

1 SAMUEL 5:1-5 IS YOUR GOD WOBBLY?

“When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So, they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.”¹

Joel Gregory holds the George W. Truett Chair in Preaching and Evangelism at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. Rejected for years by many evangelical churches and embraced primarily among black Christians, in my estimate, Doctor Gregory qualifies as one of the great preachers of this generation. His messages are powerful, grasping as he does the essential idea presented by a passage. One sermon he preached in 2014 bore the title that I have appropriated for this message.²

I shamelessly appropriated the title and the concept that Dr. Gregory developed when he first delivered this message; I have adapted the ideas he first articulated, though they reflect my own style. I deem this action to be both appropriate and fitting. I honour this good man for his insight, and I long for the people of God to be equipped for effective service. Spurgeon said of his own preaching that he grazed his cattle in many pastures but churned his own butter. I am constantly seizing great ideas from preachers who are more capable than myself, men who have great insight into the Word of God; I then employ their concepts in my own voice.

The question that is asked is whether your god props you up, or whether you need to prop up your god. The God we Christians serve is greater than anything we could imagine. Speaking for all who know the Living God, the Psalmist says,

“The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?”

[PSALM 27:1]

In the Psalm that follows, David writes of the LORD,

“The LORD is my strength and my shield;
in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped.”

[PSALM 28:7]

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Joel Gregory, “Is Your God Wobbly?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPdITdgIn0g>, accessed 21 June 2016

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Throughout the Psalms, we see God extolled as the strength of the Psalmist³ and as the upholder of life.⁴ It is evident that God supports His people and needs nothing from them.⁵

However, many professing followers of the Risen Son of God invest constant effort in propping up their god; they must do this because they are not supported by the Living God. Assertions to the contrary, many of the professed people of God are worshipping something other than the Risen Saviour. If they think of Christ at all, they think in terms of religious exercise designed to gain them merit or they think in terms of some sort of deliverance from the consequences of their own fallen choices. Such people are not worshipping the Living Saviour.

BAD NEIGHBOURS! Focus on the prequel to the text. “Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, ‘Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.’ So, the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

“As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, ‘What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?’ And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, ‘A god has come into the camp.’ And they said, ‘Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.’

“So, the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died” [1 SAMUEL 4:1b-11].

The Philistines were neighbours of Israel. They were bad neighbours. They were somewhat like a neighbour that keeps a Rottweiler penned in his back yard. The dog runs up and down the fence looking for a hole in the fence or a place he can dig under the fence and get into your yard. He barks and growls at you each time you go into your back yard; he is always intimidating and frightening you. That describes the Philistines.

As an aside that may help you grasp the situation, the Philistines lived in what is today known as the Gaza Strip. You may recognise the Gaza Strip as the home of the Palestinian opposition to Israel’s existence; those living in the Gaza Strip are perpetual enemies of Israel. The Philistines were right on Israel’s doorstep. They were a mysterious, warlike people who were in constant conflict with Israel. Their armies were ferocious and intimidating. They had giants in their armed forces [see 1 SAMUEL 17:4 ff.; see also 2 SAMUEL 21:19; 1 CHRONICLES 20:5] and special forces—the Cherethites and Pelethites—that even served as mercenaries for David’s armed forces [see 2 SAMUEL 8:18; EZEKIEL 25:16; ZEPHANIAH 2:5].

³ E.g. PSALM 28:8; 118:14

⁴ See PSALM 54:4

⁵ See PSALM 50:7-15

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The story of a wobbly god starts with the account of Israel treating the Ark of the Covenant as though it was a talisman, a rabbit's foot, a good-luck charm to be pulled out when needed and forgotten at other times. The Ark of the Covenant was a box. Oh, the Ark was definitely well-constructed and appropriately adorned; however, it was a box. The box was meant to contain a few items of historical significance that would remind the nation who God was. The box was about forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches wide and twenty-seven inches deep. The box was covered with gold and had a gold top known as "the mercy seat" [EXODUS 25:17]. A cherub was situated at either end of the mercy seat; the cherubs faced one another with their wings spreading out to cover the top of the Ark [see EXODUS 25:10-22; 37:1-9].

The Ark was meant to serve as the visible symbol of the presence of the invisible God. Inside the Ark were items commanded by God. We read about those items when an unknown writer wrote, "The ark of the covenant ... [contained inside] a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant" [HEBREWS 9:4]. An ancient poem, known as "The Song of the Ark," sheds some light on the function of the Ark. The poem reads, "Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, 'Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.' And when it rested, he said, 'Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel'" [NUMBERS 10:35, 36]. The Ark would guide Israel as the nation moved through the world, and it would lead them in battle.

We need to step back to look at a battle that would change things for Israel. It was one of the interminable fights with the Philistines that Israel had to endure. The two armies were somewhat closely matched, though the Philistines may have had a slight edge in the warrior department. The two armies camped within sight of one another at Ebenezer and Aphek. The battle began the following day; it didn't go well for Israel. At days' end, when the battle ceased, the Philistines had won, having killed about four thousand Israeli soldiers. The two armies retired for the night, the Philistines to the camp at Aphek and the Israelites to their camp at Ebenezer [see 1 SAMUEL 4:1, 2].

Just as coaches review films of a football game, the elders of Israel got together to review what had gone wrong. They concluded that they needed God on their side. They had rushed into battle, forgetting to bring God with them. So, they sent to Shiloh to bring the Ark of the Covenant to be with them. Their solution to this problem is recorded in 1 SAMUEL 4:3, 4: "When the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.' So, the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God."

Since the Philistines won the day, the elders concluded that their loss was God's fault. He didn't hold up His end of the bargain; they had neglected to bring Him along in their venture. In their estimate, the solution was eminently simple—go get God! Bring Him along to the battle. That would change things.

So, they got the Ark and brought the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas to accompany the Ark. Now, they not only had God in the camp, but they had His representatives. They were unconcerned that these two men were scoundrels! Hophni and Phinehas had long treated the service of God with disdain and acted immorally as His representatives [see 1 SAMUEL 2:22-25]. Their wilful sin had brought a divine warning: "Both [Hophni and Phinehas] shall die on the same day" [1 SAMUEL 2:34].

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I don't know about you, but if I was one of those two brothers, I'd make it a point never to hang around with the other ever again! I'd be a loner from that point on! God had warned! Nevertheless, these two brothers came into the camp in the company of the Ark. Isn't it strange how professedly religious people can become so casual about defying the Living God? Outwardly, they act as though they are honouring Him, but in reality, the Living God has no impact on the conduct of their life.

Israel, believing their God had come into the camp—after all, they had brought the Ark of the Covenant into the camp—gave a mighty shout! The Philistines heard the shouting and began to question what might be going on. They knew of all the mighty acts of the LORD God, and they were afraid. They wondered if they were going to be forced to fight against the Living God. Their conversation went like this, “A god has come into the camp... Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight” [1 SAMUEL 4:7-9].

The divine writer is almost laconic in his notation of what happened after this. “So, the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died” [1 SAMUEL 4:10, 11].

WHEN YOUR GOD FALLS, YOU WILL HAVE TO PICK HIM UP! “When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So, they took Dagon and put him back in his place” [1 SAMUEL 5:1-3],

The Philistines captured the Ark! We read these things and fail to grasp the horror of what happened. This was a disaster! In fact, it was the biggest disaster in the history of Israel up to this point! Nothing like this had ever happened before. It was such a great disaster that others not engaged directly in the battle died as result of the capture of the Ark.

“A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, ‘What is this uproar?’ Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And the man said to Eli, ‘I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.’ And he said, ‘How did it go, my son?’ He who brought the news answered and said, ‘Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured’” [1 SAMUEL 4:12-17].

The next sentence details Eli's response. “As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years” [1 SAMUEL 4:18]. Eli didn't topple over upon learning that his sons had died—he knew that God had determined to kill both of his sons. That wasn't a particular shock to the old man. However, that the Ark of the Covenant had been captured was a shock! In response, he fell backward and broke his neck. That God could permit Himself to be humiliated was unthinkable to the old priest.

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However, the consequences that followed the capture of the Ark of God weren't finished. "Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, 'Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.' But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, 'The glory has departed from Israel!' because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured'" [1 SAMUEL 4:19-22]. The capture of the Ark was an unmitigated disaster. Israel was humiliated. Israel's God had allowed Himself to be humiliated by the uncircumcised Philistines. Sometimes, what seems to be a disaster in our estimate results in God's glory. Sometimes, God allows Himself to be humiliated so that He can reveal His majesty. Hold that thought in mind!

The Philistines were ecstatic at the capture of the Ark. They brought the Ark to Ashdod, one of the five key cities of the Philistines.⁶ The Ark was treated as a prize of war; the Philistines saw it as evidence that their god, Dagon, was superior to the Living God. They placed the Ark in the house of Dagon, situating it in an inferior place to the idol they had carved of their god. It was, in their eyes, a demonstration of the superiority of Dagon to the LORD.

Think of what it meant. Not only had Israel been defeated on the field of battle, but the victory was theirs because their god was greater than the Living God of Israel! What a humiliation for Israel. However, something strange happened the first night that the Ark of the Covenant was placed in Dagon's house. It was so strange that there could be no explanation.

Dagon was visualised as an ugly creature—half man and half fish. He was sort of an ugly mermaid, if you can envision such a thing. No one ever said that the idols we build for ourselves are attractive. In fact, it seems that idols tend to be grotesque, horrid, absolutely terrifying. Perhaps we cannot imagine a god that is gracious, gentle and good even though omnipotent, omniscient and omni-present.

This is the weird thing—the priests of Dagon placed the Ark in his house, locked the doors and went home to sleep. It had been a tiring day. Early the next morning, as the city stirred, the priests went to the house of Dagon as they always did, unlocked the doors and prepared to go into the room where Dagon was situated. To their utter surprise, "Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground in front of the Ark of the LORD" [1 SAMUEL 5:3]. He was face down, prostrated as if worshipping before the Ark of the LORD. That is just weird; but it could be rationalised. Maybe there had been a localised earthquake. Maybe someone had failed to secure their god to his pedestal. A god wouldn't just topple over, would he?

I suppose the priests and whatever acolytes were assigned to work with them, picked up their god, situated him on his pedestal, ensuring that he was secure. They no doubt performed all the appropriate rites associated with securing their god in his place, made all the required offerings and chanted all the necessary chants to placate their god. It was in all likelihood another exhausting day in the house of Dagon. Though the whole city was abuzz with gossip of what had happened in the house of Dagon, everything appeared to be back to normal. At the end of the day, the priests and all their helpers went home to enjoy what they saw as a well-deserved rest. Everything was at it should be. The Ark of the Covenant was still there, evidence of the superiority of Dagon over the LORD God of Israel. Dagon was back in his place, more secure than ever. It had been a weird day, but days can be weird when your god is an ugly merman.

⁶ The key cities of the Philistines were Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. Each of these five cities had a ruler, or a "lord" [see 1 SAMUEL 5:11].

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The morning came; it would be another busy day in the house of Dagon for the priests of the ugly monster. Maybe there was a sense of apprehension for some of the more perceptive priests. It is equally possible that the priests drew near to the house of their god with casual nonchalance. I don't know; what I do know is that when the priests opened the door to the house of Dagon, "Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him" [1 SAMUEL 5:4]. This was clearly a case of temple vandalism. How shocking! Like the concubine ravished in Jebus, who was found with her hand stretched out to the threshold [see JUDGES 19:10-30], Dagon's hands were on the threshold as though trying to escape the presence of the Living God.

Talk about weird! The doors were locked—no one could have entered into that room. There were no windows. No one had breeched the wall of the inner sanctuary. And, yet, there he was, lying on the ground. Worse still, both his hands were cut off—he couldn't do anything without hands! If that wasn't bad enough, his head was also lopped off—how could he speak, or hear or even think! His head and hands were not broken by the fall, they had been sheared off, deliberately sliced off! That this act was deliberate was evident in that his head and hands were not just lopped off and scattered about—they were deliberately placed on the threshold of his house. His torso was all that was left to him.

Let me give you a bit of insight into Philistine theology. Body counts were not some new concept introduced by the United States military in Viet Nam. The Philistines cut off heads and hands of fallen warriors as a means of demonstrating victory and to provide an accurate count of the number killed.⁷ In the Baal cycle of Ugaritic poetry, the goddess Anath is said to strike off heads and hands of those she fights.

"She fights the people of the se[a] shore,
Strikes the populace of the su[nr]ise.
Under her, like balls, are hea[ds,]
Above her, like locusts, hands,
Like locusts, heaps of warrior-hands.
She fixes heads to her back,
Fastens hands to her belt."⁸

As we read this account, we can almost see the hair rising on the neck of these priests. Dagon had been ritually executed in a grisly semblance of the execution of conquered military leaders; it was a scene that the Philistines had witnessed often following their own battles with Israel. Their theology was turned back on them. The god of the Philistines who was seen as virile in battle, in what should have been the safety of his own house, had been humbled before the Living God—Dagon was mercilessly executed. Though in exile, the LORD God had proven His superiority. The hands of Dagon were powerless, though in short order, "the hand of the Lord was heavy" against the Philistines [1 SAMUEL 5:6]. You know, there are people who speak of what happened in the house of Dagon as a contest between Dagon and the LORD God; but there was no contest. The Lord didn't simply defeat Dagon—He humiliated him.

⁷ David Tsumura, **The First Book of Samuel, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament** (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 2007) 205

⁸ Mark S. Smith and Simon B. Parker, **Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, vol. 9, Writings from the Ancient World** (Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA 1997) 107

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About this time, you're probably asking yourself how all this applies to you. Christians don't have to worry about wobbly gods, do they? We're quite vocal that our God is the Living God. We say we don't have idols. Are you quite certain about that? Is it possible that we do have idols? Maybe we need to take a bit of time to think this through. The Philistines were idolaters, but Israel was guilty of idolatry as well. The Philistines at least recognised the might of the Living God; they were aware of what He had done when He delivered Israel from Egypt.

Later, after God had rested His hand more heavily still upon the Philistines, they determined to send the Ark back to Israel. As they prepared to send the Ark back, they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?" [1 SAMUEL 6:4-6]? They knew that God had delivered Israel by defeating the gods of Egypt and they knew that Israel had received gifts from the Egyptians as they left. They were more determined to honour God than were the Israelites!

Nevertheless, the Philistines were idolaters. I don't imagine that I'm speaking to anyone who has a carved idol in their house. Few of us here will have crafted an idol before which we bow and present offerings. Nevertheless, we do have idols. An idol is anything that displaces love for the Living God. If you have an idol, you will have learned one thing—you have to prop up your god rather than your god propping you up.

Some listening have made family their idol; they esteem family as more important than God Himself. Rather than hear their spouse whine and complain, or rather than having a child pitch a fit instead of attending the services of the faithful, they'll just stay home on Sunday morning. Perhaps they will go sledding in the winter, fishing in the summer or hunting in the fall. I mean, they just work so hard that they have to have some time for themselves; and going to church is just so demanding. These people will prop up their god rather than their god propping them up.

Some who listen have made pleasure their idol. That transient pleasure they get when they drink a little too much, or the guilty pleasure they experience when they are looking at pornography or even some salacious television show, or even the pleasure they derive when watching someone with whom they're peeved get their comeuppance has become their god. Funny thing about the god pleasure, you will always be propping up that god; you will never be propped up by that god. The noted theologian, Mick Jagger, nailed it with the anthem of worshippers of pleasure, "I can't get no satisfaction."

All over this town are people who have made their house a god. They perform divine services in the yard every Sunday morning. The yard needs their attention, snow has to be cleared from the drive and the sidewalks, Christmas lights have to be strung—there's always another divine task to be performed to make their god perfect. They are always propping up their god, rather than being propped up by that god.

I don't want to move so quickly that I fail to speak of some who have made mammon their god. I'm talking about money as a god! These people work seven-days a week so they can get a little more. They are exhausted, so they plan a major holiday. Then, when they return they have to work extra hours to pay for the time away. They are propping up their god rather than being propped up by their god. Money is a demanding idol, isn't it?

IF YOUR GOD IS WOBBLY, MAKE DO WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT! “When they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day” [1 SAMUEL 5:4, 5].

Here is something strange that leaps out at me when I read this story. The Philistines witnessed the power of the Living God. They convinced themselves that they had demonstrated that Dagon was the superior god. However, Dagon was defeated, utterly humiliated, demonstrated to be powerless in the presence of the True and Living God. Wouldn't you think that if you had witnessed such a thing you'd give some thought as to what it could possibly mean? Wouldn't you imagine that seeing such raw power would at least challenge you to consider getting rid of your god and accepting the authority of the LORD God? However, that isn't what the Philistines did.

Look at what the Philistines did. They found Dagon's head and both hands lying on the threshold where they would be trampled underfoot by those entering into his sanctuary. You see, the temple thresholds were considered especially worthy of respect because they separated sacred and common areas.⁹ The Philistines saw this and reasoned, “Dagon is holy. His hands and his head have lain on the threshold. Therefore, the threshold is holy. We can never again step on the threshold.” Talk about clue free! Dagon is powerless and all they can think is that the threshold must be holy. We are witnessing an adventure in missing the point.

We smile as we read this account of a god in the presence of the True and Living God, but it isn't that much different from the response of people in this day when their god proves to be wobbly. People prop up their god because that god cannot prop them up. Incredible! People seek fulfilment in worship of their various gods—pleasure, possessions, power, position. They witness the power of the Risen Saviour to give peace and to make life complete, and they imagine that they can perhaps appropriate the power of the Lord of Life to complement what they have been worshipping. They are jumping over the threshold.

Joining the church without allowing the Spirit of God to transform one's life is jumping over the threshold. Saying prayers without connecting to the Risen Christ is jumping over the threshold. Taking the Communion Meal without recognising the presence of the Lord Christ is jumping over the threshold. Reading the Bible without hearing the voice of the Risen Saviour is jumping over the threshold. God calls us to a relationship with Himself, not an experience!

One truth I urge each listener to grasp is that *No one can manipulate the Living God*. Simply possessing the Ark of the Covenant did not give any individual power over God. The Lord God is sovereign and free; His Person is not confined to the Mercy Seat, to the altar, to any building we speak of as a church; God is not even confined to the pulpit. God is not chained to His throne. We must never underestimate His power and His holiness. Both Israel and the Philistines had thought that through possessing the Ark they held God captive to do their will. Both were wrong, but it is more reprehensible still that Israel had slipped into this fallacy.

Even Christians sometimes forget this truth. They begin to exalt the building in which they meet for worship. Haven't I heard the pitiful whine of a good woman bemoaning that a congregation was growing too large to meet in the old building. “We can't throw all these new Christians out into the street!” Those new Christians to whom she referred didn't come because of her—they came to hear the Word of God and to find peace in the Living God.

⁹ Op. cit., Tsumura, 206

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Christians may become so tied to the ordinances of the Faith that they rename them sacraments and imagine that these ordinances themselves contain God. Listen to me! Isn't that what happens when we imagine that we make ourselves acceptable to God if we can only eat some bread and drink some wine? Rather than worshipping the Risen Saviour as He taught us through recalling His sacrifice and anticipating His return, too many of our fellow worshippers imagine that they can manipulate God through using the elements to their own advantage.

You cannot live life without prayer or time alone with God and then expect Him to deliver you in time of trouble. God is not some sort of god in a box to be called out when we have a problem. You can't live without thought of God until you find yourself in a jam and then whistle for Him to come rescue you from your own foolishness. God doesn't operate in that way. Jesus our Master is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.

Another great truth that is essential for each individual who hears me this day is to know that *God sometimes allows Himself to be humiliated in order to gain greater glory for Himself*. The LORD God allowed the Ark to be captured by the ungodly Philistines, not because He was powerless, but because He would gain greater glory for Himself by what He would do to them. They would be compelled to witness His power as He drove Dagon to fall in the presence of the Living God.

Some of you listening to me will experience what you imagine to be defeat; but I want you to know that God isn't finished writing the story. What seems a loss to you may well be the backdrop against which God is writing a victorious account. Perhaps you thought that the loss of a job was a defeat; but God is at work. You can't say it just yet, but in His time, you will say, as did Joseph, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" [**GENESIS 50:20**].

Maybe you are experiencing trials in your home, a broken relationship at work or even a broken relationship in the congregation of the faithful. You feel wounded and think you are defeated. Let me encourage you by reminding you that the final chapter of your life has not been written. Is it possible that God may be permitting Himself to be humiliated through you so that He can gain greater glory when He demonstrates His power in your weakness? As the Apostle has said, "Things that no eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, are the things God has prepared for those who love him" [**1 CORINTHIANS 2:9 NET BIBLE**].

Though you know it well, let me tell you a story about Jesus who permitted Himself to be crucified. There has never been a more ignominious death than crucifixion. Taken as a common criminal and pinioned to a rough, Roman cross, Jesus sacrificed His life. His body was placed in the temple of death—the tomb. The disciples were disheartened, downcast, defeated; their God had been humiliated and His body was taken captive by death. On Friday, death fell off his pedestal. On Saturday, death's hands were cut off; he can't hold me any longer. On Saturday, death's head was lopped off; he can't frighten me any longer. Then, Sunday morning came!

The women came to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body, but they never were able to complete the task. Jesus transformed the temple of death into the Temple of Life. Jesus conquered death, hell and the grave. He is alive; and because He lives, we also may live. Of Jesus, it is comforting to know that "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" [**HEBREWS 7:25**].

Doctor Gregory is correct when he says, "If Jesus had lived to be seventy-five and died in His bed in Galilee, we might say 'Wasn't that a wonderful teacher?' But because He let Himself be captured, let Himself go to a cross, let Himself go into a temple of death, we don't call Him 'Teacher,' we call Him 'Saviour!'" Remember, Sunday morning came and Jesus rose from the grave. Now, we call Him Saviour!

1 SAMUEL 5:1-5
IS YOUR GOD WOBBLY?

There are some people listening today who are serving a wobbly god. That god isn't propping you up; you're propping up your god. Get yourself a real God. Some who listen are themselves wobbly. They are leaning, tottering, staggering; they are about to topple over. People in that condition need a real God. And that is what is offered in the Person of Jesus, the Son of God. He gave His life as a sacrifice because of your sinful condition. He was buried. His enemies thought they had conquered Him; but they couldn't see behind the scenes. Something was taking place and they couldn't imagine what it was. He broke the bonds of death and came out of the tomb. He walked with those whom He chose and then ascended into the glory. From thence, He is coming again to receive to Himself those who look for Him.

This is the message I would have you hear and receive. If you agree with God that Jesus Christ is Master, believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father; it is through open agreement with the Father that one is set free. The Prophet Joel testified long years before the Son of God walked on this earth, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" [JOEL 2:32]. The Apostle to the Gentiles echoed the words as he wrote to Roman Christians. Throughout the world today, the promise redounds as men and women of God repeat the same Good News. This is a message worth hearing. This is a message worthy of belief. Amen.