

Who can stand in the presence of the LORD?

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Date: 25 June 2023

Preacher: Daniel Chapallaz

[0:00] Often in the news, you kind of hear a bit odd stories like this.! Someone having a bit of toast and thinking, there is the face of Jesus in my toast.

Every so often that kind of thing happens. I looked up other stories related to this kind of thing, and I found that a family in Wales were cooking their roast dinner one Sunday, and they found the face of Jesus in gravy.

And the woman said she's not religious, and she felt very unmoved by seeing the face of Jesus in gravy. Or, completely different really, sometimes you might go, people might go to a cathedral and be in awe at the gold and the images and the beautiful grandeur of the building and think, that is where God's presence is.

That's where I can encounter the divine. A bit of toast or in a cathedral. People have strange ideas about the presence of God being with them.

When we come to this passage this morning, after singing that great song, Behold our God, seated on His throne, behold our King, nothing can compare to Him.

[1:34] We've come to this passage after singing that, after being reminded of how great and glorious God is. And this morning, as we look at this passage, we're particularly thinking about God's presence with people and what to do with it or what not to do with it.

And this passage asks us, as we read through it earlier, it asks us in verse 20, who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?

Who can stand in the presence of God? These chapters, they've been dominated by this, the Ark of the Covenant, the Ark of God, which signifies various things to us.

It's a very important piece of Israel's worship. It shows us God's power. You've got the cherubim on the top there.

God is enthroned between the cherubim. It signifies His presence with His people. His promises of the tablets of the Ten Commandments are in there.

[2:57] And the provision of God, a piece of manna in there that He provided for His people in the desert. It's a very important item in Israel's worship.

And yet, as we saw, and David reminded us a few weeks ago, in chapter 4, the Philistines, they defeated Israel and they captured the Ark and they took it off to their territory.

And at the end of chapter 4, we read that the glory of God has departed from Israel. as it kind of signifies God's presence leaving Israel.

The glory's departed. Where is the glory? But as it entered into Philistine territory, it caused all sorts of issues.

We looked at that last week. We looked at the god Dagon in his temple, accompanied by the Ark. And the glorious presence of the Lord Almighty and Dagon just fell flat on his face.

[4:06] And they propped him back up again. He fell off again. He couldn't stand in the presence of the Lord Almighty. And the Philistines, we read in chapter 5, were inflicted with tumours.

And as we'll see in chapter 6, also rats had devastated the land. And in chapter 5, verse 11, they called together people and they said, send the Ark of God, the God of Israel, away.

Let it go back to its own place. We cannot stand in the presence of God. And so this morning, as we think about this passage, as we think, who can stand in the presence of this holy God?

We kind of get a crash course in dealing with God's presence. And I say a crash course, it's a complete car crash, really. In many ways, how these people approach the presence of God. You have people making weird objects out of God. You have a test set up to trick God. And you have people falling down dead because they're not dealing with God's presence rightly.

[5:25] So it's a complete crash course with really what not to do with the presence of God. And hopefully we'll draw some lessons out for ourselves as we look at this.

So firstly, what not to do with the presence of God? Well, offer your finest gifts to pay for your sins. As the Philistines stand there in the land, having been devastated by the tumors and by the rats which had come upon them, as they stand there in the land with this Ark of God, with the presence of the Lord Almighty, they stand pretty helpless.

It had been there now, we're told in verse 1, for seven months. And it kind of, the Ark had kind of become a bit of a hot potato.

There's a game, hot potato, I guess children play where you have to get rid of a ball or something very quickly. But imagine if you had a real hot potato in your hands, you'd be throwing it away from you as quickly as possible.

That's kind of what they do with the Ark. It arrived in Philistine and Ashdod, caused trouble there, so they sent it away, sent it off to Gath, caused trouble there, and so finally, they sent it down to Ekron.

[6:43] They can deal with this. And so now, they're asking again about sending the Ark of God away. What shall we do with it?

Verse 2, the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, what shall we do with the Ark of the Lord? Tell us, how should we send it back to its place?

So the Philistines, they consulted the spiritual squad in Philistine. What shall we do with this Ark? How shall we send it back?

What's the right way to do this? So it doesn't cause us any more issues. We've had enough. And they say this in verse 3.

They answered, if you return the Ark of the God of Israel, do not send it back to Him without a gift. By all means, send a guilt offering to Him.

[7:44] Then you will be healed and you will know why His hand has not been lifted from you. Sure, return the Ark of God but make sure you send a gift.

Send a bit of a peace offering. Then we'll be healed and we'll know why these problems have come upon us. Because it was from Him. And so what should they send?

What should they send to this God of Israel to bring peace for them? Well, a no expenses spared object of gold, of course.

Wouldn't you like that? If someone had caused you trouble and they gave you an object of gold? Amazing. What a gift. But how about some golden tumors and some golden rats?

Would you like that? Well, that's what they're going to give God. Verse 4. The Philistines asked, what guilt offering should we send to Him?

[8:49] They replied, five gold tumors and five gold rats according to the number of the Philistine rulers because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers.

No expenses spared in the gold, but really tumors and rats? Five of each? Always wanted a golden tumor and a golden rat on my shelf.

But that's what they choose. And what they're doing in this is they're kind of saying, God, what you have said before us is these tumors and these rats and we want them gone.

And so to try and appease you, we're going to make these objects out of gold. These are the issues, but here's some gold. Please take it away.

Finest gifts of gold. As an offering to God to pay for their sin, to pay for their guilt so their guilt can be taken away.

[10:00] And as we read on into verse five, it says, make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country and give glory to Israel's gods.

perhaps, perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your lands. No assurance, but perhaps he may then choose to take your guilt away.

Perhaps. And as these representatives, the spiritual squad in Philistine kind of finish their advice, they say this in verse six, why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did when Israel's God dealt harshly with them?

Did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their own way? It's a reminder of when Israel were in some other foreign lands with the Egyptians as slaves there.

Pharaoh would not let God's people go. And he kept on keeping hold of them for as long as he could. And so God sent plague after plague after plague.

[11:24] plague. And so it's a warning for the Philistines not to keep hold of the ark. We've had the tumors and we've had the rats. Who knows what else could be sent upon us?

Send it away. Don't harden your hearts towards this God. Make sure to send it back. Send it back so we can live our lives in peace again.

The advice that the Philistine leaders kind of get here is quite right in some ways. They're told to bring to God a guilt offering.

They do stand guilty before God. They are God's enemies. But making some tumors and rats out of gold isn't really going to cut it with a holy God.

all the Philistines really seem to be interested in is a bit of peace from their troubles. Making peace with God.

[12:33] Getting God off their backs so that trouble can go away. And I wonder maybe you hear this morning as you're here maybe you think you need to deal with God in that way.

You need to kind of get God off your back. come to church and then maybe you'll have some peace with God. Maybe you feel like you you're full of sin and for God to be pleased with you you need to give lots of money to charity.

That will help you get some peace with God. Or go and donate lots of food to the city mission. That will get you peace with God. Or you missed communion last Sunday and so you'll make sure you're at every communion for the next three months then you'll have peace with God.

Perhaps. But the Lord is holy. And the Lord is present there in Philistine with him and who can stand before a holy God?

Who can stand in his presence? We are guilty before God. A helpful few verses from a psalm.

[13:56] Psalm 24 says this, Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? Only the one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false God.

Who can stand before God? Someone who is clean, who has no sin, who has no guilt. The Philistines, they have lots of false gods.

Dagon was one of them and he fell over in the presence of God. Don't trust in him. Don't trust in these objects of gold. But how can we stand?

How can we stand before the presence of God? God provided, didn't he, the sacrifices for the Israelites to make before God.

The ark is a reminder of that. It was used once a year by the high priest to splatter blood of an animal to atone for people's sins.

[15:03] sins. The blood of something else in our place because we deserve death to make us clean with God.

But as the Bible goes on to tell us in the New Testament, the blood of bulls and goats, it cannot ultimately pay the price for our sin. But thank God that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came into this world as a human being.

And he can stand with clean hands and a pure heart before this holy God. He stands clean and uncondemned.

But he chose to stand in our place with our sin laid upon him. He chose to stand unclean and condemned before God in our place.

So that as Hebrews says, we can be made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Do we offer our finest gifts to pay for our sins?

[16:19] We can try, but it just won't work. And so the lesson that kind of comes out for us from this is look to the Lord Jesus who's paid the debt for your sins.

Not by your own works, not by offering your finest treasures, but by looking to him. Because all we have is our sins and our shame and our guilt.

God. Second thing, what to not do with the presence of God. Test the Lord and prove he is not at work.

That's what the Philistines try to do here. They are ready to bring this guilt offering before God, but just maybe this is all coincidence. Just maybe these tumors and rats would have come anyway. Maybe it's nothing to do with this Israelites God. And so they test him. They put him to the test. Verse 7. Now then, get a new cart ready with two cows that have been carved and have never been yoked.

[17:33] Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. Take the ark of the Lord and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it, put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering.

Send it on its way, but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, but towards Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us.

But if it does not, then we shall know that it was not his hand that struck us, but that it happened to us by chance. So their plan to test God goes something like this.

they're going to get two cows, two cows who have given birth to calves, and they're going to get them hooked up to the cart to take it to Beth Shemesh.

It's a seven-mile journey. But the clever thing they're doing with choosing two cows who have two young calves is that these cows are going to be producing milk, and they're going to want to be feeding their calves.

[18:38] They're going to want to be looking after their young. They're not going to want to go seven miles away from them whilst they're penned up over here. And so this is a very clever trick, really, by the Philistines.

Of course this isn't going to happen, and they're going to prove that God is not at work. They're going to make it completely impossible for God here. And the other thing is they've never been yoked, which means they've never carried a cart away, and this is quite a journey.

So these cows who have never drawn a cart before will clearly want to go back to their young and have been set up to trick God, to show God, we're in control here.

It's not you at all. So what happens? Verse 10. So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them up to the cart and penned up their calves.

They placed the ark of the Lord on the cart along with the chest containing the gold rats and models of tumis. The plan's coming into place. They've hooked up the cows, got the ark ready and the offering.

[19:52] It's all ready, it's all there. And as they're about to send them off, you can imagine them kind of saying to each other, place your bets here, how far are the cows going to go? 400 miles, 400 meters even?

A mile? That would be a bit of stretch. When are they going to turn around and go back to their calves? How long is it going to take? Probably not long, meters. So what happens?

Verse 12, then the cows went straight up towards Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way. They did not turn to the right or to the left.

The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh. The Philistines aren't in control at all.

The cows go straight up, it says. They don't turn to the right or to the left. Who's in control? It's God who's in control. Something beyond their control is working.

[20:57] Something beyond their understanding. The Philistines set this up to be impossible. But God can do the impossible. God is showing that he is the one on the throne.

Nothing, nobody can compare with him as we sang. You cannot play around with God. You cannot test God.

He can make idols fall to the ground and cows travel seven miles back to territory that the ark belongs.

God is at work. He was showing, revealing himself to his enemies, the Philistines. Yes, it really has been me at work here. Yes, it really has been me bringing this disaster upon you, he's saying. These Philistines have shown us you cannot beat God. And maybe, just maybe this morning you're here and maybe you've been trying to test God.

[22:14] Maybe you're trying to prove that he doesn't exist. Maybe that's why you're at church this morning. And yet we sang at the beginning of our meeting. He made the starry host.

He traced the mountain peaks from desert to the sea. All nature testifies to his glory. You look at creation, you cannot escape that it speaks of the creator God.

And you look in his word and you have to come to a decision. Is God real? You have to look at stories like this and you have to think these cows, have they gone up on their own accord or is this really God at work?

You have to look at the Lord Jesus and say is this really Jesus, God's son and am I going to worship him or is it just complete madness?

You have to make a decision. This is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Don't test him.

[23:19] That's the lesson. Don't test him. bow before him as the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Third and final thing, what not to do with the presence of God?

Be careless in approaching the holy God. The ark returns. The ark returns to Israel.

Remember when it left, the glory of God departed but now it's coming back. Verse 13, now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley.

When they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. Quite rightly too. It's returns. All by itself really with these cows.

God was bringing his presence back among them. The glory had departed and now it was returning. Rejoice. And the ark arrived and extraordinarily the cows knew where to stop.

[24:27] Verse 14, the cart came in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh and there it stopped beside a large rock. The cows knew just where to stop.

And the people of Beth Shemesh, they decide to present an offering to the Lord. So, halfway through verse 14, it says, the people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering.

The Levites took down the ark of the Lord together with the chest containing the gold objects and placed them on the large rock. On that day, the people offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.

They seemed to do the right things, the people of God. They knew that the glory had departed, that sin had been committed in Israel and now they had a chance to turn back to him.

And this was in a Levitical city, a city where there were Levites living and it says that the Levites, they were the ones who took down the ark of the Lord.

[25:36] They carried it and put it on the rock and all seemed to be going okay. And you know what, if it all ended in verse 18, this chapter, then we could kind of go home quite happy really.

But it doesn't quite end there actually. So verse 19, God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting 70 of them to death because they looked into the ark of the Lord.

The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them. People were struck down dead, we're told, because they looked into the ark of the Lord.

What's wrong with that? Well, in the book of Numbers we read this, but the Kohathites who are part of the Levitical people must not go in to look at the holy things even for a moment or they will die.

They looked inside the ark, a holy place. they gazed upon something which is holy.

[27:05] And as they look into the ark in a way that seems wrong, God shows his power and strikes them down.

God will come. And so this statement that I was thinking of this week must be true.

Just because you touch and handle holy things, it doesn't mean you're holy. Just because you touch and handle holy things, it doesn't mean you're holy.

Just because they're by the ark, just because they look into it, doesn't mean they're holy and can stand in the presence of God. And so verse 20, the people of Bethlehem asked, who can stand in

the presence of the Lord, this holy God?

To whom will the ark go up from here? Just because you might be here at church this morning, just because you might be watching the live stream at home, just because you might have sung some hymns and read from the Bible, doesn't mean that you are right with God.

[28:25] And so who can stand in the presence of the Lord, the holy God? Interestingly, three times in these verses we have mention of a large rock that the ark kind of came and stood by and then stood on.

And this large rock was in the field of Joshua. Joshua, a name which means God is salvation or God saves. And as the Bible goes on, and we've mentioned him already, and shows us Jesus who came into this world to save.

Jesus, whose name in Hebrew I believe is Joshua. Jesus, the one who comes to save, is also described in the New Testament as a rock.

Christ the rock. And this rock here stands as a witness to these things that happen here. And Jesus, the Savior, the one who came to save his people from their sins, stands as a rock, on whom we place our hope.

Because all other ground is sinking sand. And so let's not think for one moment that we can treat the Lord carelessly as is done here.

[29:58] As they just kind of peek inside. Let's come before the Lord knowing we come through the Lord Jesus. not on our own because we cannot on our own stand in the presence of the Lord.

But if we come trusting in the Lord Jesus, our rock of salvation, we can stand.

Don't treat God carelessly as they do here. Don't treat God casually. That's the lesson. Don't treat him like he's just a face on a bit of toast and be unmoved like that lady who found a picture of Jesus in her gravy.

That's not what to do with the presence of God. No, we look to Jesus, the one who saves us, the one who can, who means we can stand before the presence of God.

God. And as we do that, let's not treat God casually in the way we kind of speak to him. Let's remember when we speak to him in prayer, we're not saying, God, please do this, this, and this for me.

[31:17] Begin our prayer like the Lord Jesus taught us, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Remember who you are coming to as you pray.

don't treat him casually in the way you speak to him about others. I know when I'm with non-Christian friends, it can be very easy to kind of join in with the way they might speak about God, irreverently,!

Mocking, even. Be careful in the way we speak about God to others. this is a holy, awesome God. And in our sin, don't treat God casually in our sin.

When we're tempted to sin, thinking, oh, it doesn't matter, I'm forgiven in Christ anyway. It is true, there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus.

Praise God for our hope in him. But Paul says, shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. Remember your holy God who is pure and utterly sinless, who is holy.

[32:43] The God who just struck down people because they just peeked into the ark of the holy things. who can stand in the presence of God, the holy God.

We can in Jesus. Jesus, the one who's offered up a sacrifice in our place.

In Jesus, the one who shed his blood for our sins. in him we can stand before our holy God.

Anywhere else other than Jesus is sinking sand.

Let's pray. pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's