

CHAPTER 5

It is now time to enquire what has become of the ark of God; we cannot but think that we shall hear more of that sacred treasure. I should have thought the next news would have been that all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, had gathered together as one man, with a resolution to bring it back, or die in the attempt; but we find not any motion made of that kind, so little was there of zeal or courage left among them. Nay, we do not find that they desired a treaty with the Philistines about the ransom of it, or offered any thing in lieu of it. "It is gone, and let it go." Many have softness enough to lament the loss of the ark that have not hardiness enough to take one step towards the recovery of it, any more than Israel here. If the ark will help itself it may, for they will not help it. Unworthy they were of the name of Israelites that could thus tamely part with the glory of Israel. God would therefore take the work into his own hands and plead his own cause, since men would not appear for him. We are told in this chapter,

I. How the Philistines triumphed over the ark (v. 1, 2), and,

II. How the ark triumphed over the Philistines,

1. Over Dagon their god (v. 3-5).

2. Over the Philistines themselves, who were sorely plagued with emerods, and made weary of the ark; the men of Ashdod first (v. 6, 7), then the men of Gath (v. 8, 9), and lastly those of Ekron, which forced them at length upon a resolution to send the ark back to the land of Israel; for when God judgeth he will overcome.

~~1011~~ 1 SAMUEL 5:1-5

THE FALL OF DAGON

Here is,

I. The Philistines' triumph over the ark, which they were the more pleased, the more proud, to be now masters of, because before the battle they were possessed with a great fear of it, ~~1011~~ 1 Samuel 4:7. When they had it in their

hands God restrained them, that they did not offer any violence to it, did not break it to pieces, as the Israelites were ordered to do by the idols of the heathen, but showed some respect to it, and carefully carried it to a place of safety. Whether their curiosity led them to open it, and to read what was written with the finger of God on the two tables of stone that were in it, we are not told; perhaps they looked no further than the golden outside and the cherubim that covered it, like children that are more affected with the fine binding of their bibles than with the precious matter contained in them. They carried it to Ashdod, one of their five cities, and that in which Dagon's temple was; there they placed the ark of God, *by Dagon* (v. 2), either

1. As a sacred thing, which they designed to pay some religious respect to, in conjunction with Dagon; for the gods of the heathen were never looked upon as averse to partners. Though the nations would not change their gods, yet they would multiply them and add to them. But they were mistaken in the God of Israel when, in putting his ark by Dagon's image, they intended to do him honour; for he is not worshipped at all if he is not worshipped alone. *The Lord our God is one Lord.* Or rather,

2. They placed it there as a trophy of victory, in honour of Dagon their god, to whom no doubt they intended to offer a great sacrifice, as they had done when they had taken Samson (~~<0762>~~Judges 16:23, 24), boasting that as then they had triumphed over Israel's champion so now over Israel's God. What a reproach was this to God's great name! what a *disgrace to the throne of his glory!* Shall the ark, the symbol of God's presence, be a prisoner to Dagon, a dunghill deity?

(1.) So it is, because God will show of how little account the ark of the covenant is if the covenant itself be broken and neglected; even sacred signs are not things that either he is tied to or we can trust to.

(2.) So it is for a time, that God may have so much the more glory, in reckoning with those that thus affront him, and get him honour upon them. Having punished Israel, that betrayed the ark, by giving it into the hands of the Philistines, he will next deal with those that abused it, and will fetch it out of their hands again. Thus even the *wrath of man shall praise him;* and he is bringing about his own glory even when he seems to neglect it, ~~<0760>~~Psalm 76:10. Out of the eater shall come forth meat.

II. The ark's triumph over Dagon. Once and again Dagon was made to fall before it. If they designed to do honour to the ark, God thereby showed that he valued not their honour, nor would he accept it; for he will be worshipped, not *with* any god, but *above* all gods. *He owes a shame* (as bishop Hall expresses it) *to those who will be making matches betwixt himself and Belial*. But they really designed to affront it, and though for some hours Dagon stood by the ark, and it is likely stood above it (the ark, as its footstool), yet the next morning, when the worshippers of Dagon came to pay their devotions to his shrine, they found their triumphing short, ^{<815>}Job 20:5.

1. Dagon, that is, the image (for that was all the god), had *fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark*, v. 3. God had seemed to forget the ark, but see how the Psalmist speaks of his appearing, at last, to vindicate his own honour. When he had delivered his strength into captivity, and all seemed going to ruin, *then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine*, ^{<978>}Psalm 78:59-65. And therefore he prevented the utter desolations of the Jewish church, because he *feared the wrath of the enemy*, ^{<622>}Deuteronomy 32:26, 27. Great care was taken, in setting up the images of their gods, to fix them. The prophet takes notice of it, ^{<240>}Isaiah 41:7, *He fastened it with nails that it should not be moved*; and again, ^{<240>}Isaiah 46:7. And yet Dagon's fastenings stood him in no stead. The ark of God triumphs over him upon his own dunghill, in his own temple. Down he comes before the ark, directly towards it (though the ark was set on one side of him), as it were, pointing to the conqueror, to whom he is constrained to yield and do homage. Note, The kingdom of Satan will certainly fall before the kingdom of Christ, error before truth, profaneness before godliness, and corruption before grace in the hearts of the faithful. When the interests of religion seem to be run down and ready to sink, yet even then we may be confident that the day of their triumph will come. Great is the truth, and will prevail. Dagon by falling prostrate before the ark of God, which was a posture of adoration, did as it were direct his worshippers to pay their homage to the God of Israel, as *greater than all gods*. See ^{<1281>}Exodus 18:11.

2. The priests, finding their idol on the floor, make all the haste they can, before it be known, to set him in his place again. A sorry silly thing it was to make a god of, which, when it was down, wanted help to get up again; and sottish wretches those were that could pray for help from that idol that needed, and in effect implored, their help. How could they attribute their

victory to the power of Dagon when Dagon himself could not keep his own ground before the ark? But they are resolved Dagon shall be their god still, and therefore set him in his place. Bishop Hall observes hence, It is just with God that those who want grace shall want wit too; and it is the work of superstition to turn men into the stocks and stones they worship. *Those that make them are like unto them.* What is it that the great upholders of the antichristian kingdom are doing at this day but heaving Dagon up, and labouring to set him in his place again, and healing the deadly wound that has been given to the beast? but if the reformation be the cause of God, before which it has begun to fall, it shall not prevail, but shall surely fall before it.

3. The next night Dagon fell the second time, v. 4. They rose early, either, as usual, to make their addresses to their god, or earlier than usual, being impatient to know whether Dagon had kept his standing this night; and, to their great confusion, they find his case worse now than before. Whether the matter of which the image was made was apt to break or no, so it was that the head and hands were *cut off upon the threshold*, so that nothing remained but the stump, or, as the margin reads it, *the fishy part of Dagon*; for (as many learned men conjecture) the upper part of this image was in a human shape, the lower in the shape of a fish, as mermaids are painted. Such strong delusions were idolaters given up to, so vain were they in their imaginations, and so wretchedly darkened were their foolish hearts, as to worship the images, not only of creatures, but of nonentities, the mere figments of fancy. Well, the misshapen monster is by this fall made to appear,

(1.) Very ridiculous, and worthy to be despised. A pretty figure Dagon made now, when the fall had anatomized him, and shown how the human part and the fishy part were artificially put together, which perhaps the ignorant devotees had been made to believe was done by miracle!

(2.) Very impotent, and unworthy to be prayed to or trusted in; for his losing his head and hands proved him utterly destitute both of wisdom and power, and for ever disabled either to advise or act for his worshippers. This they got by setting Dagon in his place again; they had better have let him alone when he was down. But those can speed no better that contend with God, and will set up that which he is throwing down, ^{<3010>}Malachi 1:4. God, by this, magnified his ark and made it honourable, when they vilified and made it contemptible. He also showed what will be the end of all that

which is set up in opposition to him. *Gird yourselves, but you shall be broken to pieces,* ^{<389>}Isaiah 8:9.

4. The threshold of Dagon's temple was ever looked upon as sacred, and not to be trodden on, v. 5. Some think that reference is had to this superstitious usage of Dagon's worshippers in ^{<300>}Zephaniah 1:9, where God threatens to punish those who, in imitation of them, leaped over the threshold. One would have thought that this incontestable proof of the ark's victory over Dagon would convince the Philistines of their folly in worshipping such a senseless thing, and that henceforward they would pay their homage to the conqueror; but, instead of being reformed, they were hardened in their idolatry, and, as evil men and seducers are wont to do, became worse and worse, ^{<383>}2 Timothy 3:13. Instead of despising Dagon, for the threshold's sake that beheaded him, they were almost ready to worship the threshold because it was the block on which he was beheaded, and will never set their feet on that on which Dagon lost his head, shaming those who *tread under foot the blood of the covenant* and trample on things truly sacred. Yet this piece of superstition would help to perpetuate the remembrance of Dagon's disgrace; for, with the custom, the reason would be transmitted to posterity, and the children that should be born, enquiring why the threshold of Dagon's temple must not be trodden on, would be told that Dagon fell before the ark of the Lord. Thus God would have honour even out of their superstition. We are not told that they repaired the broken image; it is probable that they sent the art of God away first, and then they patched it up again, and set it in its place; for, it seems, *they cannot deliver their souls, nor say, Is there not a lie in our right hand?* ^{<340>}Isaiah 44:20.

^{<0986>}1 SAMUEL 5:6-12

THE DISTRESS OF THE PHILISTINES

The downfall of Dagon (if the people had made a good use of it, and had been brought by it to repent of their idolatries and to humble themselves before the God of Israel and seek his face) might have prevented the vengeance which God here proceeds to take upon them for the indignities done to his ark, and their obstinate adherence to their idol, in defiance of the plainest conviction. *Lord, when thy hand is lifted up they will not see,*

but they shall see, ^{<2361>}Isaiah 26:11. And, if they will not see the glory, they shall feel the weight, of God's hand, for so the Philistines did. *The hand of the Lord was heavy upon them* (v. 6), and he not only convinced them of their folly, but severely chastised their insolence.

1. *He destroyed them*, that is, cut many of them off by sudden death, those, we may suppose, that had most triumphed in the captivity of the ark. This is distinguished from the disease with which others were smitten. At Gath it is called *a great destruction* (v. 9), *a deadly destruction*, v. 11. And it is expressly said (v. 12) that those who were *smitten with the emerods were the men that died not* by the other *destruction*, which probably was the pestilence. They boasted of the great slaughter which their sword had made among the Israelites, ^{<6040>}1 Samuel 4:10. But God lets them know that though he does not see fit to draw Israel's sword against them (they were unworthy to be employed), yet God had a sword of his own, with which he could make a no less dreadful execution among them, which if he whet, and *his hand take hold on judgment, he will render vengeance to his enemies*, ^{<6344>}Deuteronomy 32:41, 42. Note, Those that contend with God, his ark, and his Israel, will infallibly be ruined at last. If conviction conquer not, destruction shall.

2. Those that were not destroyed *he smote with emerods* (v. 6), *in their secret parts* (v. 9), so grievous that (v. 12) *the cry went up to heaven*, that is, it might be heard a great way off, and perhaps, in the extremity of their pain and misery, they cried, not to Dagon, but to the God of heaven. The Psalmist, speaking of this sore judgment upon the Philistines, describes it thus: *God smote his enemies in the hinder parts, and put them to a perpetual reproach*, ^{<3786>}Psalm 78:66. The emerods (which we call the piles, and perhaps it was then a more grievous disease than it is now) is threatened among the judgments that would be the fruit of the curse, ^{<6327>}Deuteronomy 28:27. It was both a painful and shameful disease; a vile disease for vile deserts. By it God would humble their pride, and put contempt upon them, as they had done upon his ark. The disease was epidemical, and perhaps, among them, a new disease. *Ashdod was smitten, and the coasts thereof*, the country round. For contempt of God's ordinances, *many are weak and sick, and many sleep*, ^{<6113>}1 Corinthians 11:30.

3. The men of Ashdod were soon aware that it was *the hand of God, the God of Israel*, v. 7. Thus they were constrained to acknowledge his power

and dominion, and confess themselves within his jurisdiction, and yet they would not renounce Dagon and submit to Jehovah; but rather, now that he touched their bone and their flesh, and in a tender part, they were ready to curse him to his face, and instead of making their peace with him, and courting the stay of his ark upon better terms, they desired to get clear of it, as the Gadarenes, who, when they had lost their swine, desired Christ to *depart out of their coasts*. Carnal hearts, when they smart under the judgments of God, would rather, if it were possible, put him far from them than enter into covenant and communion with him, and make him their friend. Thus the men of Ashdod resolve, *The ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us*.

4. It is resolved to change the place of its imprisonment. A great council was called, and the question proposed to all the lords was, “What shall be we with the ark?” And at last it was agreed that it should be carried to Gath, v. 8. Some superstitious conceit they had that the fault was in the place, and that the ark would be better pleased with another lodging, further off from Dagon's temple; and therefore, instead of returning it, as they should have done, to its own place, they contrive to send it to another place. *Gath* is pitched upon, a place famed for a race of giants, but their strength and stature are no fence against the pestilence and the emerods: the men of that city were smitten, *both great and small* (v. 9), both dwarfs and giants, all alike to God's judgments; none so great as to over-top them, none so small as to be over-looked by them.

5. They were all at last weary of the ark, and very willing to get rid of it. It was sent from Gath to Ekron, and, coming by order of council, the Ekronites could not refuse it, but were much exasperated against their great men for sending them such a fatal present (v. 10): *They have sent it to us to slay us and our people*. The ark had the tables of the law in it; and nothing more welcome to faithful Israelites than the word of God (to them it is *a savour of life unto life*), but to uncircumcised Philistines, that persist in enmity to God, nothing more dreadful nor unwelcome: to them it is *a savour of death unto death*. A general assembly is instantly called, to advise about *sending the ark again to its place*, v. 11. While they are consulting about it, the hand of God is doing execution; and their contrivances to evade the judgment do but spread it. Many drop down dead among them. Many more are raging ill of the emerods, v. 12. What shall they do? Their triumphs in the captivity of the ark are soon turned into lamentations, and they are as eager to quit it as ever they had been to

seize it. Note, God can easily make Jerusalem a burdensome stone to all that heave at it, ^{<312B>}Zechariah 12:3. Those that fight against God will soon have enough of it, and, first or last, will be made to know that none ever hardened their hearts against him and prospered. The wealth that is got by fraud and injustice, especially that which is got by sacrilege and robbing God, though swallowed greedily, and rolled under the tongue as a sweet morsel, must be vomited up again; for, till it be, the sinner shall not *feel quietness in his belly*, ^{<3105>}Job 20:15-20.