

## 1 Samuel 6:1-7:17

### Introduction

There were reports in the news this week of the deaths of two mountaineers.

Gina and Anna were competing to be the first American women to scale all 14 of the world's highest mountains. They had both already climbed 13 of them and were racing to complete the final one: a mountain in Tibet.

They were taking different routes, with different guides. The ascent is not considered to be difficult. But disaster struck. A series of avalanches hit the mountain.

Initially, it had been hoped they might have been able to avoid those avalanches.

But when it became clear they hadn't, it was quickly accepted that they had both died.

There was no hope. No one could survive the weight of an avalanche crashing down on top of them as it had these two women.

The same is true of the submersible that lost pressure and broke apart on its way to the wreck of the Titanic earlier this year. Reports explained how the passengers would have been crushed instantly by the weight of the ocean bearing down on them.

And as we began to see last week, the same is true with God. We simply cannot survive the weight of his glory bearing down on us.

That's what this story in 1 Samuel is all about. We started to look at it last week.

If you remember, the Israelites have fought and lost a devastating battle against the Philistines. Eli's sons have been killed and the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence, has been captured by the Philistines and taken back to Philistine territory.

But we also saw that the ark has been passed from city to city like a hot potato because, wherever it goes, the people are afflicted with an onslaught of tumours and death. We're told that the hand of the Lord is heavy upon them. They're in a panic. They can't bear it. And eventually, they decide there's nothing for it but to send the ark back to Israel.

There's where we're picking up the story again this week.

The first half of the passage doesn't contain much comfort or encouragement. But hang in there. That will come as we get to the end of the passage.

I've put as the first heading: Our hopeless situation.

### Our hopeless situation

Please look down with me at chapter 6 verse 1.

**When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory for seven months, the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, ‘What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it back to its place.’**

The priests and diviners tell the people that they need to send the ark back to Israel with some gifts, a guilt offering. Five gold tumours and five gold rats.

That might sound like an odd kind of gift. It may not be the kind of gift that you would want to receive. I haven’t seen any jewellery that’s decorated with tumours and rats. I don’t suppose it’s the kind of thing you would want to unwrap at Christmas. But it’s highly symbolic.

Five corresponds to the five major cities in the Philistine territory, each with its own ruler or king. The tumours and rats represent what has happened to them. They might suggest that those cities had been afflicted with plagues that had been carried by rats.

And the priests and diviners remind the Philistines what had happened to the Egyptians when Pharaoh had tried to resist the God of Israel. They warn the Philistines not to harden their hearts towards him, but to give him glory. They’ve learnt that the God of Israel is to be taken seriously. He’s not to be taken lightly.

Then they give very specific instructions about how these gifts are to be sent. They’re to be put in a cart that’s hitched to two cows who have just given birth.

It’s a test.

The cows must act against all their natural instincts if they’re to leave their calves behind and walk towards Israel. And they would only do that if this was God’s hand at work.

And that’s what the cows do, lowing all the way.

It confirms that this great disaster that had swept through the Philistine territory had been from God’s hand. And it raises the possibility that it might now come to an end.

The five rulers of the Philistines follow the cart as it trundles along. And when it finally arrives in Beth Shemesh, in Israel, they turn round and go home... presumably relieved and happy. They’ve moved the problem on. The heavy weight of God’s glory has been lifted from Philistia. Now, as far as they’re concerned, it’s someone else’s problem.

In Beth Shemesh, there’s rejoicing. The cows are sacrificed. And the ark is put on top of a rock.

And, we would like to say, they all live happily ever after.

But they don't.

Some of the Israelites get nose-y, and they fail to treat the ark with proper respect. Rather than gazing on it and delighting in its safe return, they take the lid off and have a look inside.

And God acts in anger and strikes seventy of them down, dead.

It's far from a happy ending.

In fact, it should shock us.

Once again, we're seeing that you cannot take God lightly.

If you've read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, you might remember Susan and Lucy asking Mr Beaver about Aslan.

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr Beaver, "Why, don't you know? He's the King..."

"Is—is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not... Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he ain't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

God is not safe.

The Israelites are left mourning for 70 of their friends and family who had failed to take God seriously. The weight of God's glory may have been lifted from Philistia but now it's being felt once again in Israel. And it is not safe. It's serious.

That's why the Israelites ask their question in verse 20. Look at it with me.

**And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, 'Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?'**

The answer is that no one can. No one can bear the weight of God's glory.

Not Eli and his sons, who now lay dead because they had despised the Lord.

Not Dagon the false god of the Philistines, who had been broken into pieces.

Not the Philistines, who had been devastated by deadly tumours.

Not even the Israelites.

No one can stand in the presence of the holy God of Israel.

We cannot bear the weight of his glory.

And that's because of our sin.

Because of sin, no one can stand in the presence of a holy God.

His consistent, settled attitude toward sin is righteous anger.

Think back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lived in the presence of God.

What happened to them when they sinned?

They were driven out of the garden. They weren't politely shown to the exit. They were driven out. And cherubim were placed at the entrance to the garden to make sure they didn't return.

That was for their protection. Because sinful people cannot stand in the presence of a holy God.

That was the purpose of the curtain in the temple, that stopped people from going into the Holy of holies, where God's presence was believed to dwell.

Do you remember what was woven into the curtains?

It was cherubim. Guarding the entrance.

It was to protect them. Because sinful people cannot stand in the presence of a holy God.

When the weight of his glory bears down on us, we cannot survive.

And this isn't just an Old Testament thing. It's the same in the New Testament too.

Do you remember Ananias and Sapphira? Who came into a meeting of the church and acted deceitfully, lying about the proceeds of a field they'd sold.

And what happened to them?

One after the other they fell down dead. They experienced the weight of God's glory come crashing down on them.

And we're told that the whole church was seized with fear.

Because God is not safe.

The people of Beth Shemesh look inside the ark and seventy of them die. This is serious.

And it's serious for us too because one day each one of us will appear in the presence of this holy God and bear his scrutiny. One day we will all stand in the presence of God on the day of judgement. And we are all sinners.

What hope have we got?

**'Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?'**

No one can.

No one can bear the weight of God's glory.

So, the Israelites decide that the only solution is to do with the ark what the Philistines had done, and to move it on. It would make us laugh if it weren't so serious.

They send it to the middle of nowhere. To a place called Kiriath Jearim. Where it remains for 20 years.

Perhaps that's what we might be tempted to do with this issue that the Bible confronts us with: the problem of human sin and a holy God. Just to push it to one side. And ignore it. And pretend it doesn't exist. Perhaps just to laugh it off. And dismiss it as religious nonsense.

Thankfully, there's a better solution. And that's what we come to, now, in the second half of our reading.

I've called our next heading: The helper we need.

### **The helper we need**

Please look down again, at the start of the next paragraph.

**Then all the people of Israel turned back to the LORD.**

This is a turning point. Thanks, no doubt, to the ministry of Samuel, who reappears, having been absent from the narrative for three whole chapters, the people repent. They turn back to the Lord. This is the path to hope. It's to repent and take God seriously.

And Samuel wants to make sure that their repentance is genuine.

The proof of that is simple.

If you're for real, he says, then get rid of your idols. Put away all your false gods and commit yourself to serving the Lord alone.

And that's what they do. They get rid of their Baals and Ashtoreths. And they serve the Lord only.

This is genuine repentance. To repent is a turning around word – like spinning on your heels and facing in the opposite direction. It's to turn *away* from sin and *to* the Lord.

And it's active. It's not just words. It involves action.

If our repentance is genuine, then it will mean doing all we can to avoid sin in the future. It will mean removing all sources of temptation from our lives, whatever they might be. It will mean turning away from our idols – the things we give our allegiance to instead of God. It will mean putting his word, the Bible, at the centre of our lives and living by it. And all that will mean making changes to our lifestyles – sometimes big changes. Genuine repentance is seen in much more than words. It's seen in action. That's what the Israelites do here. They commit themselves to a change of lifestyle. They get rid of all the idols they had worshipped previously, and they devote themselves to the Lord alone.

And genuine repentance involves confessing our past sin to God.

Verse 5.

**Then Samuel said, 'Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the LORD for you.' When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'**

The pouring out of water may be connected to fasting. The Israelites are depriving themselves of both food and water as a sign of their sorrow over sin.

They confess their sin to God. They don't cover it up. They don't try to excuse it or explain it away. They don't blame someone else. They don't blame their circumstances. They acknowledge before God that they have done wrong. They take responsibility for the wrong they have done. And they do so with sorrow and regret.

That's what genuine repentance looks like.

And genuine repentance trusts in a sacrifice.

In verse 7, the Philistines attack once again, as they had in chapter 4. The Israelites are afraid and ask Samuel to cry out to God to save them. And that's what Samuel does. He offers a sacrifice to God and cries out to God on Israel's behalf.

Notice the contrast with chapter 4.

In chapter 4, when the Philistines had attacked, there was no suggestion that the Israelites cried out to God. They simply went and fetched the ark of the covenant, as a kind of good luck charm. In chapter 7, they cry out to God and offer a sacrifice.

In chapter 4, when the ark arrived in their camp, the Israelites let out a great shout. In chapter 7, it's God who thunders with loud thunder.

In chapter 4, the Israelites suffer a devastating and humiliating defeat by the Philistines. In chapter 7, the Israelites are victorious, and the Philistines are routed and subdued.

It's a complete reversal. The Israelites have been lifted from death to life, from defeat to victory, from shame to glory.

And at the heart of this great reversal is a sacrifice for sin. A lamb that was offered up to God.

It's pointing us to the cross.

God takes sin so seriously that it can only be forgiven through sacrifice. It cannot be swept under the carpet. God's righteous anger at sin must fall somewhere. It must be satisfied. But in his mercy, he has provided a substitute.

For the Israelites, a lamb was that substitute. But that lamb is just a symbol of the true sacrifice for sin. The reality that it's pointing to is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

At the cross, Jesus bore the full weight of God's anger in our place as our substitute.

At the cross, the full weight of God's anger came crashing down on *him*, so that it need never come crashing down on his people.

He died so that we might live.

And then, on the third day, he rose triumphant from the tomb.

The resurrection is proof of his victory over sin and death. And *his* victory becomes *our* victory when we put our faith in him.

Through faith in the cross, repentant sinners are lifted from death to life, from defeat to victory, from shame to glory. It's a complete reversal.

## Conclusion

And, in verse 12, the story ends with a monument.

**Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us.'**

For us, today, our Ebenezer, is the cross.

The cross stands as a promise to all who will put their faith in Jesus.

It's the promise of salvation through the forgiveness of sin. If we turn back to God, and put our faith in Jesus, then he will keep us safe when that day of judgement comes.

And the cross is the promise of help in our time of need. When life is hard and we're feeling alone, the cross stands as a promise that Jesus is with us and that he cares.

Jesus has done all that's necessary to save his people from sin and death. He has opened the way to heaven. And whatever we may go through, we can trust him to get us safely there. He will not abandon us. We need to keep relying on him.

Thus far the Lord has helped us. And he will continue to help us until we are safely home.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we are unable to stand before you because of our sin. But we thank you that Jesus died on a cross to bear the weight of your righteous anger in our place so that we will never have to. Thank you that he has won forgiveness and life for all who come to him in faith. Please help us to keep trusting in him every day of our lives, until the day we stand with him in glory. In his name we pray. Amen.