

“Who May Stand In The Presence?”

September 4, 2016

1 Samuel 6:1-7:2

SI: We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel which is the early history of Israel. But it’s not ordinary history, it’s redemptive history.

This is about God working in history to prepare a people out of whom would come the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says that the things in the Old Testament happened as examples and were written down as warnings to us—those of us living after the coming of Christ.

So this history is full of spiritual truths and faith lessons for us.

So let’s read chapter six.

The Philistines had captured the ark of the covenant.

They took it around to all their cities. But wherever it went, the Lord would strike the people of that city with a deadly disease.

The disease caused awful tumors. There was also an infestation of rats.

Scholars think these all went together—this was the plague, the Black Death.

So after seven months of that, the Philistines were panicking over the ark.

INTRO: A number of years ago Allison and I went out to eat with another couple. We were expecting a fun night out. But as we were sitting in the restaurant something was said and the other couple started arguing. They didn't stop after a word or two but they started getting warmed up and began to say some cutting things to each other right in front of us. It was a jarring end to what we thought would be an enjoyable evening.

This story has a jarring ending. The story actually starts back in chapter 4. The Israelites took the ark of the covenant into battle, which should not have done. The Lord allowed the Israelite army to be crushed and allowed the ark to be taken by the victorious Philistines. The Philistines took the ark and placed it in the temple of their god Dagon. It was their way of saying—Our god is better than your god.

But Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel said—
No, I'm not a better god, I'm the only God.
And without any help from Israel, he began to devastate the Philistines. The statue of their god Dagon was cast down before the ark and broken in pieces. Then city by city, wherever the Philistines would take the ark, the Lord would afflict the city with tumors and people were dying.

The Philistines got the point. They didn't become followers of Yahweh as they should have. But they recognized their gods were no match for him. Knew they had offended the God of Israel and understood they had to pay him, just like the Egyptians had paid the Israelites to leave Egypt years earlier. So they sent the ark back with gold offerings—models of the tumors and the rats.

They still weren't 100% sure this was because of Israel's God— they thought this plague moving from city to city might be coincidence. So they devised a test. Put the ark in a cart. Hitch up two cows that have never pulled a cart, cows with calves. Pin up the calves and let the cart go. See what happens. Instead of going back to their calves, the cows pulled the cart straight back to Israel, mooing in distress the whole way—supernaturally compelled. The leaders of the Philistines watched the whole time. It was a final demonstration to them that the Lord controls all things, and that he is the sovereign God—not only in Israel but in Philistia too.

The Israelites working in the fields rejoiced when they saw the ark.

They dropped their tools and had an impromptu worship service, made sacrifices.

It seems like a good and happy ending to the story.

But then there is the jarring finale.

Seventy Israelite men were struck dead for some act of irreverence toward the ark.

The ark, of course, was a symbol of the presence of the Lord himself.

This was actually an irreverent act towards God.

It says seventy were struck down. Seventy is a symbolic number.

That means many more committed the sin and deserved to die.

Those seventy were killed as representatives for all of them.

What was their disrespectful, irreverent act?

NIV says they looked into the ark. Touching it, even looking at it was forbidden by the law of God. It was to be covered and only seen by the priests.

But the Hebrew wording is vague so it might have been some other offense.

Some commentators think it was that their sacrifices violated God's law.

God's law required priests to make sacrifices, it required male animals only.

It's interesting that verse 12 says the cows who pulled the cart

went straight up the road and did not turn to the right or to the left.

That very phrase is used a number of times in Deut to describe the way God expects his people to keep his law. Precisely. Carefully. Not turning one bit.

The ironic point being made is that the cows were more careful to obey the Lord and more precise in their obedience to him than the Israelites were.

Whatever the offense, it was something they knew went against God's law.

They didn't think it would matter. But the Lord considered their disobedience so offensive that he struck them down for it.

What are we to think about this jarring end of the ark story?

What does it tell us about the Lord? What's the application for our lives?

There's a clue in the story itself that points us in the right direction.

It's the question the Israelites asked when 70 men in their town were struck and died after the worship service. Verse 20.

“Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?”

That's the question the Holy Spirit wants us to wrestle with and answer.

I want to propose three answers to that question.

1. The wrong answer. 2. The expected answer. 3. The intended answer.

Credit where credit is due. Dr. Robert Rayburn's sermon on this passage.

MP#1 Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?

The wrong answer is: Everybody can.

Everybody can stand in the presence of the Lord because God's not like this.
He doesn't judge people.

He certainly doesn't strike people down when they break some law of his.
When disasters do befall people, that's not God.

And it's certainly not judgment. It just happened. It was just natural causes.

That's the way the vast majority of people in the world think.

The suggestion that a person might have experienced God's judgment is
ridiculous and offensive. Unless maybe it's a really bad person.

And then they might say it's karma. The person got what was coming.
Karma's not threatening. It's a law. It's up to me to keep it. I'm in control.

The idea of a God who judges people, that's unsettling and most people reject it.

But sometimes things happen that are so unsettling that even unbelievers are
compelled to consider the possibility of God's judgment for a time.

I'm thinking about September 11, 2001.

It was so long ago that it's easy to forget how for a few weeks after the attacks,
churches in New York City and around the country were filled.

Filled with people who normally never go to church.

St. Patrick's Cathedral on 5th Ave was packed.

I have a pastor friend in a church on Staten Island.

The Sunday after Sept 11 the biggest crowd they had ever had before or since.

That's because even the people who hardly ever think bout God

and who would scoff at the idea God judges people, were compelled by the
magnitude of what had happened to wonder if God somehow had a hand in it.

And just for a short time they were filled with the uneasy sense that this might be a
divine judgment and we need to somehow turn to God.

Then it was over and most went back to thinking that God doesn't judge anybody.

Like the Philistines. They came to the unpleasant realization it might be the Lord
God of Israel who was doing this to them. But they didn't want to believe that.

They even came up with that test of the cows and the cart to make sure.

And for a short time they had to face this unsettling spiritual reality of judgment.
When, phew, the plague was over, they went back to Dagon and their pagan ways.

Who can stand it God's presence. Everybody. Because God doesn't judge.

There's a Christian version of this wrong answer.

Many Christians read about the 70 Israelite men being struck dead and they say—

Well, that only happened in the Old Testament.

God was much more strict and less gracious back then. He's different now. God treated people far more harshly back in the Old Testament era than he does now in the New Testament era, after the coming of Christ. But the New Testament itself disproves that.

Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira struck dead for cheating and lying about offering. Paul says in 1 Cor. 11 that some church members got sick and some lost their lives because of their irreverence toward the Lord's Supper.

Hebrews has many warnings to church people to the effect that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, and it cites judgments against Israel as warnings for believers today.

In Revelation 3, the Lord threatens the church of Laodicea with destruction, and in John 5 Jesus himself warns the man he healed at the pool of Bethesda: "Stop sinning for something worse will happen to you."

Jesus also said in Matthew 7 that he will one day say to some people who have done all sorts of miracles in his name: Depart from me, I never knew you.

Because, according to him, they still had not done his will from the heart. And in his famous parable of the four soils, Jesus spoke of people like a seed in shallow soil, who initially have joy but who have no root and who fall away. Aren't these just like the men of Beth Shemesh who rejoiced and offered sacrifices when the ark came, but who were indifferent to keeping all of God's law?

There are many warnings in the Bible about superficial and insincere faith. Those warnings come in stories like this one in 1 Samuel and in the preaching of the apostles, and in the very words of Jesus Christ.

So if we're going to answer this question about who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God, it won't do to say everyone, or God doesn't judge, or God's not strict like he was back then in the Old Testament.

He is.

So that brings us to the second answer.
I'm calling it . . .

MP#2 The expected answer

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

The answer Christians expect is: Those who believe in Jesus Christ. The only way anyone stands in the presence of the holy God is with

the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.
Imputed righteousness means that the perfect life of Jesus is credited to every person who puts his or her trust in him.

Imagine that you are taking a test—A placement test.
But it's not the ACT or the LSAT or the MCAT—
it's the test that will determine whether you go to heaven or hell.
You pass the test and you get eternal life and happiness and joy—
you fail the test and you get darkness and despair and eternal death.
This test is obeying God perfectly in thought, word, and deed.
It's loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind,
and loving your neighbor as yourself.

When you get the test back you see that you've not only flunked.
You missed every single question. You didn't get one right.
You're going to hell.
God says: If you trust my Son Jesus, I'll forgive your failure.
I'll wipe your big fat zero out of the grade book.
Well that sounds good but what's the problem?
That just takes you back to the starting line. You still have to pass the test.

God says: One more thing, my Son Jesus came to earth.
He was born as a little baby on Christmas morning.
He lived in this world as a real human being with a real body and soul.
And he took the obedience test and passed it perfectly.
36 on the ACT of obedience.
If you trust him, I won't just forgive your failure, I'll put his grade by your name
in my grade book. I'll give you his perfect grade and you can come in under him.

That's imputed righteousness.
Jesus not only died the death I should have died.
He also lived the life I should have lived—and I get both if I trust him.
I get his death forgiving my sins,
and his obedience covering me with righteousness before God.

Often in the Bible Jesus' righteousness is depicted as a white robe.
We're dressed in filthy rags.
Isaiah says even our attempts at righteousness are filthy rags.
But everyone who trusts Jesus is clothed in the white robe of his obedience.
And when you come into the holy God's presence, that's what he sees.

And that's how you stand.

The great old hymns often sing this message.

When He shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne.

And another one says:

O great Absolver, grant my soul may wear The lowliest garb of penitence and prayer,
That in the Father's courts my glorious dress May be the garment of thy righteousness.

The Apostle Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 5.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,
that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

That's a wonderful and true answer to the question:

Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, the holy God?

None of us in ourselves.

None of us clothed in our own deeds, even our best ones stink.

We could never stand before God and expect anything but punishment.

But every man or woman, boy or girl, who believes in Jesus and trusts him
gets Jesus' obedience and therefore stands righteous before God.

If there are any of you here who haven't done that—

haven't trusted Jesus and given your life to him—what are you waiting for?

You get Jesus' perfect life! You get the white robe that covers you!

That's wonderful news. That's the Good News. That's the Gospel.

And that's a true and certainly the expected answer to this question.

But we can't stop with this answer.

Let's move on to . . .

MP#3 The intended answer

Here's what I mean.

If we're going to be honest with this passage and allow the Word of God to speak
to us, then we have to face the fact that there is another answer to the question.

The question is: Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, the holy God?

The Israelites who asked that question didn't answer it. They were disturbed and frightened of God and they got rid of the ark as quickly as they could—sent it off to another Israelite town.

But there are other places where this question is asked and clearly answered. We read one earlier in the service for our confession of sin. Psalm 15.

Look at it again in your bulletin. This is the whole Psalm, 5 verses, not 3 misprint. Look at the opening question: Lord—It's all caps, Yahweh—
Who may dwell in your sanctuary? Why may live on your holy hill?
Who can come into God's holy presence and live? Same question.

But look at the answer David gives in the Psalm.

He doesn't say: Whoever trusts in your Messiah.

Whoever receives your righteousness by faith.

Instead, David says it whoever walks blamelessly, lives righteously.

And then he lists a bunch of specifics which all have to do with the way you treat other people. Tell the truth to people, don't slander them.

You keep your word even when it hurts.

You use your money to bless people, not to control them and so forth.

Then David ends by saying that everyone who does these things won't be shaken. That person will stand in the presence of the holy God.

That sounds very different from just trusting in Jesus, doesn't it?

The Bible talks like this a lot.

It often says that those who stand will only be those obey God from the heart.

Jesus in John 5: At the resurrection all the dead will rise, "those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

There it is again. Those who stand are those who do good.

James says that true religion that God accepts amounts to helping the needy and keeping yourself uncorrupted by the world.

Paul says that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil.

What are we to make of this answer the Bible gives over and over that those who stand before the holy God are only those people who do good and live righteous lives?

Clearly you cannot be righteous before God in your own righteousness. You must have the righteousness of Christ.

But how do you know if you have his righteousness?

You say, because I believe in Jesus.

But how do you know you really believe in Jesus and are right with God?

Those 70 men in Beth Shemesh thought they were right with God.

They participated in worship, they even rejoiced when the ark appeared.

But it was only an outward faith and their hearts were far from him.

They didn't love and fear the holiness of God. Not really.

They didn't revere his name. Not really.

We don't know exactly what their offense was, but deep down they didn't really care about keeping God's law perfectly because their hearts were indifferent toward him.

It didn't even occur to them they had dishonored him until he struck them dead.

Here's the point of this story and all the passages I just mentioned about standing or falling before God on the basis of your good or evil deeds.

The key test for genuine, saving faith in Jesus Christ is that it produces an obedient, reverent life, and a heart that desires and strives to honor God.

I could put it this way: If you are truly covered by the white robe of Jesus' righteousness, then that will produce in you a righteous life.

The Bible even sometimes calls it a perfect life.

That doesn't mean sinless, or without failure or struggle—

but it means a life that desires to know God's will and that tries to keep it.

It also means a life of frequent and heartfelt repentance.

Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, the holy God?

People who live righteously by faith.

This is a paradox in the Christian life—

As Christians we can have peace with God and assurance we are forgiven, and at the same time we take seriously the warnings everywhere in the Bible that we must live sincere, obedient lives if we want to stand before God on the last day.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9 that he beat his body and made it his slave, lest having preached to others he himself might be disqualified for the prize.

Think about that!

Paul himself, preacher of grace alone and Christ alone who said over and over it's all and completely Jesus—that Paul—also said that he wanted to live in such a

self-disciplined, obedient way that he would not be disqualified from salvation. Then he says to all of us: Run in such a way as to get the prize.

And that means keeping your eyes on Jesus and striving to know God's will, and to love his law, and to obey him in all the details from the heart.