

## The Ark of the Lord

Passages: 1 Samuel 5:1-12  
Luke 8:26-37

Let's begin with prayer.

One of the characteristics of our fallen human race is that we all search for **power**. Our fallen minds have swallowed the lie that this world is out of control and quite unsafe. As such, we believe that, unless we do something to *control* our own little worlds, we will suffer the consequences. That's why we search for *power*—power to control people; power to control nature; power to control all of life's unforeseeable situations. In the end, power provides some level of guarantee that we will be safe and secure in this unpredictable world. Now, most Westerners turn to things like **money** as a means to get the power they need to feel secure. Money usually helps us control our world. Many people will also use their **position or status** to get power. Some people enter **politics** to gain power. Some of us use **anger and violence** to gain power. Whatever we use and however we use it, the main idea is to be in control...to limit the unforeseeable and the unpredictable things of this life. But what do you do when you don't have the money or status or political clout or the physical stature to get your way? What happens when you have no power; when you feel like a rudderless ship, battered around by the forces of this universe? At this point, **many people turn to religion!** Now, by the word '*religion*', I mean the simple acknowledgment of some invisible power that, you genuinely believe, will defend you and protect you and bless you in this life. *Religion* is the belief that some Supernatural Power is at work on your behalf to control the unpredictable elements of this world.

I used to carry around a rabbit's foot. I was told that, if I stroked the rabbit's foot, it would bring me good luck; things would go my way; that life's *unpredictables* would be tamed. It was a religion for me...at least, for a while. It didn't work, so I threw it away!

I had other religions as well: When I walked home from school, I used to watch out that I didn't step on the cracks in the pavement. "*Step on a crack, break your mother's back!*" I didn't understand those words—I just made sure I watched where I walked. But, of course, when I did accidentally step on cracks, I saw that nothing happened to my Mum! So that religion was also quickly discarded.

I never turned to horoscopes or ouiji boards, but I once had a '*Magic Eight-Ball*'-- if you shook it up and asked it a question, a little window would reveal the answer. People may say these things are harmless...but, in the end, they, too, are a religion—that is, if you follow it *religiously* enough and allow it to shape your daily life. If you regularly check the daily horoscope, for example, that's your religion! It obviously helps you to feel that you have some control over the unforeseen elements of your life.

Of course, in Africa, people turn to witch doctors and amulets to get power over their world. In Asia, people turn to their ancestors for help, building altars in their homes and burning incense in order to get the ancestors on their side. It's religion.

But here's an interesting thought-- Very few people in the world who practice one of the 5 major world religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity) practice a *pure* version of that religion. Rather, they mix and match! On many occasions while we were in Africa, I saw Christians wearing amulets. They obviously thought that they could combine the power of Jesus with the power of witchcraft. I also saw Muslims going to the witchdoctor, as if Mohammed wouldn't even mind! Most interesting of all is the fact that

this practice of “mixing and matching” religions to suit your own personal needs is what makes the New Age movement so popular!

But in the end, it’s all because *religion* lets you do it! After all, religion is all about getting control of your world. Religion says that you should do whatever works best for you—whether it be wearing a crucifix around your neck, saying the Lord’s Prayer before bed each night, or reading the horoscope each morning. (Perhaps you should do all three!) If you do something religiously enough, there will be an invisible Power working on your behalf.

**This is exactly what today’s story in 1 Samuel is all about**—it’s all about religious people doing religious things in order to get *power*. In the OT, however, the focus wasn’t on a rabbit’s foot or a ouiji board—it was on a gold-plated box called the “*Ark of the Covenant*” ...the same Ark of the Covenant that made Harrison Ford famous in the Indiana Jones movie, “*Raiders of the Lost Ark*”! In **1 Samuel, chapter 4**, we read how the religious elders of Israel earnestly believed that, if they went into battle with this *ark of the covenant*, they would be successful against the Philistines. They thought that the ark had supernatural powers to protect them and even destroy the enemy! **They were wrong!**

Then, in today’s reading from **chapter 5**, it’s the Philistines turn! When they captured the ark from the Israelites, they had the same religious belief as the Israelites had—namely, that this box would bring some automatic benefits to them. In fact, they even set-up the captured ark in the Temple of their own god, Dagon, thinking that Dagon would now be supercharged with the mysterious power of this golden box. **But the Philistines were also wrong!!** Instead of the box bringing them power and wealth, it brought disaster upon them! Here we see the typical *religious* mind-- the idea that a golden box can actually help you to control your world! *But...* the truth is that religious beliefs are only as good for as long as they seem to work for you. If the horoscope is always wrong, why would you keep reading it? If the amulet you’re wearing doesn’t protect you, you’ll throw it away and try something else. A religious person will always move on to something else once what is presently on offer no longer serves their needs.

It’s no wonder, then, why the Philistines of Ashdod quickly sent the Ark away! In a humorous twist to the story, it’s funny to read how the various Philistines leaders end up passing the ark around from town to town once they discover that the Ark won’t *work* for them as they thought it would! Perhaps they were thinking that someone, somewhere, could benefit from the Ark. Perhaps someone, somewhere would be able to harness the Ark and get some blessing from it. ... So they sent it on to another Philistine town. But, of course, that’s just religious thinking! It’s like saying, “*Well, this rabbit’s foot hasn’t brought me any good luck, but it might work for you!*”

I personally think this is the reason behind why so many people in the West have abandoned Christianity. Because people tend to see Christianity as just another *religion*, they may come to it with a bit of curiosity to see what it might offer. But when it doesn’t offer us any quick fixes or promises for a successful life, they send it on, saying, “*It might work for you, but it hasn’t worked for me!*”

Of course, there are some churches that try to tie Christianity with success and prosperity. They tell you that, if you pray a certain prayer or do a certain ritual, you will gain control over your unpredictable world! *But that’s not true Christianity!* True Christianity is not a religion! In fact, it really has only one thing to offer and **that’s the knowledge of God through the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ**. Instead of power, Christianity

encourages me to turn the other cheek and to pray for my enemies! It's no wonder why people prefer **religion**! Religion at least gives me some guarantees...some sense of control... *even if it's a total delusion.*

**Listen to what Mike Raiter has to say on the subject. (p103)**

But God is no man's debtor! He cannot be controlled! He does not do what we tell Him to do. Rather, **He does what He knows will bring about His desired outcomes in the world...and in His good time.**

In fact, it was for this reason that the Ark was built in the first place! You see, the ark of the covenant was originally supposed to remind the Israelites of God's Sovereign plans and purposes for the world...that God was, in fact, uncontrollable; untameable! It was God, after all, who designed the Ark of the Covenant! It was God who commanded Moses to have it built! Why? In order that it might continually re-tell the story of what God was on about! Critical to the re-telling of this story were three objects contained inside the Ark. Each object contributed to the story:

- There were the 2 tablets of **the 10 commandments**. These spoke about God's intention to bring order, peace and harmony to the world.
- There was also **the budding rod of Aaron**. Why? Because that rod supernaturally confirmed Aaron and his lineage as God's chosen mediators...the bearers of the Good News of God's love and forgiveness. In others words, the budding rod of Aaron revealed how much God desires to restore fellowship with the human race.
- Finally, the Ark contained **a jar of manna** that had been collected during Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. This jar of manna reminded Israel that God was their true source of life and sustenance.

The Ark of the Covenant was meant to be like a giant portable billboard, carried by four men, announcing God's unquenchable desire to bring the entire world back to Paradise, perfectly re-gathered under His Sovereign Lordship.

But, of course, *religion* doesn't need a story; it doesn't need any content. And so, these key items inside the ark were soon forgotten. The focus, instead, was on the outer container... the golden box. That's what became all-important! (And that's exactly what you get when you watch Harrison Ford! It's all about the box!) Both the Israelites and their enemy, the Philistines, were so caught up in *religion* that they swallowed their own rhetoric: "*If we have the ark, God has to bless us!*"

You are all aware of the fact that, this morning, we are having a baby baptised—the daughter of Grant and Julie Griffiths. This couple was married in our church back in February of 2006. For several years, they struggled to have a child...until Tahlia finally came along. Today, through her baptism, they want to publicly acknowledge that this little girl is a blessing from God.

But there's a small problem with infant baptism that I want to raise first. **Baptism is often misunderstood in a religious sense.** As it was with the Ark of the Covenant, it's easy to lose sight of the *content of this ritual*. Instead, we only focus on the outward splash of water on the child's head... and, from a purely religious perspective, we start to believe that the water has done something to the child. We swallow the superstitious idea that baptism is our guarantee of God's blessing or God's protection... As if we've harnessed God!

**No we haven't!** In fact, as many Christians have discovered, the baptism of our children doesn't really guarantee anything by way of health, happiness or faith. To the contrary, in

many hostile places, Christian baptism only brings persecution, isolation and even poverty! Baptism is not about *harnessing* God or *getting* a blessing from God. Baptism is basically re-telling the story of God's universal love. As it was with the Ark of the Covenant, baptism is a *covenantal* reminder...a reminder of God's faithful plans for the world. **Baptism simply re-tells the story of God's desire to bring all humankind (along with Tahlia and her parents) back into the Paradise of peace and intimacy with God through the forgiveness of sins that come through God's one and only mediator, Jesus Christ, our great high priest.**

And so, as it was with the ark, so it is today...that **anyone** who tries to control God and use Him for their own purposes of power and manipulation...anyone who tries to hi-jack God for themselves...will surely feel the *heavy hand* of God upon them. He refuses to play that game of religion.

On the other hand, however, **anyone** who, by faith, aligns themselves with God's story—the story of His universal plans to bring the entire world under His sovereign Lordship—will know God's presence and the hand of His goodness...even when life doesn't always go as we want; even when things are out of control!

The Word of the Lord has spoken.

Let's pray.