

Who can stand before the Holy God?

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Date: 09 November 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a couple of weeks ago we were up with friends up the country and it was out in the garden that we were. It was getting dark and it was getting cold and so they lit a fire in a barrel.

And so as they put more and more wood into the fire, the fire grew hotter and hotter. And it was a good fire. It gave us heat in the cold and it gave us light in the darkness.

It gave us melted marshmallows to put on biscuits to eat. But you couldn't stand too close to the fire. When you tried to go closer to the barrel, you realized I can't handle this heat.

I needed to move away from the fire. It was a good fire, but I couldn't get too close to it. The reason I mentioned that is because in the letters of the Hebrews in the New Testament, God is described as a consuming fire.

A consuming fire. Now that is an image of God. God isn't actually fire. But it is highlighting the fact that we cannot get close to God or too close to God.

[1 : 0 7] It is in another sense asking this question, who can stand before God? And that is the question that is on the minds and hearts of the people in what we've just read.

If you look in chapter 6, verse 20, the people of Beth Shemesh asked, who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?

That is the big question. The reason we had such a long reading is because the whole reading moves towards this point, moves towards this question, who can stand before God?

Now we're not going to do a show of hands, but it is a question that we need to ask of ourselves. Could I stand before this holy God?

And so let's ask that question as we reflect on this text together. Who can stand before this holy God? What we see, first of all, is that false gods cannot stand before this holy God.

[2 : 0 7] We see in chapter 5, in verse 1, after the Philistines had captured the Ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the Ark into Dagon's temple and set it before Dagon.

Now the Ark of God is mentioned about 25 times in this section, and it is representing God's powerful presence to his people. But now it has been captured by God's enemies, or the people of Israel's enemies, and it has been put in this temple of Dagon.

And the symbolism of that is essentially this. Dagon is better than the God of Israel. In Dagon we trust. He is more powerful. He has given us the victory over the Israelites.

We trust in Dagon. We depend on Dagon. This is his territory. And now we have captured the God of Israel, and he needs to bow before Dagon.

That's the idea. What happens is Dagon falls over. Verse 3, when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon falling on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

[3 : 18] And you can imagine the conversation that went on as they go in and see Dagon falling on the ground. Maybe one little kid was like, it's like Dagon is bowing to the Ark of God. And maybe one of the adults was like, well, you know, it was very windy last night.

And there's kind of nervous laughter as they put Dagon back in his place. In verse 3, they took Dagon and put him back in his place. So off they go to bed again the next night.

And verse 4, So Dagon falls over again.

But this time, his head and his hands have been cut off, and no wind, no matter how strong, is going to cut the hands and head off of a statue. Incidentally, if you're interested to know what Dagon looks like, you can Google it, and they give you some images of these carvings and statues that perhaps is what Dagon looked like.

But what this is clearly showing us is that Dagon is powerless. He is helpless. He's hopeless before the God of the Israelites. He has to be propped up by people. And so as Israel hear this story or heard this story, and they're looking on at their enemies or the Philistines who put their trust in Dagon and think that Dagon is powerful, Dagon is dependable, Dagon is trustworthy, what the Israelites are realizing is he cannot stand before the one true God.

[4 : 53] What happened to Dagon, daddy? Dagon gone. Son. Son. I'm not sure any of us now today know someone who trusts in Dagon, but we do know people who trust in things other than God.

We know people who depend on things other than God. I remember watching *The Pursuit of Happiness* some years ago with Will Smith in the lead role, and here's one of the quotes from *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something. Not even me. You got a dream. You got to protect it. People can't do something themselves, and they want to tell you you can't do it.

You want something? Go get it. That was the message of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, and that is the message of much of the culture around us. You can trust in yourself to get this done.

Work hard, stay hungry, and you'll achieve greatness. You'll achieve wealth. You'll achieve achievement. You'll achieve influence. Get up at five o'clock in the morning.

[5 : 57] Do all the side hustles, all the life hacks. You can do it. Trust yourself. Depend on yourself. The power is in you. Well, if you know somebody like that, and you see them succeeding, what does it cause you to do?

It causes you to doubt and to wonder. Maybe they're onto something here. Maybe I should be trusting in myself. And perhaps it even causes us to doubt and to waver the fact that we trust in God.

Trusting for them in themselves seems to have made them win at life, whereas I'm really struggling. Well, we need to take heart, as the Israelites needed to take heart, that these false gods, these things that people depend on or find their security and won't ultimately stand before God.

They will be dismantled. They will fall over before God, just like Dagon did. And it also gives us an opportunity that if we see somebody who is trusting in something other than God or putting their hope or their security in something other than God, it gives us an opportunity to kindly but firmly say to them, this isn't trustworthy.

You are not trustworthy. Don't depend on yourself in this way. It is too much pressure for you. You're not built or designed to be God.

[7 : 20] And so it gives us a heart and it also gives us courage to see this false god Dagon falling on his face before the one true God.

Who can stand before this holy God? Dagon can't. False gods can't. Who can stand before this holy God? Well, we also see that people can't.

In verse 6, the Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity. He brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors. It's interesting that Dagon's hands are cut off, showing how powerless he is.

But now it says, the Lord's hand was heavy on the people. Now, God doesn't have a hand, but it is a symbolic way of saying that God was pressing down on them. And you see this in the fear and the sickness that they experience.

Now, we need to be careful with this. What we don't want to say is that wherever we see fear or see sickness, then that must mean that God's hand is heavy on that person. That's not the conclusion we want to draw.

[8 : 24] You think of Job and his sickness was actually nearly a sign of his godliness. God was saying, look at my servant Job. He will trust me no matter what.

So we don't want to say that sickness or fear is automatically a sign of God's hand pressing down on somebody. But in this particular case, we're told that that is exactly what is going on.

The Lord's hand was heavy on them. And what they realize is they cannot stand before God either. Verse 7, when the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, the ark of the God of Israel must not stay here with us because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon, our God.

And so they ship the ark off to Gath. In verse 8, let the ark of the God of Israel be moved to Gath. So they move the ark of the God of Israel.

Well, it gets to Gath. And in verse 9, the Lord's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. So Gath, now they think, we don't want the ark of God with us.

[9 : 32] So in verse 10, they send the ark of the God to Ekron. And Ekron see the ark of God coming up the road and they're thinking, you must be joking.

In verse 10, as the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, they have brought the ark of the God of Israel round to us to kill us and our people. And so wherever the ark of God goes, there is fear and sickness and even death.

And you think, why is this happening? Why is this happening? And instinctively, what we think when we read this is, these are fine people. These are good people.

God must be bad for killing them like this. That's what we think instinctively. What is actually the case is the exact opposite. It is the exact opposite.

Death is not because God is so bad. Death is because we have fallen short of the glory of God. And it is because God is so good and holy and pure that this happens, that they cannot stand before him.

[10 : 42] The shock for us here should not be so much that these people, a few of them have died. The shock should be that so many survive. That each and every day of our lives, that so many people continue to live by the common grace of God day in, day out.

That he is so patient, so loving, so kind, that though we have deserved death, that that is not what he does. He gives us life.

And so these people realize they cannot stand before God because of the impurity that is in every part of them.

We need to hear that as well, that even the good that we do, if we have our back turned to God, that is not good. I read a quote during the week.

It said this, Satan doesn't need to make you do bad things. He just needs to keep you from doing the one thing that matters, which is giving your life to Christ.

[11 : 49] God is a consuming fire. And so these people who recognize their own impurity coming into the presence of a consuming fire is not going to end well.

I was watching a video of a man making a knife during the week and he had the steel, the raw steel that he was going to use, put it into the furnace to shape it into a blade.

Now, as he puts the steel into the furnace, what happens in the fire is that any little bits of impurities get burned off. And so the steel is purified in that furnace.

Now, the problem is what happens if it's totally impure? If it's totally impure, what happens is that when you take the knife out, there's nothing left. And these men in this reading realize that they stand, they cannot stand before this holy God.

And they're not alone in that. If you think of one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah, when he comes into the presence of God, what does he say? Woe to me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, when you think of one of the greatest apostles, in that he was one of the leaders of the apostles, Peter.

[13 : 08] What does he say when he encounters Jesus? Depart from me, Lord. I am a sinful man. What did the seraphim do in the vision that Isaiah is given of God?

The seraphim are these angels that are called burning ones to highlight their holiness. But even the holy ones in the presence of a holy, holy, holy God cover their eyes, cover their feet in his presence.

What do the people on the other side of the Sea of Galilee do when Jesus heals a demoniac? They plead with him to leave them. They realize, like these men realized, that they could not stand in the presence of a holy God.

They recognize their guilt before him. This is why they cannot stand. Verse 3, they say, 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. They recognize their guilt. That is why they cannot stand before him. And so they come up with a plan.

[14 : 12] It's a great reading, isn't it? They come up with this plan. Here's the plan. Verse 4. 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.

Now, there's all kinds of ways we could get distracted by this, but here's the simple thing that is being communicated. It's gold. It is costly. Their guilt before God means it is costly to be forgiven.

They make five of them representing all of the lords of the Philistines, all of the cities of the Philistines, even though the ark of God didn't go to all of the cities.

What's that saying? We're all guilty before God. And the reason they do it is to give glory to God in verse 5. Give glory to God.

In other words, acknowledge that I am guilty before God. And that's going to be the plan. The big question is will they have hard hearts or soft hearts?

[15 : 18] So hard hearts is saying I'm not guilty. I could stand before God. I don't need to give glory to God. A soft heart says I am guilty before God.

I haven't even lived up to my own standard. And I need to recognize that I need to recognize there is a cost to our relationship between me and God because of this.

And so that's what they do. They show that they have soft hearts because they follow through on this plan and so now they get this guilt offering on its way to Israel in verse 10.

They took two cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. They placed the ark of the Lord on the cart and along with it the chest of the Lord on the cart.

Sorry, the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. Then the cows went straight up towards Beth Shemesh. What's going on here? Well, they've set up this little test and the test is this.

[16 : 24] In verse 9 they said, keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory towards Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this disaster on us. But if it does not, then we shall know that it was not his hand that struck us, but happened by chance.

So these two cows are sent off up the road, but here's the thing, they've put their calves locked up over here. Now, you hear stories of cows that will break through barbed wire fence in order to get to their calves.

But these cows don't do any such thing. They walk in the exact opposite direction to their calves, straight up to Beth Shemesh, laser vision, the hand of the Lord, guiding them every moment of the way, and it is as clear as day that this is what God is doing.

They cannot deny it. There is no other way of explaining this. It is exactly what happens in verse 12. They did not turn to the right or to the left.

They didn't even sniff the ground to see if there was a little smell of their calves that they could follow. And so this is evidence that these men had soft hearts.

[17 : 39] I cannot stand before God. I'm guilty before Him. I need to make an offering to cover that guilt. Now, in our day, here's the bad news.

The bad news is that we're being told day in, day out that we don't need God. There's this gospel of freedom, of radical autonomy, and here's the gospel of freedom.

No one can tell you what to do. Freedom is doing whatever you want. You do you. How do you get salvation through this gospel? Well, total autonomy, lack of constraints, and how you go about that is you break the norms, you push the boundaries, and you resist authority.

That is what we're hearing day in, day out, but if that's how you choose to live, it puts you in a place of guilt before God. That's the bad news.

The good news is this. We are guilty, but God has provided a guilt offering for us, and it is far more valuable than five gold tumors and five gold rats, and it covers far more than just five Philistine lords.

[18 : 52] God has given us his son, Jesus. Listen to what it says in the New Testament about Jesus.

Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many. God has given Jesus that he might be an offering so that our guilt would be dealt with.

Or listen to this, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. Now don't miss the significance of that phrase, to bring you to God.

If at that friend's house you had said to me, I'm going to bring you closer and closer to the fire, I would be saying, no, don't bring me any closer, I can't come close to this fire.

But what Jesus has done is he has given his life so that all impure people like me can be brought right into the presence of God, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that I can stand before God on the basis of what Jesus has done.

[20 : 08] And the question for us is the same question that was there in Samuel's day. Are we going to be hard hearted or soft hearted? Are we going to be hard hearted and say, I'm not that bad?

I'm not that guilty. I could stand before God, I could stand before God and say, well, God, I've tried. That's hard hearted, that's not humble, it's hard hearted. Or soft hearted is this saying, I am guilty before you, God, but you have given your son Jesus and he is of infinite cost and he has done everything necessary to cover my guilt and my sin.

That is soft hearted and that is the way to eternal joy with God. That is how we start with God, to acknowledge our need for Jesus and cry out to him.

And that is how we go on, isn't it? For those of you who have followed Jesus for many years, what we realize more and more and more is the way we have started is the way we go on.

By doing what? Pretending that we're good? No, by saying I'm bad. But Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. And I have perfect freedom in living for him.

[21 : 27] So who can stand before God? Dagon can't. People can't. And so now the ark is returned to Israel in verse 13. The people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley.

And when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at its sight. And you're thinking, all is well, right? This is where the story ends with a celebration with a party that the ark of the God of Israel has come back to Israel.

God has defeated our enemies while we were out making hay. God is back with his people, praise the Lord. But then look what happens in 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. And what they're realizing is that they can't stand before God either.

This is when the big question comes in verse 20. Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? This is on the lips of the Israelites as the ark of the God of Israel comes back to them.

[22 : 38] And Samuel spells it out for them in verse 3 of chapter 7. Samuel said to all the Israelites, if you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths, commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only.

And as you hear that, you realize that the Israelites were living the exact same way as the Philistines. The Philistines had this god Dagon, the Israelites, Samuel says, have their own foreign gods.

The Philistines had their guilt before God. The Israelites are guilty before God, which is implied by the fact that they are told to return to God. The big issue for the Philistines was what was going on in their hearts.

Were they going to be soft-hearted or hard-hearted? The big issue for the Israelites, Samuel says, is what's going on in your heart. You need to return to the Lord with all your heart.

And you realize, if you reflect on what we were thinking about a couple of weeks ago, where Israel lost the battle to the Philistines, what you realize here for Israel is that the most important battleground for them is not geographical or political.

[24 : 00] The most important battleground for them is their hearts. That's the key bit of territory. That's the key bit of real estate. Who does their hearts belong to?

Samuel says, if you're returning to the Lord, put away the foreign gods. Commit yourself to the Lord and serve him only. You know, in the Old Testament, God had promised Israel the promised land.

land. But what you see as it unfolds is that if push comes to shove, it is better to be far from the land and close to the Lord than in the land and far from the Lord.

You think of Daniel and his friends who are far from the land in Babylon, but they are so close to God that they are one of the greatest examples of holiness and godliness in the Old Testament, and they're nowhere near the land.

What this is highlighting is that the key battleground is in their hearts. And you know, it's the same today. If you look at what Israel is doing today, it is the exact same question.

[25 : 15] Of course we want to make sense of it. We are made in God's image. We want to understand what is right, what is wrong, what is going on. We wrestle with it. For some they will say it is perfect, perfectly justified what is happening, what Israel is doing.

For others they will say it is unjustifiable and there are many who will find themselves somewhere in between in that spectrum. But even if we have settled that question in our own minds, first of all we need to say I might be wrong.

We're limited in our understanding. But more importantly we need to say this, the key battleground is in the hearts of those who are in power, the hearts of the people of Israel.

Now I don't know where their hearts are at, but if they are far from God, if they are trusting in something other than God or depending on something other than God, then what they need to do is recognize their guilt, recognize their need for Jesus this offering that God has made for them and give glory to God in that way.

That's what Paul says in Romans, isn't it, when he thinks about Israel. He says this, brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.

[26 : 44] If you declare with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

For everyone who calls in the name of the Lord will be saved. You can see Paul is using the same language, isn't he? What's going on in their hearts? That's the key battle ground.

It was the same for Israel now as it was then. And here's the amazing thing, it was the same for Jesus. It was the same for Jesus. When Satan offered Jesus a shortcut to all the kingdoms of the world, you can have all this without the cross.

What's the temptation there? Political, military, victory. What does Jesus say? No. No. Why did Jesus say no to Satan when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world which are Jesus' is anyway?

Because Jesus was going to fight for us, for you and for me. He was going to fight for us and he was going to fight against temptation. And so Jesus stood before Satan and said, no, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

[28 : 08] Jesus stood in the face of this great temptation and he stands now in the presence of God because he is the only one who can do so.

He is the only one who has lived a life where he can stand before God and look God the Father in the eye and says, I have perfectly loved you. I have perfectly lived for you.

And Jesus stands in the presence of God now so that we can stand in the presence of God, that we are brought into his presence, justified, so that now we can fight too.

And we fight this battle that Paul mentions or highlights for us a spiritual battle. We fight it because Jesus has brought us into the presence of God.

And so we head into this week with a fight on our hands. It's not a fight for land, it's a fight for good things maybe. Maybe it's a fight for accommodation or a fight for work or a fight for health or a fight for a visa application.

[29 : 19] What did Jesus say to us? Your father knows what you need. Your heavenly father knows what you need. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Or to put it in other words, recognize that the battleground is not with this application or that job offer. It's not with this family member or that health concern.

Those are important things. The battleground is what's going on in our hearts. And that if push comes to shove, we need to be able to say it would be better for me to not have these things and be close to God rather than have all these things that I long for and be far from God.

And so we head into this week fighting for these things but we need to recognize that the battleground is in our hearts and we want to fight against sin and temptation as we head into this week.

Robert Murray McShane, one of these old preachers that are often quoted, he died before he was 30. He was one of the godliest men of his generation and I read this about him during the week.

[30 : 32] He said that the seeds of all sins were in his heart. A little water and the right conditions and who knows what poisonous fruit our hearts could bring forth.

We head into this week with a fight on our hands, not so that we can stand before God but because Jesus stands before God and he has brought us into the presence of God and so we want to fight with all our might, with all the strength that he gives us to live for him, to recognize the battleground is in our hearts, so that we might one day stand before him and see his smile as he welcomes us into his presence eternally.

Let's ask God to help us to do that in the week ahead. Heavenly Father, we want to thank you and praise you for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who stands even now in your presence.

Lord, stands on the basis of all that he has done. He has lived this perfect life and died this perfect death. Father, in so doing, he has brought us into your presence.

Father, help us to realize that we can stand before you because of what Christ has done and help us to fight. Help us to fight in the week ahead, Lord, for holiness, for godliness.

[31 : 52] Help us to fight, Lord, in light of what Christ has done. Amen. Amen.