

LESSONS

1st Lesson: 1 Samuel 5: 1 - 12

1. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. 3. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. 4. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it. 5. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day. 6. But the hand of the Lord was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. 7. And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god." 8. Therefore they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" And they answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath." So they carried the ark of the God of Israel away. 9. So it was, after they had carried it away, that the hand of the Lord was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them. 10. Therefore they sent the ark of God to Ekron. So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!" 11. So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. 12. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

2nd Lesson: Luke 6: 43 - 45

43. For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. 45. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

3rd Lesson: Divine Providence 100

Everyone can see from reason alone that the Lord, who is Good itself and Truth itself, cannot enter into a person unless the evils and falsities in him are put away. For evil is opposed to good, and falsity to truth, and two opposites can never be commingled. Rather, when one approaches the other, a combat takes place, which lasts until one gives way to the other, and the one that yields departs while the other takes its place. In such

an opposition are heaven and hell, or the Lord and the devil. Can anyone reasonably suppose that the Lord can enter where the devil reigns? Who does not see from the rationality granted to every sane person, that for the Lord to enter, the devil must be cast out? Or that for heaven to enter, hell must be removed?

S E R M O N

Capturing the Ark
A Sermon By
Rev. Michael E. Ferrell

The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us...Send away the ark of the God of Israel...and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people. 1 Samuel 5: 7, 11

The Philistines constantly battled against the people of Israel. Occasionally the Philistines would prevail while at other times the Israelites would defeat them. In our lesson we see that the two armies put themselves in battle against each other. This time the Philistines prevailed and in Israel thirty thousand soldiers fell. Consequently the Philistines captured the Ark.

Perhaps the Philistines believed they had captured a great prize and therefore they'd rejoice over the spoils of war. But dire consequences resulted because of the Ark of God. Dagon fell on its face before the Ark. After being set on its place Dagon fell yet again before the Ark and its head and the palms of both hands were broken off. The people of Ashdod suffered tumors. Finally, in Ekron there was a "deadly destruction" where some people died while others suffered tumors.

The Philistines captured the Ark, a curious box of pure gold, something like a wonderful, sparkling trophy. But instead of celebrating the Philistines eventually cried out: "the Ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us...Send away the Ark of the God of Israel...and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people."

The Ark was the most important religious symbol associated with the Tabernacle. The Ark was made of acacia wood and was about four feet long, two feet wide, and two feet in height. According to the Lord's instructions, Moses covered the wood inside and out with pure gold. Moses likewise covered with pure gold the rings on each corner of the Ark and the poles inserted through the rings.

The Ark was the most sacred of all the furnishing in the Tabernacle. Inside the Ark were the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. The resting place of the Ark was inside the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle where the Lord would speak with Moses face to face between the two cherubim placed upon the Ark. Later the Ark would be installed in the Most Holy Place of the Temple built by King Solomon. John says in the book of

Revelation that “the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the Ark of His covenant was seen in His temple” (Revelation 11: 19).

As we turn to the Heavenly Doctrine we learn that the Ark “signifies the Divine truth that proceeds from the Lord” and “on our earth this Divine truth is the Word” (AE 700:21, AC 9276: 7). We can rely upon the Ark or the Word of the Lord as our source of healing and inspiration. However, in our lesson we see that because of the Ark people suffered destruction, sickness and death.

Again, the Philistines battled against Israel. In the internal sense the Philistines represent deeper spiritual realities about people. The Apocalypse Explained tells us that the Philistines stand for people who “make no account of the good of love and charity” and “thus no account of the good of life” (AE 700:20). The Philistines show us an image of people who reject the good of life that the Lord has set before us. These are people who deprive themselves of a life inspired by heavenly qualities from the Lord.

Instead of joining the good of life to their beliefs, “faith alone” or “faith separated from charity” characterizes the religion of people represented by Philistines (AE 700:20). Philistines portray people who consider religion as consisting in the accumulation of knowledge. Consequently people who focus solely upon knowledge can deprive themselves of heavenly blessing when they do not live the good of life that the Word teaches. Sinful living and false ideas can imprison the heavenly qualities that the Lord is trying to build within them. We may see this in the capturing of the Ark.

By capturing the Ark the Philistines appear as victors. Yet as we probe a little deeper we may see that this describes the sad condition of people who become trapped in evils and falsities because they’ve refused to allow the Word to shape their life. Notice that the people of Israel removed the Ark from its proper place in the Tabernacle which at the time was in Shiloh (1 Samuel 4: 1-4). The Ark was a powerful religious symbol but was not meant to be employed in some superstitious manner in fighting battles.

However, as explained in the Heavenly Doctrine, the tragedy at this particular time was that the “sons of Israel were conquered by the Philistines because they had departed from the worship of Jehovah to the worship of other gods, especially to the worship of Ashtaroth” (AE 700: 20). As the people had departed from true worship of the Lord, they also apparently misused the Ark in their battle against the Philistines who captured the Ark and carried it away to their land. We look now to the Heavenly Doctrine to acquire a sense of what it means when something is “captured” or “taken captive.”

For example, “to be taken captive among all nations” is “to be possessed by evils of every kind” (AE 175: 12). This state can occur when “evils will make a prey of the goods and truths of the church” (AE 632:3). When the goods and truths of the church with a person become consumed they are replaced. “Captivity” has a negative connotation and refers to removal and to the substitution of one thing for another: evils of every kind take the place of good while falsities of every kind take the place of truth. But

let's keep in mind that the Lord is describing what can happen to us when sinful attitudes and a disordered life can supplant heavenly qualities within our souls.

The consequences can be devastating. In our lesson the appearance is that the Lord causes destruction, sickness and death – Dagon fell down, the Philistines suffered tumors, and people died. But the internal reality describes that sad spiritual condition of people who reject the Word and thus allow evils of life and false ideas to rule them.

We learn in the Apocalypse Explained that “Dagon” signified the Philistine religion, which was without intelligence and without power, because it was without spiritual good (AE 700: 22). When Dagon fell, his “head” (signifying intelligence) broke off and likewise the “palms of his hands” (signifying power) also broke off (AE 700: 21). One thing we can learn from this is if we are not forming our religion from the Word our head will fall off. In other words, our so called “religion” that we fashion for ourselves will be devoid of the necessary truths from which we may live a good life.

But then there's more. The Philistines also suffered tumors. The Heavenly Doctrine uses the word “emerods.” “Emerods” signify truth defiled by evils of life as is with those who are destitute of good” (AE 700: 21). Truths are defiled when they are known but not lived. Truths are defiled when they are rejected by unclean loves that favor falsity. Truths are defiled when there is no regard for them except for reasons such as reputation, self-importance, or some selfish gain.

We must realize that if sin is allowed to flourish with a person, then good loves and truths will be captured. This captivity takes form in the person's rejection of the goods and truths of the church. Let's understand that without good loves and truths, a person's life will be nothing but sinful and unclean. The Lord said “a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. (Luke 6: 43). We know that good and evil are opposites. A person must make a choice and decide what kind of life to live.

The Philistines said, “the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us...Send away the ark of the God of Israel...and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people.” Again, the Ark represents Divine truth or the Word proceeding from the Lord. Only a certain kind of person would suffer anguish because of the Word.

The cry of the Philistines therefore represents a deeper meaning describing how sinful people are tormented by the truths of the Word. The Lord said “light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deed should be exposed” (John 3: 19-20). But we ask, how may a person avoid suffering because their loves are not in tune with the goods and truths of the Word?

In the Heavenly Doctrine we learn that although the Word is written in ordinary language suitable to everyone's comprehension, “the Word is a holy writing” (AC 3419: 2) and that “the Word is the Divine from the Lord, thus is the Lord Himself (AC 9396: 9).

Interestingly, the Heavenly Doctrine says “the Word is a kind of heaven” (NJHD 260). But compare these beautiful descriptions of the Word with the intriguing story in our lesson about how the Ark (the Word) brought about peculiar consequences.

One reason this is all so important is that we may learn to avoid suffering the dire consequences of disregarding the Lord’s Word. We must be very careful not to depart from learning from the Word. As we gather truths from the Word we must at the same time live according to the Lord’s commandments. In we fail to follow the Lord the result is spiritual captivity “which exists when the truths and goods of the Word cannot be perceived because of the falsities which rule” (AE 724: 17). In His mercy the Lord has given us simple solutions.

First, a person “ought nevertheless to do what is good and to think what is true as from himself, for in no other way can he be reformed and regenerated” (AC 2016). But we know that the Philistine part of human nature battles against a person’s willingness to do good. Therefore, secondly, a person ought to compel himself to resist evil (AC 1937, AC 1947, NJHD 148). Third, a person ought to compel himself to do what is good, to obey the things commanded by the Lord (AC 1937, DP 129). Finally, everyone should “do good as if from himself, and yet to acknowledge that it is from the Lord” (AC 2883, AC 2891).

The Word is a wonderful repository of truths about the Lord, His heavenly kingdom, and the kind of life people should live. Within the stories of the Word the Lord has miraculously implanted wonderful truths that, if we are willing, can lead us to heaven. The Word teaches nothing other than to live a good life with our neighbors and to love the Lord above all things (AC 1408:3). The Word is good for us as it is like food to feed our souls.

In we notice ourselves at any time feeling uncomfortable about the Word that is an opportunity to engage in self reflection to discover whether or not we’ve departed from the path of reforming and regenerating. That could be an opportunity to reflect upon whether or not there’s something in our character that is a little difficult to face. Denial can blind us to the reality that we need the Word always as the source of truths that can free us from captivity. Let’s be reminded that the Philistines, that part of human nature that favors sins and falsities, want to take the Lord’s Ark from us. But the Lord is ever merciful, sending forth His Word in His effort to free us from ourselves.

“The Word of the Lord is such that it gives life to him who is thirsty, that is, to one who desires life, and that it is a spring whose waters are living” (AC 3424:2).

Amen.