



Supremacy

God manifested His power before the Philistines.

Scripture Passage: 1 Samuel 5:1-10; 6:13-15,19-20 Memory Verse: Psalm 97:9

Underestimating the forces of nature can prove deadly. Each year, we hear stories of people who minimize the power of a hurricane and find themselves completely unprepared when the storm actually strikes. The results often are tragic. The same is true with tornadoes and floods and wildfires. When people fail to heed warnings, the consequences leave devastation in their wake.

Biblical history is filled with stories of people who underestimated the power of the God of Israel. Like those who misjudge the sheer force of a natural disaster, they quickly learned that the Lord's power is not something to trifle with or take for granted. Nowhere is that truth more evident than in the fascinating story of the ark of God and the Philistines in 1 Samuel 5–6. The Israelites played with the sacred and lost big. Then, the Philistines didn't respect God's ark and also suffered for their arrogance.

As you study this week's verses, ask God to give you a renewed reverence for Him and His power. Pray that His power will be evident in leading the session, and pray that God will do a transforming work in the lives of any adults who need His touch.

Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Native to China and Japan, kudzu was introduced to America in the 1870s. Admired for its beauty, it was used for shade and promoted to prevent soil erosion. The Southeast's heat and humidity allowed it to thrive—growing up to a foot a day. Kudzu blocks sunlight, kills other plants, damages power lines, and engulfs buildings and forests, causing millions of dollars in damage each year. It's known as "the vine that ate the South." (PSG, p. 37)

What recent purchase have you made that left you disappointed?


SESSION 4

Supremacy

GOD MANIFESTED HIS POWER BEFORE THE PHILISTINES.

1 SAMUEL 5:1-10; 6:13-15,19-20

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SUGGESTED USE | Week of December 27, 2026 37

Understand the Context (1 Samuel 4:1–7:17)

The larger context of today's session highlights the ongoing conflict between the Philistines and the Israelites. The writer's underlying intent was to show fulfillment of God's words related to the fall of Eli's house (1 Sam. 2:27-36; 3:10-14).

The Philistines were Israel's primary nemesis in the promised land during the era of the judges and the early monarchy. Their animosity toward God's people lasted more than one thousand years, from Abraham's dispute with Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-32) to the Philistines' final defeat by David in 2 Samuel 5. Known as the "sea peoples," the Philistines had migrated from the region of the Aegean Sea and settled on the Mediterranean coast near modern-day Gaza.

Much of Israel's difficulty in the promised land arose from their inability to drive out the various people groups who had been living there. God gave specific instructions to this end, but Israel failed to carry out His commands fully. God wanted to purge the land of the wickedness and idolatry. He understood the human tendency toward sin, and He knew Israel would be drawn into idolatry if the nations remained. With pagan neighbors tempting them to compromise, the Israelites would struggle to become a holy people focused solely on the Lord.

In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelites lost an initial battle with the Philistines, and four thousand men died in the fighting (1 Sam. 4:1-2). Looking for an advantage, they decided to bring God into the fight, but they chose the wrong way to do it. Instead of crying out to the Lord, they carried the ark onto the battlefield. As the ark entered the Israelite camp, the cheering of the soldiers hardened the resolve of the Philistines. The Philistines fought even harder in the second battle, defeating Israel again and killing thirty thousand men, including Eli's sons (4:10-11).

In reality, Israel wasn't just fighting against Philistia. They were also experiencing God's judgment on the nation and on the house of Eli. Rather than guaranteeing God's favor, their disrespect toward God and the ark led to devastation.

News quickly reached Eli that the ark of the Lord had been captured and his two sons were dead. With this news, Eli fell from his chair (the Hebrew word means "throne") and broke his neck. Thus, the priestly dynasty of Eli came to an end.

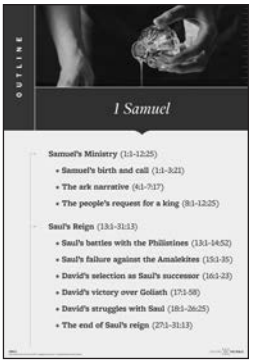
The ark of God remained in Philistine territory for seven months until it was finally sent back to Israel. Through the guidance of Samuel, whom God was establishing as a priest and prophet for His people, Israel won a temporary victory over the Philistines, but the fighting would continue for decades to come.

Scan 1 Samuel 4:1–7:17, looking for how people, both Israelite and non-Israelite, treated the ark of the covenant. In what ways did they treat it properly and respectfully? How did they treat it disrespectfully? (PSG, p. 38)

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ENGAGE

PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of 1 Samuel*) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Dagon*). Enlist a volunteer to give a summary report of **Pack Item 10**.





READ: Read the opening paragraph on page 37 of the PSG. Lead a brief discussion on any experiences adults have had with kudzu or a similar invasive plant or animal species.

ASK: **What recent purchase have you made that left you disappointed?** (PSG, p. 37)

INTRODUCE: Point to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of 1 Samuel*). Explain that today's Bible study is part of the section known as "The Ark Narrative." Explain the significance of the ark for Israel.

> *Between Egypt and Canaan, God gave Moses detailed directives about life in the promised land. . . . Part of God's instructions included the place where His people were to worship Him, a tent-like structure known as the tabernacle. The inner-most and holiest part of the tabernacle would house the ark of the covenant. The ark contained three items: the tablets of stone that Moses received on Mount Sinai, a golden jar containing some of the manna that God supplied in the wilderness, and Aaron's staff, which had miraculously budded (Heb. 9:4). The top of the box was covered with a solid gold lid. Two angelic beings, cherubim, also made of gold, were on the lid. They faced each other; their wings overarched the lid. The empty space below the wings was known as the mercy seat. This area symbolized the presence of God.* (PSG, p. 38)

CONTEXT: Share that today's lesson will examine how God demonstrated His power through the ark, even though both the Israelites and the Philistines handled it improperly.

Group Activity Option

Music

Distribute hymnals and guide adults to "Holy, Holy, Holy" (*Baptist Hymnal 2007*, No. 68). Guide adults to read the verses and reflect on what it means to consider God as "holy." Ask: ***How can we be guilty of not treating God as holy?*** Note that this session focuses on the holiness of God and challenges us to revere Him as holy each day.

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Sovereignty (1 Sam. 5:1-5)

1 After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, 2 brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue. 3 When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. 4 But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon's torso remained. 5 That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

(vv. 1-2) ***The ark of God*** was a sacred object for the Israelites. This golden chest contained the tablets of law written by the finger of God (Ex. 34:1) and was kept in the tabernacle's holy of holies. Later, it would reside in the most holy place of the temple. Over the ark were two golden cherubim whose wings covered the mercy seat. This is where God promised to dwell and where the high priest would sprinkle blood on the Day of Atonement. The *ark* served as the supreme symbol of God's presence among His people.

The Israelites foolishly had brought the ark to their military camp at ***Ebenezer*** to serve as a kind of good luck charm. Instead of experiencing God's favor, the Lord allowed the Philistines to rout His people and to capture the ark. After the battle, the Philistines carried it about nineteen miles to •***Ashdod,*** one of their five main cities.

Along with being a primary Philistine city, Ashdod also was the home of a ***temple of •Dagon***. Originally worshiped in Mesopotamia, the Philistines adopted *Dagon* as their primary god. Though often depicted as half-man and half-fish, he most likely was a god of storms and agriculture. Supposedly, Dagon was the father of Baal, a major god among other Canaanite peoples. Samson destroyed a different temple to Dagon in Judges 16.

For the Philistines, the defeat of the Israelites was proof of Dagon's superiority over the God of Israel. Thus, it would be appropriate for them to place the ark next to their god's ***statue*** in his temple. Such a move was meant to emphasize Dagon's authority, but it would prove disastrous for the Philistines and only validate the Lord's power.

(v. 3) Worshipers who came to Dagon's temple ***early the next morning*** found something unexpected. The statue of Dagon was knocked over with its ***face to the ground before the ark of the LORD***. From all indications, Dagon was prostrate in worship before the God of Israel. The Philistines "helped" their god up and ***returned him to his place***. This idol needed an intervention.

(vv. 4-5) From there, things went from bad to worse for Dagon's statue. The next morning, the image again had ***his face to the ground***, but its ***head*** and ***both of his hands*** had been ***broken off.*** They were lying on the ***threshold*** of the temple's entrance, separated from his ***torso***.

The Hebrew language is more telling, indicating that the desecration of Dagon was the active work of God Himself. Plus, in ancient warfare, often the head and the hands were cut off as trophies. The writer of 1 Samuel later used the same wording to describe David removing Goliath's head (1 Sam. 17:51). Just as David executed Goliath, so God "executed" His pagan rival in its own temple, demonstrating His ultimate power.

Verse 5 contains an odd statement on how the Philistines reacted to what they found. Because Dagon's head and hands had fallen on the threshold, they began to consider it a "holy" space. Worshipers would not step on the threshold out of respect for their god. The prophet Zephaniah condemned those who followed such worship practices: "On that day I will punish all who skip over the threshold" (Zeph. 1:9).

Key Doctrine

God

There is one and only living and true God. (See Isaiah 40:25; John 17:3.)

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APPLICATION POINT: **We can be assured that God is the only true God.**

READ: **Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 5:1-5** while adults listen for what happened to the ark of God and what happened in the temple of Dagon. Guide adults to summarize the events described in the verses.

REPORT: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Dagon*). Call on the enlisted volunteer to overview the article. Encourage the group to read and reflect on the article in greater depth during the week.


DAGON

EXPLAIN: Read aloud 1 Samuel 5:3 again and summarize this information from page 40 of the PSG:

> "Dagon was the Philistines' primary deity. Bringing the ark to the Dagon temple meant the Philistines credited Dagon with their victory over the Israelites. The symbolism in verse 3 is rich. Having one's face to the ground indicated subservience and vulnerability. The statue of Dagon being in that position while before the ark of the Lord underscored this false deity's powerlessness before Yahweh. Further underscoring Dagon's helplessness, the people who tended to this so-called god had to return him to his place. He, of course, was incapable of doing this himself."

HIGHLIGHT: Encourage adults to recall what happened the second night in the temple of Dagon. Use information from verse 3 of the Leader Guide (p. 48) to discuss the message that God communicated through the hands and head of Dagon.

ASK: **What lesser "god" in your life needs to be toppled over?** (PSG, p. 40)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

The ark of the covenant is the central piece in this story of Israel and the Philistines. Increase your knowledge of this sacred object by reading about its construction in Exodus 25:10-22 and 37:1-9. Next, read an article about the ark of the covenant in a Bible dictionary. ***What was to be the attitude of the Israelite people toward the ark of the Lord? What do we learn from the importance of the ark in Judaism that informs our own attitude toward the worship of God?***

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Judgment (1 Sam. 5:6-10)

6 The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors. 7 When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon." 8 So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, "What should we do with the ark of Israel's God?" "The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath," they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God. 9 After they had moved it, the Lord's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors. 10 The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, "They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people!"

(v. 6) The backstory of God's miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt resides in the background of every confrontation between Israel and its pagan neighbors in Canaan. As with the Egyptians, the Philistines began to feel God's ***hand*** working against them. When used negatively, the Hebrew word translated ***heavy*** indicates a burden or misfortune. Moses used it in Exodus 7–10 to describe Pharaoh's hardened heart. God was acting against His enemies, and it left them terrified, much like the residents of Jericho as Israel began the conquest (Josh. 2:8-11,23-24).

Not long after the strange occurrences in Dagon's temple, Philistine leaders began to recognize that the Lord was punishing them. That understanding grew with an outbreak of ***tumors*** that ***afflicted*** the people.

The Hebrew word for *tumors* refers to a "hill" or "mound." In this case, it likely described a "swelling disease." The Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, adds that God sent mice against the Philistines. One disease that fits the description of swelling glands spread by flea-carrying mice and rats is bubonic plague. This connection could explain why the Philistines included images of mice and tumors when the ark came back to Israel (1 Sam. 6:5). Other scholars suggest this was an outbreak of dysentery that produced painful anal sores.

(vv. 7-8) Whatever the disease, the people of ***Ashdod*** connected the dots between the plague and the presence of ***the ark***. They knew the tumors were the Lord's judgment against ***us and our god Dagon***. Their shattered bodies were tied directly to their shattered idol!

In response, a council of the ***Philistine rulers*** was called. This would have included the leaders of the five Philistine city-states: *Ashdod*, Gaza, Ashkelon, ***Gath***, and Ekron (see 1 Sam. 6:17-18). The rulers concluded that the ***ark*** should be relocated to *Gath*, about twelve miles southeast of Ashdod. The writer did not explain why Gath was chosen as the ark's next destination.

The move allowed the Philistines to determine if the plague really was tied to the presence of the ark or if the two things were simply a coincidence. After what happened in the temple, most of the citizens likely suspected that both the fall of Dagon and the tumors were related to the ***ark of Israel's God***.

(vv. 9-10) The suspicions were confirmed when the same plague broke out again. The writer affirmed that ***the Lord's hand was against . . . Gath*** as it had been against Ashdod. And, as it had in Ashdod, the ark and the ***outbreak of tumors*** created a ***great panic*** in Gath. The entire population felt the impact of the plague.

While the text suggests that these outbreaks and the transfer of the ark of God from town to town occurred rapidly, the events actually took place over a seven-month period (1 Sam. 6:1). From Gath, the ark was moved to ***Ekron***, a town located about ten miles east of Ashdod and about twenty miles from Jerusalem.

However, the residents of *Ekron* took a stand. The news of Ashdod and Gath's misery preceded the ark's arrival, and the people of Ekron wanted no part of it. They believed the ark would ***kill us and our people***. For them, the results of the Philistine "experiment" were conclusive, and they were not willing to risk their own lives by accepting the ark into their city.

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APPLICATION POINT: **We should recognize that God will judge our sin.**

READ: **Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 5:6-10** as adults listen for how the residents of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron responded to the presence of the ark of God.

LIST: On the board, draw four columns: *Ashdod*, *Gath*, *Ekron*, and *God*. Direct adults to call out what each Philistine city said and did. Record their responses in the corresponding columns. For the fourth column, ask adults to add what the Lord did in each of the towns. Record responses under *God*.

ASK: **Why did the Lord bring judgment on the Philistines in Ashdod and Gath?**

RECAP: Share more details about God's judgment on the Philistines:

> *The contrast is clear. Dagon's hands had been removed, yet the LORD's hand was still powerful. . . . God's hand being "heavy" indicated that He was applying persistent pressure on the Philistines. . . . The Hebrew word translated "terrified" does not mean that He simply startled or scared them. Some translations say He "ravaged them." The picture is of Ashdod and its surrounding territories being ruined and made desolate. The exact nature of the tumors has been the subject of debate. Possible explanations have included everything from hemorrhoids to boils or to lymphatic swelling. This final possibility would have indicated the presence of bubonic plague.* (PSG, p. 41)

FOLLOW UP: Emphasize the serious nature of God's judgment. Note Ekron's reaction to the ark when the Philistines tried to move it there.

ASK: **Why do you think God brought such heavy punishment on the Philistines? What do God's actions reveal about His character?** (PSG, p. 42)

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Wrapped Gift

Place a wrapped gift in the center of the group. Ask: ***What is the worst "white elephant" gift you've ever gotten for Christmas? What did you do with it?*** Point out that the Philistine cities did not want the ark of God or its judgment. Note that they moved it on as quickly as possible—and Ekron refused to take it altogether.

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Reverence (1 Sam. 6:13-15,19-20)

13 The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. 14 The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. 15 The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. [. . .] 19 God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. 20 The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?"

(v. 13) Finally, the Philistines decided to return the Lord's ark to Israel. With it, they sent two unique gifts to appease God's anger: five gold mice and five golden images of tumors. They put the ark on a cart and sent the cows pulling it on their way. The animals headed straight toward Israelite territory.

•***Beth-shemesh*** belonged to the tribe of Dan and sat about twenty-four miles west of Jerusalem. In Joshua 21:16, it was designated as a levitical city, so the priestly residents were members of the tribe of Levi and should have been well-versed on the protocol for handling the ***ark***. Initially, they were ***overjoyed*** to see the ark, but their celebration soon would turn into grief.

(vv. 14-15) Throughout this incident, the regulations regarding ***the ark of the LORD*** were violated. Although the Philistines were unaware of God's laws, the ark was always to be carried, not transported on a cart (Num. 4:15; 7:9). This violation would receive harsh judgment from God years later (2 Sam. 6:1-11).

The ark was loaded onto a ***large rock***. Here, too, God's directions were violated. The ark was to remain hidden from public display. The Levites should have covered the ark (see Num. 4:4-6).

In their joy, the people ***chopped up the cart*** for a sacrifice. Hopefully, the sacrifice was offered by the priests. Otherwise, that would violate God's law. In addition, the law specified that only male animals were to be offered to the Lord. The Hebrew word rendered ***cows*** identifies female bovine. A worse offense, however, was yet to come.

(v. 19) God is holy and demands to be treated with reverence. His laws regarding worship were precise and designed to maintain the sacred nature of His mystery and holiness. In their zeal in worship, some residents of Beth-shemesh were ***struck down*** because they ***looked inside the ark***. Some ***seventy*** people died that day because of their disrespect toward God.

It would not be the last time He killed someone for improperly handling the ark. In 2 Samuel 6:7, God struck down Uzzah for simply touching the ark. Here, the people of Beth-shemesh quickly realized their error and ***mourned*** because of the ***great slaughter*** at God's hands.

(v. 20) The Israelites determined that no one could ***stand in the presence of the LORD***. Taking their cue from the Philistine lords, the Israelites decided to move the ark, but they weren't sure where to take it. In verse 21, they invited the citizens of Kiriath-jearim to claim the ark.

It is fair to wonder why the ark did not return to the tabernacle at Shiloh where it belonged. Instead, it remained in Kiriath-jearim for twenty years (1 Sam. 7:2). Some scholars have speculated that the tabernacle may have been destroyed by the Philistines during this period. If true, this would also explain when Samuel moved his headquarters to Ramah, his hometown (7:17).

God's Holiness

Learn more about God's holiness and how we are to show proper reverence for Him.

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EXPLORE 1 Samuel 6:13-15,19-20

APPLICATION POINT: **We can enter into the presence of God only in the way He has prescribed.**

READ: **Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 6:13-15** while other adults note of what the people of Beth-shemesh did with the ark of God.

SUMMARIZE: Direct adults to form teams of two or three to review the information for 1 Samuel 6:13-15 under "Reverence" on page 43 of the PSG. (*For smaller groups, an individual can be a team.*) After a few minutes, allow volunteers on each team to identify one or two facts from their review. Use information from page 52 of the Leader Guide to supplement the discussion.

ASK: **What would you expect to happen in response to the people's actions in verses 13-15? Why?**

READ: **Read aloud 1 Samuel 6:19-20** and ask adults to compare what actually happened to what they expected.

EXPLAIN: Highlight God's response to the violation of His holiness by the residents of Beth-shemesh:

> *God had instructed that the ark was to be covered when it was not sitting in its place in the holy of holies. No one except Aaron and his sons (the priests) were to see the ark (Num. 4:1-20). They were to exhibit great reverence when covering and moving the sacred objects. Here, the people put the ark on display and evidently looked inside. Personal curiosity had eclipsed any sense of reverence and decorum that these seventy persons should have had. God held them accountable. Having experienced God's judgment, the people's mood went from being overjoyed to mourning.* (PSG, p. 43)

SHARE: Note that the residents of Beth-shemesh had a similar response to the Philistines once they experienced God's wrath. Point out that they moved the ark about fifteen miles to the town of Kiriath-jearim and that it remained there for twenty years. Explain that many scholars believe the ark could not return to Shiloh because the tabernacle had been destroyed by the Philistines.

ASK: **In what ways might we be guilty of trivializing that which is holy?** (PSG, p. 44)

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CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE: Review these points from Apply the Text on page 45 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can be assured that God is the only true God.*
- *We should recognize that God will judge our sin.*
- *We can enter into the presence of God only in the way He has prescribed.*

DISCUSS: Guide adults to read and reflect on the first set of questions on page 45 of the PSG. Encourage them to list ways they can show reverence for the things of God in their lives. Record their responses on the board. Challenge them to identify at least one practical step they will take in the week to come.

EVALUATE: Read the second question set on page 45 of the PSG: **Examine your own life. Are there any modern-day "idols" that are vying for your loyalty and attention? What actions can you take to make sure the Lord has your sole devotion?** Encourage adults to use these questions as a prayer prompt during the week.

PRAY: Direct a volunteer to read Psalm 97:9. Point out that this is the memory verse for the week. Lead adults to use this verse as a prayer back to God. After a few minutes, close the session in prayer, asking God to help adults identify the false gods in their lives and to follow God with all their hearts.

AFTER THE SESSION

Follow up the session with an email, text, or note to adults who attended the session. Encourage them to continue approaching the Lord in reverent prayer and identifying areas where their reverence is lacking. Remind them God is holy and worthy of our sole devotion. Urge them to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 45 of the PSG.

LEADER EXTRAS



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