

1 Samuel 4:1b-5:12

Introduction

Let's start off with a quiz.

If I asked you what the heaviest living animal is, what would you say?

The top ten heaviest living animals are all whales. The heaviest is the Blue Whale, weighing in at anything up to 190 tonnes.

What about the heaviest living land animal?

It's the African Bush Elephant, which can reach a maximum weight of more than 10 tonnes.

Compared to the whale, it's a tiddler. You wouldn't want it sitting on you though.

What about the heaviest vehicle?

The heaviest, as far as I understand, is the Bagger 293 Bucket-Wheel Excavator, which is used in mining. It weighs an extraordinary 14,200 tonnes.

The heaviest self-propelled vehicle is NASA's Crawler-Transporter, which is used to transport spacecraft to the launch site. That weighs 2,721 tonnes.

Okay, last one. What about the heaviest person?

That's Jon Brower Minnoch. When he died, at the age of 41, the doctors estimated that he was at least 100 stone or 635kg.

Why am I asking all this? You didn't expect to be coming along to a Pub Quiz this morning.

It's because the idea of weightiness helps us to get to grips with the passage we're looking at.

When we talk about keeping something 'light', we mean not getting too serious.

To be 'light-hearted' is not to take things too seriously.

On the other hand, the idea of something being weighty implies that it is serious or important.

We might talk of 'weighty matters' or of someone's opinion 'carrying weight' or of being 'weighed down' by something, and so on.

In our speech, we make a link between weightiness and seriousness or importance.

And the Bible does the same.

In the original language, Hebrew, the word 'glory' comes from the same root as the word 'weighty'.

The glory of God is his weightiness or heaviness. That idea will keep coming up in this passage.

Now, God doesn't have a body. He's not a physical being. So, we're not talking about physical weight.

Rather, his glory, or his weightiness, is the seriousness with which he must be taken.

And the warning of this passage is not to take God lightly.

So, I've just got one heading: Don't take God lightly.

But I've got three sub-headings. They are three ways in which the people of Samuel's day took God lightly. And three ways in which we can still take God lightly today.

So then, here's our heading: Don't take God lightly.

Don't take God lightly

And here's our first sub-heading. The first way we might take God lightly. It's superstition.

1. Superstition

In the opening verses of the chapter, the Israelites go out to fight against the Philistines.

The Philistines lived in Philistia. Here's a map showing the territories of Israel in the time of the days of Samuel. The Dead Sea is at the centre. And here is Philistia. The Philistines were seafarers. It's likely that they came from southern Europe, perhaps Crete, were repelled by the Egyptians, and eventually settled here, on the Mediterranean coast of Canaan, west of the Dead Sea. So, they were right next-door to the Israelites, on the coast.

They knew how to forge iron, which made them technologically advanced. And in Samuel's day, they were looking to expand their territory into the hill country where the Israelites lived.

The Philistines were the main threat to the Israelites at this time. And the battle we're reading about this morning happened about here.

And for Israel, it went very badly. They lost the battle and four thousand of their men were killed.

So, what do they do?

Well, they ask a good question. **'Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?'** they ask.

But that don't hang around for an answer.

The next moment, they're off. They've decided what to do. They want the ark of the covenant. So, they send a group of men to Shiloh – here – to get it.

The ark was a symbol of God's presence. So, their thinking goes, if we've got the ark, then we've got God. And if we've got God, then he'll be sure to fight for us and save us.

It all sounds rather superstitious and manipulative. They've reduced the Lord Almighty to a 'god-in-a-box' who will do their bidding. At the end of the last chapter, we were told that God's word had come to all Israel through his prophet Samuel. Yet, there's no suggestion that they *consult* with Samuel. There's no suggestion that they seek *a word* from God. They just go to Shiloh, grab the ark and rush off back to their camp.

And then, when the ark of the covenant arrives in the camp, we're told that it's met with such a great shout that the ground shakes.

It's the kind of roar you hear from the crowd at a rugby match or a football ground.

The Israelites are sure that, now they have the ark, victory is assured.

The Philistines hear the noise and want to know what's going on. And when they find out that the ark of the covenant has arrived in the camp, they're terrified.

Look at verse 8.

'We're doomed!' they say. 'Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'

The Philistines had clearly heard what God had done when he had struck Egypt with plagues and rescued the Israelites from slavery. Their information wasn't completely accurate. But they know what had happened. And they're terrified. They know what God can do. Unlike the Israelites, they know that he's not to be taken lightly. They know that his arrival in the camp is a weighty matter. And their fear drives them to fight.

And this time it's a disaster. *Without* the ark, the Israelites had lost four thousand men. *With* the ark, they lose thirty thousand men. Nearly ten times as many. And what's more, the ark is captured, and Eli's two sons are killed.

The lesson is that God cannot be treated like a good luck charm.

And we're not immune to that kind of superstitious theology ourselves.

The author Tim Chester has written about this. And he has pointed out, very helpfully, that we can treat God like a waiter in a restaurant.

It's good to walk into a restaurant and find that someone is waiting to serve you. We don't want the waiter to sit at the table with us – we're not on those terms! But we do want him to hover nearby. If we want some water, we want to be able to beckon him over and ask for some. When it's time to order dessert, we want to catch his eye so that he can bring us the menu. At the end of the meal, we get very grumpy if he doesn't appear quickly with the bill so that we can get off home.

And the danger for us is that we can treat God like that. We don't want him to sit at the table with us and be part of our daily lives. But we *do* want him nearby. When we need his help, we want to be able to call on him to get it.

What would that look like?

Well maybe we read our Bibles and pray. We come to church each Sunday. We give our money to support gospel ministry. Outwardly, it would look very normal.

But here's the difference.

Inwardly, the reason we do these things is not because we love the Lord and want to know him better and bring him glory. It's because we think that if we do our bit for God then, when we need him, he'll do his bit for us. We read our Bibles and come to church and give our money to keep God nearby so that when we need his help – perhaps to get a promotion at work, or to meet Mr. Right, or to preserve our health – we'll get it.

We're in danger when the cry of our heart changes from 'You are worthy' to 'You are useful'.

God will not be treated like that. We must not take him lightly by treating him like a good luck charm.

The second way we might take God lightly is by withholding our worship... which is our next sub-heading: Worship.

2. Worship

When news of the Israelite defeat reaches Shiloh, we find that Eli has been watching and waiting, fearing for the safe return of the ark. When he hears what's happened, it literally kills him. He falls backwards off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies.

When his daughter-in-law hears the news, she goes into premature labour. There are complications and she too begins to die.

Her friends try to comfort her with news of a son. But it's no comfort. She names him Ichabod, which means 'no glory'. And she explains that she's given him that name because **'The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured'**.

The reason that the ark had been captured is that God's glory – his weightiness – had been treated lightly.

And the evidence of that is lying in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Look again at verse 18.

When Eli hears about the capture of the ark, we're told that he **fell backwards off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man...** And then these words are added... **and he was heavy.**

Why's that mentioned? It hardly needs saying.

But it reminds us of God's words to Eli back in chapter 2.

He said, **'Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?'**

The fat of the sacrifices belonged to God. It was his portion. But Eli's family had robbed God by taking the fat for themselves. They wanted a juicy roast. So, they had fattened themselves on the fat that belonged to God.

Eli had stolen God's glory, his weight. And the evidence of that was hanging around his waist for all to see.

That's why Eli and his sons had died. They had withheld the worship that was rightly due to God. They had despised his sacrifices and defiled his sanctuary. They had abused their ministry for their own gain and treated God lightly. And now they had come under his judgement. We could say that they had experienced the weight of his glory.

The warning is that we must not rob God of his glory through our own half-hearted worship.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes: **I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy...** In other words, in view of all that God has done for you by sending his Son to die on a cross. **...to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.** (Romans 12:1)

The sacrifice that we owe to God is not the fat portion of an animal. It's ourselves. It's our whole lives. It's everything we are.

So, how do we rob God of his glory today? It's by failing to honour him with our whole lives... by living for ourselves rather than him.

We are his people. Redeemed by the blood of his Son. Adopted into his family. Indwelt by his Spirit. Made heirs of a glorious inheritance in heaven. We belong to him. And he calls us to worship him – that is, to show his worth - in every area of our lives.

In our prayers each morning, we should be asking God to show us how to bring him glory in all the things we'll be doing that day. We need to open our diaries to him and ask him to be glorified in every singly entry.

We must not take him lightly by withholding the worship he is due – the worship of our whole lives.

Finally, our passage warns us not to take God lightly by accommodating rivals.

That's our final sub-heading: Rivals.

3. Rivals

We're told in chapter 5, 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 beside Dagon.**

The ark is now in Philistia. And it's been placed in the temple of Dagon the Philistine god. That's supposed to be a sign of Dagon's superiority over the God of Israel.

But the next morning, when the people of Ashdod arise, they find Dagon face down on the ground before the ark. It's a posture of submission. Imagine their shock to find Dagon, their god, on the ground grovelling before the God of Israel.

So, they pick him up from the floor and put him back in his place.

But the next morning, he's face down on the ground once again! This time his head and his hands have been broken off. Only his body remains. This is how defeated enemies were treated. And the sight of it seems to have had a lasting impact on Dagon's priests because from that day onward they won't step on the place where he fell. The message is clear. There is one true God. And he will not tolerate rivals. All other supposed gods must bow down before him.

And notice the pun on the word 'hand'. Whilst, Dagon's hands have broken off, we're told in verse 6 that: **The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumours.**

There's that other word again: 'heavy'. God's weightiness, his glory, is being felt in Ashdod.

The people want the ark out of there. So, they send it to Gath.

But in verse 9, we're told that the Lord's hand was against that city too. So, they send it on to Ekron.

And we're told that in Ekron, **...death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy on it... the outcry of the city went up to heaven.**

This is how God's glory, his weightiness, is felt by those who worship idols.

By the power of his hand, he renders all idols handless, or powerless. And his hand is heavy on those who worship them.

And the Bible tells us that, by nature, we are all idolaters, just like the Philistines. We all put things in God's place in our affections, which we look to for our happiness and flourishing. For us, it's unlikely to be a little wooden idol. But it might be our wealth and possessions. It might be our success at school. Or our status at work. Or our popularity with our friends. It might be our children or grandchildren. Or our favourite football team. Perhaps our comfort and pleasure.

We have idols when we turn good things into god things and put them at the centre of our lives.

And God will not tolerate rivals.

He shares his glory with no one.

At his hand all other gods will fall.

We may not see that happening in the world today. But we will certainly see it at the end of history when he brings all people under his judgement.

And that's why Jesus came. He came to rescue us from our idolatry and bring us back into right relationship with God. He came so that we might put God back at the centre of our lives and give him the glory that is rightly his. He came so that we might experience grace and blessing from God's hand rather than wrath.

We need to ask ourselves whether we are taking the weight of God's glory seriously. Or are we tolerating idols? Are we allowing other things to compete with God in our affections?

Conclusion

Don't take God lightly.

Don't treat him as a good luck charm.

Don't withhold the worship he is due.

And don't give his glory to others.

He alone is the one true God. And he will not tolerate rivals.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you that Jesus came to rescue us from our idolatry. Please forgive us for the times when we have taken you lightly and not worshipped you as we should. Please help us to turn away from our idols once and for all. And please teach us how to bring you glory in every area of our lives, to the praise of your name. Amen.