

Title: Dagon-it!
Text: 1 Samuel 5
Theme: the irrationality of idolatry
Series: 1 Samuel
Prop Stmtnt: God is sovereign and sufficient.

John Piper said, *“God has revealed his purposeful sovereignty over good and evil in order to humble human pride, intensify human worship, shatter human hopelessness, and put ballast in the battered boat of human faith, steel in the spine of human courage, gladness in the groans of affliction, and love in the heart that sees no way forward.”* (Providence, p.14)

It is difficult to imagine how things could be bleaker for Israel and unbelievably glorious for her adversary. Her arch-enemy, the Philistines, have defeated her again. Israel has been reduced once more to slave-status. She is making her enemy rich and powerful and her enemy uses that power to keep Israel poor and broken. Now, the unthinkable has happened. It appears that Israel’s God has been captured by the Philistines! How could Israel ever be rescued and how could the Philistines ever be defeated? To them, God had left them. He was on the other side.

The victory for the Philistines was too good to be believed. The God who destroyed the Egyptian Empire several hundred years earlier is now safely tucked inside the temple of Dagon. What a spectacle this had to be, parading the ark of the covenant down the main street of Ashdod and into the temple of Dagon. It also had to be a bit odd, though too. The images of deities were large, imposing, and often terrifying in their appearance. For those who could not imagine what the God of Israel looked like, they really couldn’t tell from the oversized box, that was covered with gold and had two angel-like beings bent over fastened to the top. What kind of an image what this and what kind of a God was this? It was not very big and certainly not that imposing, in fact, not imposing at all. Perhaps they wondered why they were ever afraid of this. What do we do with this? Sitting in the shadow of the large and imposing Dagon seemed only right, since Dagon was, after all, obviously the more powerful of the two. But, the next morning, something, inexplicable happened. Dagon was on his face before the Ark of the Covenant.

Read Text:

My hope for you is that you respond to this text with a sweet surrender to infinite good and infinite great glory of God.

1. **God will not tolerate other gods.** (1-5)

God will not tolerate other gods because other gods do not really exist and therefore no other god can save you. This is so good for you to know and wonderful for you to embrace. God will not tolerate other gods and he doesn’t apologize for it. He is not being insecure and mean. He is simply being who He is, the one and only true and living God.

The last time we ran into Dagon was back in Judges 16, when the Philistines had an enormous party in Dagon's temple and used the occasion to mock Samson, who brought the house down. That temple was likely in the city of Gaza. This temple to Dagon is in the city of Ashdod. The Philistines were a people who were ruled by 5 city-state regions that worked together. The one thing that held them together was their worship of Dagon. To be a Philistine was to be a worshipper of Dagon. According to ancient mythology, Dagon, the god over crop fertility was the father of Baal. Dag means fish. The god Dagon was a fish-man. Instead of a mermaid, this was a merman. The top half was a man and the bottom half of the being was a fish. The terrible idea that Dagon had something to do with fertility would come back to haunt the Philistines.

Every group had its own god and the glory and bragging rights of that god was at stake all the time. For less than one day it appeared that Dagon was greater than Israel's God. But Israel's God is more than Israel's God. He is God and He is the one and only God and He will not share his glory with any other god. That is really hard to fathom now and was almost impossible to fathom back then.

It's trendy and chic to worship whatever and however works for you. In our open-minded, whatever goes, who-cares climate, do what makes you happy. It doesn't matter what your faith is in. It doesn't matter if you have faith. If you happen to find something that works, good for you, just don't impose that on anyone else. After all, your faith only is valuable because you actually think that it has value. It doesn't really have intrinsic value. It isn't actually true, but it gives you comfort, solace and a sense of meaning. Now, hold the phone. Do you realize that what I have just said, is utter insanity and complete madness? Think about this. How can something that does not actually have ultimate meaning give you meaning? How can something that is not ultimately true be your truth? How can something that is not actually valuable be valuable to you? People who find meaning in fables, truth in lies and value in hoaxes are delusional. The world likes to pretend that there are many gods, many valid beliefs, many roads that we are all on. It sounds so cosmopolitan. It just isn't true and God does not cooperate with the script.

In their minds, they have Israel's God. They have the Ark of the Covenant, so they have God. What are they going to do with God? That's a really good question, isn't it? Where do you put Him? Now, when I say that, I do not mean to imply that the Ark of the Covenant was God, it wasn't. I say that because I am reflecting how they perceived it. And the way Israel and the Philistines treated the Ark was a reflection of how they viewed God. So, back to the question, what are they going to do with God and where are they going to put him? The answer to that is that you put Him where He says to put Him. But, to them, he was another god, so they, for the time being put him in the temple of their god, who wasn't really a god.

V.3 says that the people of Ashdod rose early the next day. That may have been normal for them and this was nothing out of the ordinary. If that was the case, I would think that the writer would have simply said, "the next day." The fact that they rose early the next day may be because they were planning a major celebration. And if so, circumstantially, this would have been in major contrast to their neighbors, the Israelites. The Israelites were mourning the tens

of thousands of men who died in battle and the loss of the Ark while the Philistines were preparing for a party to out-party anything they had ever done. But, just as God would not allow himself to be used as a good luck charm to Israel, he would not tolerate other gods nor be viewed as inferior or even an equal. Ashdod, we have a problem. Dagon is worshiping Yahweh.

How do you explain your big-ol' god face down on the ground before the Ark of the Covenant? Oh, by the way, this isn't the last time that a big dude representing the Philistines does a fatal face plant before the "little" representative of Israel. Now, if this was a little figurine that sat on a shelf, one could put it back up and not say anything. But, dagon-it, this thing is big and you just can't leave your god on his face before another God. Your god will not be happy with you. So, you have to get help. You have to get a lot of help. It is going to take a lot of guys to get Dagon back up. I think the end of v.3 is hilarious. "So, they took Dagon and put him back in his place." Stay put! Right? Don't do that that again! And obviously, someone tweeted about it, so word got out about what happened which likely put the party on hold. But, seriously, how do you possibly explain this? No one wants to admit it, but this Ark thingy now seems to be a bit of a bother. But maybe it was just a fluke. Let's get Dagon back up on his flippers and hope that it works. It reminds me of Isaiah 40.18-20.

"To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move."

It's going to be a bad day at the office when your idol can't stand up. But, what does that say about your idol when you have to pick him up and put props under him so that he will stay in one place? It probably took the better part of the day to get Dagon back up. Most of us in the west have not been raised in a blatantly idol culture. But, the history of idol worship is one of a hate/fear relationship. In order for idols to thrive, they have to be fed and nourished. The more you sacrifice (quantity and quality – humans) the stronger they get. So, idols depend on their followers for strength. In this case, Dagon couldn't get himself up, he had to be propped back up. It is pretty obvious to see that all idols are simply manifestations of the human heart. Idol worship is a formal and organized attempt at worshiping self. (see Romans 1)

Verse 4 sounds similar to verse 3. They rose up early the next morning, obviously hoping that this day would start better and it was worse. Actually, it was worse than worse. As humiliating as it was for Israel to lose the Ark, this was by far, worse. Dagon was not only on his face before the Ark, but his head and both of his hands had been cut off. Not broken off, cut off. This was no fluke. Everyone looking at this knew exactly what this meant. They didn't know how it happened, but they knew what it meant. In order to get a correct body count of the number of soldiers you killed of the enemy in a battle, you would cut off their heads and cut off their hands. Gruesome? Yes. Humiliating? Yes. Easier to carry than bodies? Yes. Cutting off heads and hands was evidence of a military victory. Do you see it now? The Philistines thought they had won the battle and to some degree they had. But now they just discovered a very important truth. Yahweh always wins the war. God went into the temple of Dagon and took him down and

humiliated him. Again, in 12 chapters, the little guy from Israel cuts off the head of the giant from the Philistines who had fallen face down. Oh how the mighty are fallen.

Never, ever, ever doubt God, because even when He “loses” He wins! Even when you crucify Him, bury him and seal the tomb, He rises again. The Philistines thought that Dagon had won, so they put the “loser” God under the winner god, only for Dagon to pull a Humpty-Dumpty. God cannot be defeated. He is God. “I am going to live my own life and do my own thing. God isn’t going to tell me what to do.” That is about the most imbecile thing you could do. For one, there is no god, like God. He is the one and only. That is why he won’t share his glory or tolerate the notion of other gods. But, there is more. God is not on an ego trip. God is not a bully who delights in instilling terror. What if God, in making the glories of his grace and power known is more like an honest attorney who really knows the law and can help you and can protect you and can defend you. Is it then wrong for God to expose the dishonest attorney who is taking you for a ride and taking all of your money, and lying to you the entire time? No, you want God to tell you the truth. He does! Over and over He does. But are you willing to believe Him?

There is no love in idol worship. When I say idols, for the Philistines and Israel the idols had names like Dagon, Baal, Asherah, Molech, etc. These were formal names for the idols of power, success, reputation, influence, sex and money. The power of idols is bound up in the fear they are able to generate. The idols were never satisfied. Whatever you gave them was never good enough. You lived in terror of what they would do to you because you were responsible for their happiness and if they weren’t happy, they would take it out on you. It was a terrible way to live. Therefore, can you imagine the terror that gripped these priests and people? They thought they had the God of Israel only to discover that He had them. This was an utter disaster. What on earth were they going to do with God? The situation becomes tragic. Dagon was powerless to save himself which meant that Dagon could not save any of his followers. The fact is...

2. **You cannot be neutral about God.** (6-12)

What should have been the response of the priests of Dagon and the people of Ashdod? Yahweh was clearly superior. Wouldn’t the logical response be to acknowledge that Dagon has been exposed as a fraud, a false god, and/or powerless and impotent at the very least? Of course! Nothing of the sort happens. We are Philistines. We worship Dagon. I went to Dagon’s temple as a child. I learned this from my dad who learned this from his dad, who learned it from his dad, etc. Yes, but Dagon can’t save you! Dagon cannot even save himself. Obviously, the people of Ashdod do not do that. It appears that for the time being, they don’t do anything. But, you cannot be neutral about God.

We learn from 6.1, that the Ark of the Covenant was “captive” in the land of the Philistines for 7 months. Therefore, after the debacle in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod, the people of Ashdod clearly had no idea what to do with the Ark. But God will not be ignored. You will deal with him. The people of Ashdod found this out in a very difficult way. The Ark was still in Ashdod when a pandemic broke out. God afflicted them with tumors. It is very possible that the people of

Ashdod experienced something the same as or similar to the bubonic plague. The bubonic plague was thought to have been spread by mice and rats, but it is actually spread by the fleas that attach themselves to the rodents. Therefore, mice and rats are associated with it. The disease itself causes lymph nodes to swell in the groin, armpit or neck and these can grow as large as a chicken egg. When Jewish rabbis translated the OT into Greek (the Septuagint), they translated the last phrase of v.9 as “tumors in the groin.” (yes, we can all groan together, right?) Now, remember that Dagon was associated with fertility. So, for the men of Ashdod to be afflicted with tumors in the groin, which is very likely, would not only get their attention, but it would be another undeniable faceplant for Dagon.

Verse 6 – “*The **hand of the LORD** was heavy against the people of Ashdod...*” Now, that’s interesting, isn’t it? Dagon now doesn’t have any hands. The hands that you could see, that he “had” are now useless and the hand of the Lord that you can’t see can’t be stopped. The unseen hand of God terrified the city of Ashdod and its territory. By capturing the Ark and by taking it to their land and placing it in the temple of their god, the Philistines were mocking God. This was not working out well. So, they called an emergency session of the lords of the Philistines and decided to take the Ark to Gath. Who knows why they came up with that, but this ended up being a terrible thing for the men of Gath (young and old), so they sent the Ark to Ekron, who said no way. Verse 11 sounds like the pandemic had already started in Ekron. This means that Ashdod, Gath and Ekron (3 of the 5 city-states) have been decimated. Look at v. 12. “*The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.*”

Conclusion: 3 points

- 1) Only God can save you from God.

The gods of this world get their existence and sustenance from us. We give them life and strength, whereas, the true and living God does not need us, we need him. We are completely dependent upon him. But, we rejected him. We, like sheep have gone our own way. We have tried to be god and rule our own lives and our rebellion must be addressed. So, the major issue that we have to deal with is how can we be right before God, when we are so wrong? How can we be forgiven when we have committed such treason? Rebellion as profound as ours demands a payment that goes way beyond what we can make. How can we offer a payment for our sin to God that would satisfy the cost of our sin?

What if Ethan Crumbley pleaded guilty to 4 counts of murder and said that whatever punishment he is given, he will pay it. What could he possibly pay that would satisfy the families of the students who died? Even if Ethan had billions of dollars, no money would replace a life. Justice is limited by the capacity of the convicted. The religions of this world are full of bad news. They tell you to try harder, do better, be nicer, but you and I have offended and sinned against an infinitely holy God. What could we possibly pay that would cover our debt? We can’t! Only God can save you from God. That is what Christ did. He came to this earth in order to die a substitutionary death. His death was an atoning sacrifice. It was an infinitely perfect, righteous, pure, all-sufficient payment for the sins of every single person who would ever

believe in him. Your forgiveness is NOT based on what you do but is based on what Christ has accomplished and purchased for you. Trust in Christ! Do you see it now? Genuine Christianity is the only true religion because it is the only source of good news. Everything else is based on what you can do and your good is not good enough. Christianity is based on what God has done for you and not on what you do for God. That is why God is so good and so kind and so loving to expose all other gods as frauds and imposters because, they are. And if you trust in anything else other than Christ alone, you will have to pay for your own sin.

2) Can't all of our gods just coexist?

No. God is not going to pretend that other gods are valid. He will not share his glory with liars and frauds who damn their followers with empty promises. It is politically demanded and socially expected that you validate all beliefs. The naïve and ignorant want to pretend that all religions can get along. Dagon was a version of looking for your best life now. He promised wealth and health. But, God doesn't go along with that. And Jesus said it very clearly. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve money and God, pleasure and God, power and God. It's God, or something else. He won't tolerate another god in the temple.

3) What do you with God?

Love Him! Trust Him! Worship Him! Follow Him! If you give him your life, he will give it back – forever!