“More Lessons in Growing Up”

1 Samuel 6

Learn that dealing with God on your terms is only good for moving further away from God (1-9)

The Philistine’s had seven months with the ark of God in their land. They had seven months of dealing with the tumors and the deaths in their cities and surrounding areas. They had seven months to respond to God in the right way, but instead, they simply continued to desire to push God further away. Rather than submitting to the Lord or even seeking the Lord for what to do, they turned to their own priests and diviners. Their advice may have looked reasonable on the surface, but in reality, it was terrible advice. The Philistine’s were choosing to deal with God on their terms. They were attempting to appease God through their “guilt” offerings. They were hoping to send their problems away with God in the symbols of the tumors and the mice. The Philistine’s were still trying to deal with God by their own terms and for their own benefit, and as a result, their efforts accomplished little in terms of removing guilt. Their efforts only accomplished what their hearts desired, which was to move them further away from God. What an important lesson to learn in growing up for God: We have to deal with God on His terms if we want to move closer to God in our lives.

1. In reading the notes in your study Bible or other Bible study resources, discuss the historical reason the Philistines sent the symbols of the tumors and mice. Why was this “guilt” offering basically selfish in its motivation?
2. Were the Philistine’s seeking forgiveness for their guilt against God or just relief from His judgment against their sin? Is this distinction important? Why or why not?
3. In what ways do people still try to appease God in order to find relief from His judgment and their guilt? In what ways do people still try to deal with God on their terms? Have you ever done this? Why and how?
4. What is the way that God wants us to deal with guilt and sin in His way and by His terms? What does God's Word say about this?

Learn that God can accomplish His purposes without help from human hands (10-12)

The Philistine’s followed through with the advice from their priests and diviners. They made the symbols of the tumors and the mice, one each for the five major cities of Philistine. They got the cows and separated them from their calves. They put the yoke on the cows, which the cows had never worn before, and released the cows with the cart carrying the ark of God. Against all odds, the cows left their calves and walked in unison under the yoke, pulling the ark of God straight back to the Israelites. How? God was in control! God was in control of the Philistine’s health and lives, and He was in control of the cows that now pulled the ark. While God had used the Israelites do to His work in the past — and He would use them again in the future — He didn’t need them to accomplish His purposes. God didn’t need human hands to help Him bring His ark back to Israel. God could do it Himself because He is God! What a humbling lesson to learn in growing up for God: We have to remember the privilege it truly is to serve the Lord, and we have to understand that God gives us this gift because He wants to and not because He has to.

1. Read these verses. What impresses you about the fact that God was able to use the superstition of the Philistines and to use these two cows to accomplish His purpose in bringing the ark back to Israel?
2. Thinking about the fact that God doesn’t need us to accomplish His work, what does that mean about the fact that He does use us to do His work? What does that tell us about His value and perspective on life?
3. In what ways has God gifted you and called you to serve Him with your life? How is this a tremendous privilege? Are you serving Him with a heart of thankfulness and joy that matches the gift He’s given you?
Learn that being excited about God is not the same as truly worshiping God (13-18)

When the Israelites saw the ark of God, they rejoiced! They were excited about seeing the ark of God return to their land, and God had brought His ark back to a place in the land that was appropriate because Beth-shemesh was a place where Levites had settled. The Levites were the tribe of Israel that were responsible for the service of the tabernacle. They were the Israelites who were charged with handling the ark of God and were instructed in how to handle the ark of God according to His design and His way. They took the ark down, along with the box containing the guilt offering, and then they began to worship. Here’s where it becomes clear, however, that they were still dealing with God on their terms just like the Philistine’s. They sacrificed the two cows that had brought the ark, but God’s commandments specified that bulls should be used. They failed to cover the ark, which was also commanded by God so that no-one would stare at it, much less look inside the ark of God. They were worshiping God in their own way rather than by His way. Their excitement about God failed to turn into true worship of God. What an insightful lesson to learn in growing up for God: We have to worship God on His terms rather than on our terms and in our own way in our lives.

1. On the first reading of these verses, did you think that anything was wrong with the way that the Israelites responded to the return of the ark of God? Why or why not?
2. What was the big deal about doing things a little casually in terms of worshiping God? Didn’t their intentions count for something? Why did it matter that they didn’t follow the rules of worship exactly?

Learn that God demands relationship based on His terms and not on ours (19-21)

The Levites had failed to cover the ark of God like He had commanded them to do, and as a result, men in Beth-shemesh looked or stared at the ark of God. They knew better. God’s commandments specified that His ark be covered, and He also commanded that anyone who looked in at the ark be put to death. The ark was only a symbol, but it was an important symbol that was meant to remind God’s people of God’s holiness. God demanded reverence and respect in His relationship from His people, and the Israelites in Beth-shemesh failed to show Him the reverence and respect He deserved through their disobedience in His terms for their relationship with Him. As a result, many men in Beth-shemesh died. In the wake of the death of these men, the Israelites acted just like the Philistines. Rather than falling down in repentance before God, they wanted to move the ark of God away. Rather than responding in obedience to God, they wanted to separate themselves from this symbol of the presence of God. What a powerful lesson to learn in growing up for God: We can only have a relationship with God based on His terms and not on ours.

1. Read Numbers 4:15 and 20. How do these verses apply to what happened in 1 Samuel 6:19-21?
2. What was God teaching and reminding His people about who He is? Verse 20 holds the key. Why was this so important?
3. What was wrong, however, with how the Israelites responded in verses 20-21? How is this similar to the way that the Philistine’s responded to God’s judgment in their lives? What could have been a better response of the Israelites in Beth-shemesh?
4. What do these verses tell you about accountability before God when it comes to things that we know we are supposed to do or not do?
5. What does this reminder about God setting the terms for relationship with Himself teach us about relationship with God today? Do people still try to base their relationship with God on their terms? How?
6. Praise God for his grace and the relationship that He gives us through true faith in Jesus. It was faith that he was looking for from His people then, and it’s still true, surrendered faith that He desires today. Pray for that in the lives of people in our faith family and in our community.