. They owe a debt to God. The seriousness of their offense has resulted in their sickness and only God may heal.

Now comes the big question. What's the price to alleviate guilt? Leviticus made it clear, it was a ram to picture the sacrifice Christ would make for us. But they are clueless. They imagine that golden images of their tumors will placate the wrath of Israel's God. But that's not all. They are to add five golden mice, for in 6:5 we are told that mice have ravaged the land. Could it be that the tumors were from the mice, what we know as bubonic plague?

But their efforts show their foolishness. They think that God will be happy with their breaking the second commandment, making images, and unclean images at that. But through it all, they know they must give God glory. Again, we see the theme of God's glory evidenced through their own sinfulness shine out.

But how to deliver the goods? Are we certain that the problems are really our disrespect of Yahweh?

Next part of their plan. Not wanting to look too foolish and returning an trophy that may not be the cause of their ills, they devise a plan that if it works out, they will know beyond a doubt that the God of Israel is the cause of their problems. They are uncertain in v5...perhaps he'll lighten his hand from you. There is no reason (v6) to harden your hearts like the Egyptians.

Again, this image of *kabod*, glory shines through as the word appears again. The hardening of the heart is to make one's heart heavy. There is a sense, we might say, that a hard heart is one in which glory rests with us and is not directed toward God. This is the core of self-righteousness, when we approach God on our terms, seeking our glory.

Here's the plan: make a new cart, get two milk cows, and see if they walk to Israel. What's so strange about that? These two milk cows have never been yoked; they are not trained to pull a cart, or to act as a team. What is more, they have two calves who want their mother's milk and two moms who will want to be with their calves. Keep the calves in the pen and don't drive the cows, just see what happens. What happens is a sign from the God of Israel.

The two cows head straight for the nearest Israelite settlement just beyond the Philistine's boarder, to the town of Beth-shemesh. Ignoring their maternal instincts and lack of training, they forge on, lowing as they go, a sign of discontentment, being driven, but no one is there.

We may think that should be the end of the story, for once Israel gets their ark back, the glory days would return. But as we saw last week the presence or absence of the ark does not add or distract from the glory of God. Rather, God's glory is evidenced whenever and wherever God so desires.

It is easy for us to laugh at the Philistine foolishness, seeing the folly of the fallen world trying to worship God by their own scheme. They're playing with fire and they got burned. Serves those wacky pagans right. What happens next is equally a warning not to play with fire.

The cows pull the cart up into the hill country, some 7 miles from Ekron, just across the border.

The town is significant to the story. Beth-shemesh was a Levitical town set aside for a specific clan of priests. The town was filled with Kohathites, the clan responsible for the care of the Ark (Num 4:4,15). The people were out in the wheat fields (its spring now) harvesting their crop (6:13) and look up and see these cows, by themselves, pulling a cart on which is the Ark.

Their joy would be irrepressible. At last God has returned. The cows conveniently stop in the field (14) of Joshua, right next to a great stone. What timing! What providence! The Ark is removed, the cart disassembled, a fire is built. It is time to worship God. It's time for sacrifice. The cows are offered as a burnt offering. Now the Levitical priests are playing with fire. Leviticus 1:3 specify that a burnt offering must be a male. But no matter. Make use with what you have. God won't mind.

What they do next should likewise raise a few eyebrows. There on the stone they set the Ark...and the golden figures. Another word for figure? Idol. Since when was the ark to be put on display? Was this just a lapse of judgment? Notice the end of v18...the stone was still known to the readers some years later.

It would be great to end the story there. The bad guys got tumors, the good guys got the ark. The bad people can't figure how to worship God, but God's people know how to sacrifice. But that is not the end. What happens next is sobering.

Some of the men looked on the ark and died. It is not that they looked in. They just looked on it. What this means we are not sure. They acted contrary to the way God instructed these Levites to operate. They were to cover it, not treat it with such disrespect. The very men God called to care for his Ark were being killed. Their response understandable: "who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? An to whom shall he go up away from us?"

Good first question, bad second. Instead of mourning for their sin, they grieve because God's hand was now heavy on them. They are no different than the pagan Philistines. They pawn it off on a neighboring town, giving the recipients little info as to the problems that might ensue.

It arrived in Kiriath-jearim where Eleazar of the house of Abinadab was in charge of it. For the next 20 years there it remained and all Israel mourned.

Israelites receive God with joy, but act as though they are free to handle God as they wish.

They know they have their God back, but they play with him like little boys and matches. Like tossing fire into gas, when we yawn our way through our worship, when God's standards are but a nuisance, we are in danger. We are playing with fire.

Earlier we sang the most recognizable hymn. If a movie has Christians gathering for worship, this is the tune used. If there is a tragedy and people wish to be spiritual, this is what is sung. But those words will either warm us with delight or burn us with fire if we do not remember that God's grace is so amazing, his love so divine that I must give him my life, my love, my all.

Are you guilty of being flippant in your faith? Not taking serious the call to discipleship? IT happens when we, who are forgiven, refuse to forgive, we take fire into our laps, as Proverbs reminds us, when we play with immorality. Our hardened hearts need not seethe with bitterness, they just may be content with our own accomplishments, taking glory on their own.

But here is the flip side. This passage should warn us, not because God is contrary and should be handled like some flammable substance; you never know when He'll explode on you. Rather, God is clear that he calls for us to come humbly to Him on his terms.

When you willingly do that, you have reason not to cower in fear, but to leave here with your head held up high. You have not God's heavy hand on your back, but His powerful arms hold you up, for all glory shines on him.

The priests of Beth-shemesh ask a critical question, but look past their own vocation, unable to see the answer. How often do we make the same foolish mistake? Look at v20. Who is able to stand before the Lord? Neither you nor I can do that, but His Son does.

When we celebrate the wonderful family meal each month, I read from 1 Corinthians 11. There we hear the same warning, for in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we dine on God's grace. We are called to receive it as hungry sinners. But how often do we partake as those satisfied with ourselves, have stuffed our stomachs with the promises of our world. There is a warning we must take serious, otherwise, you and I are playing with fire.

Some become sick. Some fall asleep. Not tumors or mice, but a powerful reminder that to take and eat, the sign and seal of God's covenant of grace must be discerned by His people.

It is for this reason that we fence the table. The words of institution are not to evoke a somber time. Rather those that partake, having been baptized and admitted into a church in which the Word of God is opened and the gospel is explained, examine themselves, discern their relationship with Christ. This morning, consider what you are about to do. The fire of God's grace can warm you, empower you to see the depth of your need. Don't play with fire; rather come here to be warm and feed.