

“Dagon And Similar Gods”

August 28, 2016

1 Samuel 5:1-12

SI: We're studying the book of 1 Samuel.

It traces some of the most turbulent years of Israel's history as the nation transitioned to a monarchy.

Why do we read and study the stories in the Old Testament?

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he mentions what happened to the Israelites when they were traveling through the wilderness on way to Promised Land.

Then Paul says:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

The fulfillment of the ages is the coming of Jesus Christ.

So Paul is saying the Old Testament is for Christians today. For our benefit.

We're living in the same spiritual world they lived in.

What they faced, we face too, even if it looks different in our time.

INTRO: I've mentioned before a brief conversation I had with the manager of the Texaco station up on the corner of St. Joseph, an Indian man. On the dashboard of his car I noticed a plastic figurine of a fat, pink elephant. As I was paying I asked him to tell me about the pink elephant. He said: That is my god.

That pink elephant is called Ganesh. He's the most popular god in Hinduism. Ganesh is the remover of obstacles. Which is a pretty handy god to have. If you have obstacles in romance or in business or school, you can trust Ganesh to remove those obstacles and pave the way for your success.

In India there are images of Ganesh everywhere—big and little statues of him, figurines, license plates. There are images of lots of other Hindu gods such as Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and Hanuman the monkey god, the god of strength and protection. It seems so primitive and superstitious. But it's closer to us than we realize.

A few years ago the actress and comedian Kathy Griffin was awarded an Emmy. In her acceptance speech she said: "Now look, a lot of people come up here and they thank Jesus for this award. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this award than Jesus. He didn't help me a bit . . . So all I can say is suck it Jesus, this award is my god now." What's that pink plastic elephant on your dashboard? It's my god. What's that shiny gold trophy in your hand? It's my god.

In Galatians chapter four Paul says that apart from Christ, all people worship the elementary principles.

What are the elementary principles?

The fundamental components of human life in this world.

Work, harvest, feasting, wealth, beauty, sex, birth, strength, skill, success.

Whatever elementary principles you need or want, you deify them and serve them.

If you're a farmer, you deify the harvest and worship it as a god.

If you're a woman, it's the beauty god, or the childbirth god.

If you're an athlete, it's the gods of strength and skill.

If you're an actor you deify and serve the stage god or the fame god.

If you're a frat boy, it's the party animal god—Bacchus god of wine.

Paul says this is the religious default mode of the human heart.

The actual ways those gods are depicted and how they are actually worshipped

can look very different according to the specific culture or time in history. In the Western world, we don't do statues and figurines like they do in India and in other places in the East.

Kathy Griffin doesn't put her Emmy in a shrine with candles and incense and pray and chant three times a day. She doesn't believe a spirit inhabits the trophy. But the belief system she describes is fundamentally the same as those which add all those religious rituals to the mix.

It's worship of the elementary principles.

Another name for it is paganism.

I'm not using that term in a derogatory way. I'm using it descriptively.

When a culture takes the elementary things of the world and worships them, calls them gods or serves them like gods, that's paganism.

And as I've already said, according to Paul, this is the default religion of the fallen human heart.

Exchanging the glory of the Creator god for images of created things.

Even as Christians we are susceptible to worshipping the elementary principles.

The gods of this world tempt us.

I'm sure most of you here know your idols.

My idol is security and control—I worship it through money.

My idol is achievement and power—I get it through work.

My idol is comfort—I get it through alcohol, shopping, binge-watching Netflix.

We've talked about that a lot over the years.

But this passage shows us something more subtle.

It's the way that the world influences us to treat the Lord himself like he's just one more pagan god. But he's not like the gods of this world.

This story sets that difference before us through a series of contrasts.

We'll look at three of them and I'll give them to you as we go.

MP#1 The Lord is not a practical god, he's the true God.

Who was Dagon? He was a grain god.

A good harvest was very important, so they worshipped it through this image. Which shows, just like I said a moment ago, that people will worship any form of the elementary principles of this world.

When the Philistines took the ark of the covenant in battle, they didn't destroy it.

They took it and they put it in the temple of Dagon.

Why did they do that? Why didn't they say:

Dagon is the one true God, this ark represents a false god.

This ark is blasphemous and false, it must be destroyed.

Why didn't they destroy the ark, break it into pieces?

Why did they put it in the temple of Dagon?

This illustrates one of the basic beliefs of paganism.

For people who worship the elementary principles, the question is not which god is the true god, but which god is most functional.

Questions of which god is true or false, right or wrong,—those questions don't matter one bit to pagans.

The only question that matters is: What works?

Is this god practical? Is he functional? Will he work for me?

So when the Philistines took the ark, they didn't think it proved Yahweh was a false god, they just thought it proved he wasn't as functional as their god.

They put the ark in Dagon's temple because it was a statement of the superior functionality of their god.

Their god worked for them. The Israelite's god didn't work so well.

It also gave them a sense of well-being. It affirmed their sense of superiority and confidence over the followers of Israel's god.

The parallels in Kathy Griffin's speech are instructive.

She didn't say Jesus doesn't exist, she said she didn't need him. Her god is better. Whatever you call it—the fame god, the achievement god, her god worked for her.

She got an Emmy. How can you argue with success?

There used to be a time when people would ask about Christianity—

Is it true? Is Jesus Christ God incarnate? Did he really rise from the dead?

But American culture has shifted towards paganism, so the questions now are

Does it work? Does Christianity work? Does Jesus work?

I've got these problems. I've got these hopes and dreams.

Will Jesus take care of those things? Is following him practical?

After the Philistines put the ark in Dagon's temple they came in the next morning and found Dagon fallen on his face before the ark.

I'm sure the priests of Dagon blamed the teenager in the youth group. They put their god back in his place.

But the next morning he had fallen again, his head and hands had broken off—and only a stump of him remained. This is highly symbolic.

If the Lord had only knocked Dagon over once

he would have been saying—I'm a better god than he is.

But when he knocked Dagon over the second time,

the Lord was declaring—I'm the only true God.

That was communicated by breaking off Dagon's head, seat of intelligence,

and his hands, which illustrate the power to act. Dagon can't think, can't act.

He's no god. He doesn't really exist.

So anything his followers believe he can do for them is a delusional figment of their imagination because he is nothing, he's not real.

He's just an idol. There is no reality or power behind him.

Here's the application.

Don't think like a pagan when it comes to your faith in Jesus.

Don't follow Jesus because he's practical—follow him because he's true.

If you follow Jesus because he's practical, what are you going to do when those times inevitably come when it's terribly impractical to be a Christian?

Those times when your faith is not healing, but when it seems to be wounding.

Or when it doesn't seem relevant, but almost seem irrelevant.

Or when it doesn't seem to be exciting, but seems to be boring.

What will keep you a Christian during those times?

If the reason you follow Jesus is not because he's relevant, practical, and exciting, but because he's true then you'll make it through those times.

Because you'll know that because he's true and the Christian faith is true—then eventually it will be all those things—and supremely practical.

And you'll know that other false gods, no matter how practical and exciting and relevant they might seem now, are only a delusion.

This is why we study the Bible here, stress knowing the truth—don't neglect it.

Don't say: I just want to feel God. What happens when he doesn't feel good? The Lord is not a practical god, he's the one true God . . .

MP#2 The Lord is not a confined god, he's the sovereign God.

The presence and activity of God is never permanently connected to things.

He's not confined. He's not tamed. He's not automatic in his responses.

He's a person not a force.

And even though he does often link his presence and activity to a particular place or time or method or object—he's never permanently attached.

He will show that he is sovereign by removing himself when he wants.

I know that sounds theoretical. Let's look at the example in the story.

And then let's see how it applies to our Christian faith.

Remember the history of the ark. Back in Joshua's time Israel took the ark into battle at God's command, battle of Jericho, and walls came tumbling down.

But here in 1 Samuel 4, even though the ark is surrounded by tens of thousands of cheering Israelite soldiers with high morale, the ark seems powerless.

The Israelite army is crushed, the ark is captured.

But then, three or four days later, the ark is laying waste to an entire nation without any help from the Israelite army at all.

In Ashdod it breaks Dagon to pieces and afflicts the people with tumors—the send it to Gath, and it happens there, the try to send it to Ekron and there's a riot at the gate.

People of Ekron say: Don't bring the ark of the Lord here, it will kill us—and the Philistines, who were so confident in victory a short time before, are in full retreat without a single Israelite soldier in sight.

The Lord linked his presence to the ark at the battle of Jericho.

But when the Israelites take the ark into battle, he removes his presence.

Then he comes back and brings victory in a completely different way.

Pagan gods are always attached and confined to particular things.

The god of wealth is always attached to money or property.

If you don't have money, if you lose your money, your god is gone.

It's power and presence are gone.

If your god is hedonism, what happens when you get old and impotent?

No matter what Hugh Hefner says about his sex life, you know he's lying—his god has left him and now all he has is his pathetic posturing.

The Lord does attach himself to particular things for a time for the benefit of his people. But he never attaches himself permanently.

And when believers try to confine him that way, treating like a pagan god.

The Lord attached himself to a burning bush once for Moses.

But it was only for a time. Imagine Moses saying: Let's get a bush and light it on fire and God will be here. I've got to have a bush. Where's the shrubbery? Sometimes in churches the Lord attaches his presence and activity to something specific—maybe a Sunday school class or a small group, or some ministry of the church—short-term missions trips, or music ministry. Maybe the church goes through a kind of golden age where there are lots of conversions and sons and daughters of church going into pastorate, missions. Maybe the preaching is particularly powerful. It's evident to everyone, the Lord is here and he's doing something special.

And then it passes. Of course, the Lord is still with his church—but the particular link with that time or place or ministry or person is severed. It might still be good, it probably is, but it's not a mountaintop experience. Why does the Lord work that way? Because he knows that our tendency is to start worshipping the thing itself.

Even when he severs the connection, churches sometimes try to keep it. People think, if we can just get our church back to that golden age. There was a church in our Presbytery years ago that died because of that. They had an amazing golden age 40 years ago, always trying to get back. After they crushed about three or four perfectly good pastors, the Presbytery confronted the elders and they said in complete seriousness, "We're looking for a Bear Bryant pastor to bring back the glory days."

You can't do that. You can't even do it in your personal walk with Christ. I keep a little prayer journal and I write down verses that help me get close to God in prayer. Sometimes I'll find a verse that speaks to me deeply. When I read it, it moves me to pray and seems like God is right there. Then, after a season, it changes. It's still God's word. Still true. Fondness. But the Lord not speaking to me through it like he once did.

Remember in the Narnia Chronicles, one of the themes is that you can't get back to Narnia the same way. Wardrobe works for a time. Then it doesn't. But Aslan opens up a new way to Narnia and it's always surprising. We worship the living, sovereign, personal God who does make his presence known, but who will not be confined to anything—even by his people.

That brings us to the third contrast . . .

MP#3 The Lord is not a tolerant god, he is the exclusive God

The gods of paganism do not demand your exclusive worship and they don't demand the total moral and ethical commitment of your life.

You can have as many gods as you want and all you have to do is serve them in a very limited area of your life.

This is true of paganism in its religious form.

As I've already pointed out, the Philistines did not destroy the ark—kept it.

Probably would have put it to use in some way. Adding another god is fine.

It's like that in Hinduism today. You can have as many gods as you want.

It's also true of paganism in its secular form as we have in the West.

If you want to worship the god of wealth and then add the god pleasure—that's ok.

If you want to switch gods because find one that is more functional—that's ok.

I read an article this week about a woman who worked for a number of years in

New York City where a high-stress job was her fulfillment and identity.

But then it wasn't fulfilling anymore—so she quit and moved to an island resort and worked a menial job serving ice cream on the beach.

Some people were saying: You shouldn't have given up your good job!

But vast majority defended her for finding fulfillment.

The other element is that the pagan gods don't demand a total moral and ethical commitment of every area of your life.

The Olympics are a good example.

Olympians must give themselves to the god of sport totally in area of training—

but the sport god makes no ethical demands on their character or sexuality.

In the past Olympics, contrast the character of Usain Bolt with Allyson Felix.

Two great runners, but clearly two people who serve very different gods.

Allyson Felix serves a God who said that he resists the proud, grace to humble.

A God who demands she submit even the attitude of her heart to him.

Usain Bolt apparently serves a sports god who just demands he train hard—

but the rest of his life is up to him.

Remember our reading last week in chapter 4.

The Israelites, and especially Hophni and Phineas the corrupt priests, thought

they could live like they wanted to live, and still get God's help when needed.

They didn't want to follow the Lord exclusively, they didn't want to submit their lives to his authority in every area—but they wanted his help.

So they brought the ark of the covenant to battle and were destroyed.

What is a covenant? Can you give a good, short definition?

You go to a church called Christ Covenant. I know you know who Christ is.

But what if someone asked you—what does covenant mean?

The most bare-bones, simple explanation of covenant is—a relationship.

The ark of the covenant was the ark of the relationship.

It represented the Lord's relationship with Israel—

a relationship that had its beginnings in his promises to Abraham.

And what was at the heart of the relationship?

What was inside the ark of the relationship? Do you remember?

It was the two stone tablets of the law.

The very first words written on those tablets were:

I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

I've saved you. I've claimed you as my own. Entered into this relationship.

Then what's next?

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an image to worship it.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Honor you father and your mother.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness.

You shall not covet.

Moral and ethical demands covering every area of your life—

starting with the command to worship him only.

I just said that the Lord is not tied to particular times, things, or places—

but there is an occasion he's bound to show up.

And that's when he needs to assert his exclusivity in your life.

When you treat his relationship with you like he's some pagan god who you can pull out when you need, but then live as you want.

Of course Christians sin and fail and break God's laws—every day.

But he's provided a way to deal with that through Jesus and repentance—
and that's what he expects of every one of us.

The dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be,

Help me to cast it from it's throne and worship only thee.