

# CHAPTER 6

In this chapter we have the return of the ark to the land of Israel, whither we are now gladly to attend it, and observe,

**I.** How the Philistines dismissed it, by the advice of their priests (v. 1-11), with rich presents to the God of Israel, to make an atonement for their sin (v. 3-5), and yet with a project to bring it back, unless Providence directed the kine, contrary to their inclination, to go to the land of Israel (v. 8, 9).

**II.** How the Israelites entertained it.

1. With great joy and sacrifices of praise (v. 12-18).
2. With an over-bold curiosity to look into it, for which many of them were struck dead, the terror of which moved them to send it forward to another city (v. 19-21).

## <000>1 SAMUEL 6:1-9

### THE ARK AMONG THE PHILISTINES

The first words of the chapter tell us how long the captivity of the ark continued — it was *in the country of the Philistines seven months. In the field of the Philistines* (so it is in the original), from which some gather that, having tried it in all their cities, and found it a plague to the inhabitants of each, at length they sent it into the open fields, upon which mice sprang up out of the ground in great multitudes, and destroyed the corn which was now nearly ripe and marred the land. With that judgment they were plagued (v. 5), and yet it is not mentioned in the foregoing chapter; so God let them know that wherever they carried the ark, so long as they carried it captive, they should find it a curse to them. *Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed in the field,* <000>Deuteronomy 28:16. But, most take it to signify, as we render it, *The country of the Philistines.* Now,

**1.** Seven months Israel was punished with the absence of the ark, that special token of God's presence. How bare did the tabernacle look without it! How was the holy city now a desolation, and the holy land a wilderness!

A melancholy time no doubt it was to the good people among them, particularly to Samuel; but they had this to comfort themselves with, as we have in the like distress when we are deprived of the comfort of public ordinances, that, wherever the ark is, *the Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven*, and by faith and prayer we may have access with boldness to him there. We may have God nigh unto us when the ark is at a distance.

**2.** Seven months the Philistines were punished with the presence of the ark; so long it was a plague to them, because they would not send it home sooner. Note, Sinners lengthen out their own miseries by obstinately refusing to part with their sins. Egypt's plagues would have been fewer than ten if Pharaoh's heart had not been hardened not to let the people go. But at length it is determined that the ark must be sent back; there is no remedy, they are undone if they detain it.

**I.** The priests and the diviners are consulted about it, v. 2. They were supposed to be best acquainted both with the rules of wisdom and with the rites of worship and atonement. And the Israelites being their neighbours, and famed above all people for the institutions of their religion, they had no doubt the curiosity to acquaint themselves with their laws and usages; and therefore it was proper to ask them, *What shall we do to the ark of Jehovah?* All nations have had a regard to their priests, as the men whose lips keep knowledge. Had the Philistines diviners? We have divines, of whom we should enquire wherewith we shall *come before the Lord* and *bow ourselves before the most high God*.

**II.** They give their advice very fully, and seem to be very unanimous in it. It was a wonder they did not, as friends to their country, give it, *ex officio* — *officially*, before they were asked.

**1.** They urge it upon them that it was absolutely necessary to send the ark back, from the example of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, v. 6. Some, it may be, were loth to yield, and were willing to try it out with the ark awhile longer, and to them they apply themselves: *Wherefore do you harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?* It seems they were well acquainted with the Mosaic history, and could cite precedents out of it. This good use we should make of the remaining records of God's judgments upon obstinate sinners, we should by them be warned not to harden our hearts as they did. It is much cheaper to learn by other people's

experience than by our own. The Egyptians were forced at last to let Israel go; therefore let the Philistines yield in time to let the ark go.

2. They advise that, when they sent it back, they should send a trespass-offering with it, v. 3. Whatever the gods of other nations were, they knew the God of Israel was a jealous God, and how strict he was in his demands of sin-offerings and trespass-offerings from his own people; and therefore, since they found how highly he resented the affront of holding his ark captive, those with whom he had such a quarrel must *in any wise return him a trespass-offering*, and they could not expect to be healed upon any other terms. Injured justice demands satisfaction. So far natural light instructed men. But when they began to contrive what that satisfaction should be, they became wretchedly vain in their imaginations. But those who by wilful sin have imprisoned the truth in unrighteousness, as the Philistines did the ark (~~4118~~Romans 1:18), may conclude that there is no making their peace with him whom they have thus injured but by a sin-offering; and we know but one that can take away sin.

3. They direct that this trespass-offering should be an acknowledgement of the punishment of their iniquity, by which they might take shame to themselves as conquered and yielding, and guilty before God, and might *give glory to the God of Israel* as their mighty conqueror and most just avenger, v. 5. They must make images of the *emerods*, that is, of the swellings and sores with which they had been afflicted, so making the reproach of that shameful disease perpetual by their own act and deed (~~4786~~Psalms 78:66), also images of the *mice that had marred the land*, owning thereby the almighty power of the God of Israel, who could chastise and humble them, even in the day of their triumph, by such small and despicable animals. These images must be made of gold, the most precious metal, to intimate that they would gladly purchase their peace with the God of Israel at any rate, and would not think it bought too dearly with gold, *with much fine gold*. The *golden emerods* must be, in number, five, according to the *number of the lords*, who, it is likely, were all afflicted with them, and were content thus to own it; it was advised that the *golden mice* should be five too, but, because the whole country was infested with them, it should seem, upon second thoughts, they sent more of them, *according to the number both of the fenced cities and of the country villages*, v. 18. Their priests reminded them that *one plague was on them all*; they could not blame one another, for they were all guilty, which they were plainly told by being all plagued. Their proposal to offer a

trespass-offering for their offence was conformable enough to divine revelation at that time; but to send such things as these for trespass-offerings was very foreign, and showed them grossly ignorant of the methods of reconciliation appointed by the law of Moses; for there it appears all along that it is blood, and not gold, that makes atonement for the soul.

**4.** They encourage them to hope that hereby they would take an effectual course to get rid of the plague: *You shall be healed*, v. 3. For, it seems, the disease obstinately resisted all the methods of cure their physicians had prescribed. "Let them therefore send back the ark, and then," say they, "*It shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you*, that is, by this it will appear whether it is for your detaining the ark that you are thus plagued; for, if it be, upon your delivering it up the plague will cease." God has sometimes put his people upon making such a trial, whether their reformation would not be their relief. *Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts*, <sup><3430></sup>Malachi 3:10; <sup><3028></sup>Haggai 2:18, 19. Yet they speak doubtfully (v. 5): *Peradventure he will lighten his hand from off you*; as if now they began to think that the judgment might come from God's hand, and yet not be removed immediately upon the restitution of the ark; however that was the likeliest way to obtain mercy. Take away the cause and the effect will cease.

**5.** Yet they put them in a way to make a further trial whether it was the hand of the God of Israel that had smitten them with these plagues or no. They must, in honour of the ark, put it on a new cart or carriage, to be drawn by two milch-cows, that had calves daily sucking them (v. 7), unused to draw, and inclined to home, both for the sake of the crib where they were fed and of the calves they nourished, and, besides, altogether unacquainted with the road that led towards the land of Israel. They must have no one to lead or drive them, but must take their own way, which, in all reason, one might expect, would be home again; and yet, unless the God of Israel, after all the other miracles he has wrought, will work one more, and by an invisible power lead these cows, contrary to their natural instinct and inclination, to the land of Israel, and particularly to Beth-shemesh, they will retract their former opinion, and will believe it was not the hand of God that smote them, but it was a chance that *happened to them*, v. 8, 9. Thus did God suffer himself to be tempted and prescribed to, after he had been otherwise affronted, by these uncircumcised Philistines. Would they have been content that the honour of Dagon, their god, should be put upon

such an issue as this? See how willing bad men are to shift off their convictions of the hand of God upon them, and to believe, when they are in trouble, that it is *a chance that happens to them*; and, if so, the rod has no voice which they are concerned to hear or heed.

## ~~<0760>~~ 1 SAMUEL 6:10-18

### THE RESTORATION OF THE ARK

We are here told,

**I.** How the Philistines dismissed the ark, v. 10, 11. They were made as glad to part with it as ever they had been to take it. As God had fetched Israel out of the house of bondage, so now he fetched the ark out of its captivity, in such a manner as that *Egypt was glad when they departed*, ~~<0458>~~ Psalm 105:38.

**1.** They received no money or price for the ransom of it, as they hoped to do, even beyond a king's ransom. Thus it is prophesied of Cyrus (~~<23613>~~ Isaiah 45:13), *He shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward*. Nay,

**2.** They gave jewels of gold, as the Egyptians did to the Israelites, to be rid of it. Thus the ark that was carried into the land of the Philistines, a trophy of their victory, carried back with it trophies of its own, and lasting monuments of the disgrace of the Philistines. Note, God will be no loser in his glory, at last, by the successes of the church's enemies against his ark, but will get himself honour from those that seek to do dishonour to him.

**II.** How the kine brought it to the land of Israel, v. 12. They *took the straight way to Beth-shemesh*, the next city of the land of Israel, and a priests' city, *and turned not aside*. This was a wonderful instance of the power of God over the brute-creatures, and, all things considered, no less than a miracle, that cattle unaccustomed to the yoke should draw so even, so orderly, and still go forward, — that, without any driver, they should go from home, to which all tame creatures have a natural inclination, and from their own calves, to which they had a natural affection, — that, without any director, they should go the straight road to Beth-shemesh, a city eight or ten miles off, never miss the way, never turn aside into the fields to feed themselves, nor turn back home to feed their calves. They went on lowing

for their young ones, by which it appeared that they had not forgotten them, but that nature was sensible of the grievance of going from them; the power of the God of nature therefore appeared so much the greater, in overruling one of the strongest instincts of nature. These two kine, says Dr. Lightfoot, knew their owner, their great owner (~~200B~~ Isaiah 1:3), whom Hophni and Phinehas knew not, to which I may add they brought home the ark to shame the stupidity of Israel, that made no attempt to fetch it home. God's providence is conversant about the motions even of brute-creatures, and serves its own purposes by them. The lords of the Philistines, with a suitable retinue no doubt, went after them, wondering at the power of the God of Israel; and thus those who thought to triumph over the ark were made to go like menial servants after it.

**III.** How it was welcomed to the land of Israel: *The men of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat-harvest*, v. 13. They were going on with their worldly business, and were in no care about the ark, made no enquiries what had become of it; if they had, it is likely they might have had private intelligence beforehand of its coming, and might have gone to meet it, and conduct it into their own border. But they were as careless as the people that *ceiled their own houses and let God's house lie waste*. Note, God will in his own time effect the deliverance of his church, not only though it be fought against by its enemies, but though it be neglected by its friends. Some observe that the returning ark found the men of Beth-shemesh, not idling or sporting in the streets of the city, but busy, reaping their corn in their fields, and well employed. Thus the tidings of the birth of Christ were brought to the shepherds when they were *keeping their flock by night*. The devil visits idle men with his temptations. God visits industrious men with his favours. The same invisible hand that directed the kine to the land of Israel brought them into the field of Joshua, and in that field they stood, some think for the owner's sake, on whom, being a very good man, they suppose God designed to put this honour. I rather think it was for the sake of the great stone in that field, which was convenient to put the ark upon, and which is spoken of, v. 14, 15, 18. Now,

**1.** When the reapers *saw the ark, they rejoiced* (v. 13); their joy for that was greater than the joy of harvest, and therefore they left their work to bid it welcome. When the Lord turned again the captivity of his ark they were *like men that dream; then was their mouth filled with laughter*, ~~200B~~ Psalm 126:1, 2. Though they had not zeal and courage enough to attempt the rescue or ransom of it, yet, when it did come, they bade it

heartily welcome. Note, The return of the ark, and the revival of holy ordinances, after days of restraint and trouble, cannot but be matter of great joy to every faithful Israelite.

**2.** They offered up the kine for a burnt-offering, to the honour of God, and made use of the wood of the cart for fuel, v. 14. Probably the Philistines intended these, when they sent them, to be a part of their trespass-offering, to make atonement, v. 3, 7. However, the men of Beth-shemesh looked upon it as proper to make this use of them, because it was by no means fit that ever they should be put to any other use; never shall that cart carry any common thing that has once carried that sacred symbol of the divine presence: and the kine had been under such an immediate guidance of heaven that God had, as it were, already laid claim to them; they were servants to him, and therefore must be sacrifices to him, and no doubt were accepted, though females, whereas, in strictness, every burnt-offering was to be a male.

**3.** They deposited the ark, with a chest of jewels that the Philistines presented, upon the great stone in the open field, a cold lodging for the ark of the Lord and a very mean one; yet better so than in Dagon's temple, or in the hands of the Philistines. It is desirable to see the ark in its habitation in all the circumstances of solemnity and splendour; but better have it upon a great stone, and in the fields of the wood, than be without it. The intrinsic grandeur of instituted ordinances ought not to be diminished in our eyes by the meanness and poverty of the place where they are administered. As the burning of the cart and cows that brought home the ark might be construed to signify their hopes that it should never be carried away again out of the land of Israel, so the setting of it upon a great stone might signify their hopes that it should be established again upon a firm foundation. The church is built upon a rock.

**4.** They offered the sacrifices of thanksgiving to God, some think upon the great stone, more probably upon an altar of earth made for the purpose, v. 15. And, the case being extraordinary, the law for offering at the altar in the court of the tabernacle was dispensed with, and the more easily because Shiloh was now dismantled; God himself had forsaken it, and the ark, which was its chief glory, they had with them here. Beth-shemesh, though it lay within the lot of the tribe of Dan, yet belonged to Judah, so that this accidental bringing of the ark hither was an indication of its designed settlement there, in process of time; for, when God *refused the tabernacle*

of Joseph, he chose the tribe of Judah, <sup><1985></sup>Psalm 78:67, 68. It was one of those cities which were assigned out of the lot of Judah to the *sons of Aaron*, <sup><16216></sup>Joshua 21:16. Whither should the ark go but to a priests' city? And it was well they had those of that sacred order ready (for though they are here called *Levites*, v. 15, yet it should seem they were priests) both to take down the ark and to offer the sacrifices.

**5.** The lords of the Philistines returned to Ekron, much affected, we may suppose, with what they had seen of the glory of God and the zeal of the Israelites, and yet not reclaimed from the worship of Dagon; for how seldom *has a nation changed its gods, though they were no gods!* <sup><2021></sup>Jeremiah 2:11. Though they cannot but think the God of Israel *glorious in holiness and fearful in praises*, yet they are resolved they will think Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, at least as good as he, and to him they will cleave because he is theirs.

**6.** Notice is taken of the continuance of the great stone in the same place; there it is *unto this day* (v. 18), because it remained a lasting memorial of this great event, and served to support the traditional history by which it was transmitted to posterity. The fathers would say to the children, "This is the stone upon which the ark of God was set when it came out of the Philistines' hands, a thing never to be forgotten."

## <sup><0169></sup>1 SAMUEL 6:19-21

### THE ARK AT BETH-SHEMESH

Here is,

**1.** The sin of the men of Beth-shemesh: *They looked into the ark of the Lord*, v. 19. Every Israelite had heard great talk of the ark, and had been possessed with a profound veneration for it; but they had been told that it was lodged within a veil, and even the high priest himself might not look upon it but once a year, and then through a cloud of incense. Perhaps this made many say (as we are apt to covet that which is forbidden) what a great deal they would give for a sight of it. Some of these Beth-shemites, we may suppose, for that reason, *rejoiced to see the ark* (v. 13) more than for the sake of the public. Yet this did not content them; they might see it, but they would go further, they would take off the covering, which it is

likely was nailed or screwed on, and look into it, under pretence of seeing whether the Philistines had not taken the two tables out of it or some way damaged them, but really to gratify a sinful curiosity of their own, which intruded into those things that God had thought fit to conceal from them. Note, It is a great affront to God for vain men to pry into and meddle with the secret things which belong not to them, <sup><1639></sup>Deuteronomy 29:29; <sup><1028></sup>Colossians 2:18. We were all ruined by an ambition of forbidden knowledge. That which made this looking into the ark a great sin was that it proceeded from a very low and mean opinion of the ark. The familiarity they had with it upon this occasion bred contempt and irreverence. Perhaps they presumed upon their being priests; but the dignity of the ministerial office will be so far from excusing that it will aggravate a careless and irreverent treatment of holy things. They should, by their example, have taught others to keep their distance and look upon the ark with a holy awe. Perhaps they presumed upon the kind entertainment they had given the ark, and the sacrifices they had now offered to welcome it home with, for which they thought the ark was indebted to them, and they might be allowed to repay themselves with the satisfaction of looking into it. But let no man think that his service done for God will justify him in any instance of disrespect or irreverence towards the things of God. Or it may be they presumed upon the present mean circumstances the ark was in, newly come out of captivity, and unsettled; now that it stood upon a cold stone, they thought they might make free with it; they should never have such another opportunity of being familiar with it. It is an offence to God if we think meanly of his ordinances because of the meanness of the manner of their administration. Had they looked with an understanding eye upon the ark, and not judged purely by outward appearance, they would have thought that the ark never shone with greater majesty than it did not. It had triumphed over the Philistines, and come out of its house of bondage (like Christ out of the grave) by its own power; had they considered this, they would not have looked into it thus, as a common chest.

**2.** Their punishment for this sin: *He smote the men of Beth-shemesh, many of them, with a great slaughter.* How jealous is God for the honour of his ark! He will not suffer it to be profaned. *Be not deceived, God is not mocked.* Those that will not fear his goodness, and reverently use the tokens of his grace, shall be made to feel his justice, and sink under the tokens of his displeasure. Those that pry into what is forbidden, and come too near to holy fire, will find it is at their peril. *He smote 50,070 men.* This

account of the numbers smitten is expressed in a very unusual manner in the original, which, besides the improbability that there should be so many guilty and so many slain, occasions many learned men to question whether we take the matter aright. In the original it is, *He smote in (or among) the people three score and ten men, fifty thousand men*. The Syriac and Arabic read it, *five thousand and seventy men*. The Chaldee reads it, *seventy men of the elders, and fifty thousand of the common people*. *Seventy men as valuable as 50,000*, so some, because they were priests. Some think the seventy men were the Beth-shemites that were slain for looking into the ark, and the 50,000 were those that were slain by the ark, in the land of the Philistines. *He smote seventy men*, that is, *fifty out of a thousand*, which was one in twenty, a half decimation; so some understand it. The Septuagint read it much as we do, *he smote seventy men, and fifty thousand men*. Josephus says only seventy were smitten.

**3.** The terror that was struck upon the men of Beth-shemesh by this severe stroke. They said, as well they might, *Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?* v. 20. Some think this expresses their murmuring against God, as if he had dealt hardly and unjustly with them. Instead of quarrelling with themselves and their own sins, they quarrelled with God and his judgments; as *David was displeased*, in a case not much dissimilar, <sup><308></sup>2 Samuel 6:8, 9. I rather think it intimates their awful and reverent adoration of God, as the Lord God, as a holy Lord God, and as a God before whom none is able to stand. This they infer from that tremendous judgment, “Who is able to stand before the God of the ark?” To stand before God to worship him (blessed be his name) is not impossible; we are through Christ invited, encouraged, and enabled to do it, but to stand before God to contend with him we are not able. Who is able to stand before the throne of his immediate glory, and look full upon it? <sup><306></sup>1 Timothy 6:16. Who is able to stand before the tribunal of his inflexible justice, and make his part good there? <sup><308></sup>Psalm 130:3; 143:2. Who is able to stand before the arm of his provoked power, and either resist or bear the strokes of it? <sup><307></sup>Psalm 76:7.

**4.** Their desire, hereupon, to be rid of the ark. They asked, *To whom shall he go up from us?* v. 20. They should rather have asked, “How may we make our peace with him, and recover his favour?” <sup><306></sup>Micah 6:6, 7. But they begin to be as weary of the ark as the Philistines had been, whereas, if they had treated it with due reverence, who knows but it might have taken up its residence among them, and they had all been blessed for the ark's sake? But thus, when the word of God works with terror on sinners'

consciences, they, instead of taking the blame and shame to themselves, quarrel with the word, and put it from them, <sup><2460></sup>Jeremiah 6:10. They sent messengers to the elders of Kirjath-jearim, a strong city further up in the country, and begged of them to come and fetch the ark up thither, v. 21. They durst not touch it to bring it thither themselves, but stood aloof from it as a dangerous thing. Thus do foolish men run from one extreme to the other, from presumptuous boldness to slavish shyness. Kirjath-jearim, that is, *the city of woods*, belonged to Judah, <sup><6550></sup>Joshua 15:9, 60. It lay in the way from Beth-shemesh to Shiloh, so that when they sent to them to fetch it, we may suppose, they intended that the elders of Shiloh should fetch it thence, but God intended otherwise. Thus was it sent from town to town, and no care taken of it by the public, a sign that there was no king in Israel.