

## God Wins With or Without You

### *Courage to Lead Series*

#### **1 Samuel 5:1-12**

Pastor Bryan Clark

For those of us that are wired up as leaders, one of the characteristics that defines us is we like to get things done. We don't like to just sit in a room and talk about it; we like to get things done. But we don't just like to get things done ourselves. We like to get things done together. Part of how we are wired up is we like to encourage and inspire and invite others into the process, that we together would get more done than any individual could on his or her own. It's a beautiful thing to inspire people to come together and accomplish something meaningful together. But here's the risk, and there is a risk. The risk is when God uses you to accomplish something that matters, there is always the temptation to think, "*I did that. Look at what I did.*" Before long you start to think God is just pretty lucky to have someone like me on the team. As a matter of fact, I think maybe I'm indispensable if God's going to get the job done. Oh, we would never say that, but maybe we start to think that. So here's the question: Are leaders necessary to accomplish the mission? I'll broaden it out: Does God need any of us to get the job done? Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 5. If you are visiting with us, we are working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. This morning is maybe a good time for just a little bit of a review to catch us up on the storyline.

Israel is in the time of the Judges. It's a time of darkness. Most of the nation is engaged in pagan idolatrous worship. They are far from God. There's a faithful remnant. There's always been a faithful remnant. But for the most part, the nation is far from God. But in the midst of that darkness, in the midst of the remnant, there was a couple by the name of Elkanah and Hannah, a godly couple who desired to worship God. After years of struggle and heartache, God gives Hannah a son, a son whom she dedicates back to God. His name is Samuel. Through Hannah's godly influence, through Eli's leadership, Samuel learns what it means to be a faithful, humble, obedient follower in order that one day, when God would call him to be a leader, he would be a humble faithful leader for God. The last we saw Samuel, God was beginning to move through Samuel as a prophet in order to awaken the nation that a new leader was among us, a new leader that would bring a nation back to God.

In the meantime, we learn about Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are the priests in the temple. Hophni and Phinehas are described as sons of Belial, basically just means they were pagan to the core. They did not serve God; they did not worship God. They defiled the offerings of God. They used their spiritual position to abuse people who came to the temple. They had sex with the women that came to serve in the temple, and Eli chose not to stop them. He didn't stop them; he didn't rebuke them. So God sends a prophet to Eli and tells Eli because he made the decision to honor his sons over God, that he and his sons would be removed from leadership and God would raise up a leader that would be passionate about what is in the heart and soul of God.

So Israel and the Philistines go to war. Round one of the battle: four thousand Israeli soldiers are dead. Israel backs up; the elders have a discussion. Perhaps the problem is that we need to bring the ark to the battlefield—the ark of the covenant. So in a careless, reckless move, they treat the ark of the covenant like it's a rabbit's foot or some sort of a magic box. They haul it to the battlefield and there Israel is slaughtered—thirty thousand soldiers killed. Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of

Eli are killed, and the ark of the covenant is taken by the Philistines. It's hard for us to imagine how absolutely upsetting those words are. For the first time in history since the ark of the covenant was manufactured, it was now in the hands of Israel's enemies. Upon hearing that his sons were dead, that the ark has been taken by the Philistines, Eli falls off his stool, breaks his neck, and dies. Eli's daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, is pregnant. She hears that her husband is dead, her father-in-law's dead, and the ark of the covenant is gone, which sends her into labor, and in childbirth she will die. She is told before she dies that she is having a son, which is supposed to be good news, but she does not react in any way. Why? Because she knows that there was no reason for hope. In her dying breath she names her son Ichabod, which literally means the glory has departed because the glory of God has departed from Israel because the ark of the covenant is gone. From a human standpoint, there is no reason for hope. The leaders are dead. The ark of the covenant is gone; therefore the presence of God is gone. The Philistines will soon destroy them. The story is over. It's basically where we left the story last week at the end of Chapter 4. So we pick it up in Chapter 5, verse 1:

**Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.**

(\*NASB, 1 Samuel 5:1)

I want to throw the map on the screen again, give you just a little bit of a sense of where this is taking place. So we talked last week that at Ebenezer and Aphek is where the battle took place. Now from Aphek, go all the way down to Ashdod, which is about thirty miles south, right on the Mediterranean, and that's where the ark now has been taken. As the story continues, it's going to go from Ashdod to Gath, which is about twelve miles to the east and then about six miles to the north to Ekron. The cities there—there are five cities—they are the Philistine cities. This is considered to be the southern part of the coastal plains, each of those cities has a mayor or a governor; the text refers to them as lords. So when the lords of the Philistines gather, it's just talking about the mayor of each city gathering together, and they make up the leadership of the Philistines.

So notice the repetition, it says, "...**the Philistines took the ark...**" Verse 2:

**Then the Philistines took the ark of God...** *(Again, it's just emphasizing how upsetting, how radical this is)* **and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon.**

Dagon would have been their national deity. All of these pagan nations had multiple gods. But often there was like a primary national deity. In the case of the Philistines, it was Dagon. If you remember the story of Samson in the book of Judges, the very last scene has Samson in the Temple of Dagon, only it was in Gaza. It's in one of the other Philistine cities, and it's there that he pulls the pillars over and the temple crashes and everybody dies. This story is taking place in the temple of Dagon, just in a different city, in the city of Ashdod.

**When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again. But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both of the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.** (Vs. 3-5)

So the Philistines take the ark and they put it in the temple of Dagon. They get up the next morning and there is Dagon on his face, basically in a posture of worship before the ark of the covenant.

Now the idea of taking the ark into the temple of Dagon would basically be the idea that the Hebrew God is now a prisoner of war. The Philistine god defeated the Hebrew God. It's as simple as that. Therefore the ark of the covenant is symbolic of that: He's brought into the temple as a prisoner of war. In their polytheistic beliefs, they're probably going to add just one more god to the list, but Dagon is *the* god. He's the primary god.

So when they get there in the morning and Dagon is on his face before the ark of the covenant, the language that is selected is very carefully selected. Those are the words of worship. Dagon is prostrate before God in a posture of worship. They don't know what happened. Maybe the wind blew; maybe something else happened; maybe there was a little earthquake. So they pick up Dagon—this statue—and they put him back in his place. The language there matters because this is going to come up later in the text. What's inferred is *his* place is above the ark of the covenant. We've got to put our god back in his place. So they get up the next morning and once again Dagon is on his face worshipping the ark of the covenant, or the God of the ark of the covenant. Only this time, his head and his hands have been severed—not broken off—severed, cut.

Now this may seem strange to us in the twenty-first century, but in the ancient world it wasn't uncommon that when an army was defeated in battle, they would cut off their heads, their hands, and their feet. It was symbolic of complete and total defeat—nothing to fight with, nothing to run with, not even a head. This also may seem strange to us, but it wasn't at all uncommon that the heads were actually cut off and gathered in order to count, so they could celebrate how many of the enemy they defeated. Actually we today still use the language. “How many are coming? We need a *head count*.” This is the root of that phrase, so remember that next time you need a head count. (*laughter*) They literally counted the heads to say there were thirty thousand slaughtered. So in the ancient Near East, this is very symbolic that Dagon has been completely and totally defeated in his own house. It was so significant; it was so impactful to the Philistines that it started this belief, this tradition, that they would not step on the threshold of the temple of Dagon and then it says **...to this day**. This is what is referred to technically as etiology—the study of traditions, myths, behaviors. In other words, “Why do we do this?” So what the text is saying is at the time of the writing, or for the first readers, this behavior was still practiced. Now there's a lot of debate about exactly when 1 Samuel was written, but if you just take the number of years that cover the storyline—about 150 years—it had to have been written and finally compiled after that. So let's just say conservatively 150 to 200 years later, nobody stepped on the threshold of the temple of Dagon because they were so impacted and were so afraid based on what happened this day in this story. So it's just reflective of just how frightening this would have been.

This is a very interesting text. You have the ark of the covenant that represents the presence of the Hebrew God, the God that we would say is the only one true God. In a sense He's captured as a prisoner of war, put in the temple of Dagon, yet without a soldier, without a leader, without anyone else, God Himself defeats Dagon. “There is no other God but Me.” That's in essence the message God is sending. Now I understand that the world is filled with gods, small “g”. There are idols; there are gods in all these different religions. We can have gods of money, and stuff, and pleasure. I get that. But when we are talking capital “G”, God by definition is God. He shares that throne with no one. So the text is very helpful as to how God feels about some of the politically correct, popular views of our culture.

One of the popular, you might call politically correct views is called pluralism. It is the view that basically all roads lead to God, that every religious belief system is equally true and equally valid. Even though religions have truth claims that are contradictory to other religious truth claims, the

idea of pluralism is they both can be equally valid and true, even though they are contradictory. What comes with that, and I think what we are going to see become more and more popular, is kind of the idea of a religious buffet—that you take the religions of the world, you lay them out on a buffet, and you go through the line and you selectively choose what part of each religion you like. You in essence make up your own definition of God. You make up your own religious practices with the understanding that each belief system is equally true, equally valid. Pluralism, then, is built on a foundation of relativism, which is the belief there is no such thing as absolute truth. All truth is relative. Therefore, because all truth is relative, there is no true truth. Therefore, each individual is free to define for himself or herself what is true. And that's how contradictory truth statements can be equally valid and true. Relativism, then, is built on Genesis 3. This is the foundation, the core, the belief that I can be my own god. When I believe that I can be my own god—I can practically function as my own god—then I am free to define truth for myself. I am free to define God for myself. I even believe I have the right to judge God myself. So once I convince myself I can be my own god, then I make up my own truth, then I make up my own religion. That's how it works.

The text is a beautiful picture of how God feels about that belief system. In a sense you might say this is the temple of pluralism, and God in a sense is captured as a prisoner of war. Yet God makes His declaration: “There is no god but Me!” All other gods fall on their face, helpless and defeated before the one true God. God by definition is God. You can't have multiple gods. He is God. He reigns supreme as King of kings, Lord of lords. We don't define God. He defines Himself through creation and through His Word. We don't judge God; God judges us. People are free to believe what they want, but at the end of the day, reality wins. And the reality is there is no god but the one true God. That's kind of the heartbeat of this part of the story. Verse 6:

**Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites...** Two comments there: One is this idea of **...the hand of the LORD** is a significant phrase that shows up eight times in what's called the ark narrative, chapters 4, 5, and 6. Because at the end of the day, it is the hand of the LORD that is at work. So you have Dagon, the god of the Philistines. Now he has no hands; he has no power; he simply isn't a god. But the God of the Hebrews is God, and He does have hands, so to speak, and His hand is on them. So it's an important comparison there.

The other thing in verse 6 is the word **heavy**. The Hebrew word that's translated *glory* is a real abstract word; it's a little bit difficult to define. But it basically carries the idea of weight. In other words, the sum total of who God is, the weight of God is His glory. So often it's translated glory. You hear people refer to the weight of His glory, which is kind of a way of saying, glory glory. It's the same thing twice. But in Chapter 4, at the end of the chapter, when the glory of God has departed Israel, is that Hebrew word. Okay, now in verse 6 this is the same root word. So when it says **...the hand of the LORD was heavy**, it is the same root word, *was glorious*. In other words, God is now going to display His glory before the Philistines. *His hand was heavy on them*. So another way of saying this would be: even though the glory of God departed Israel, the glory did not depart from God. God is still glorious and He is about to demonstrate that to the pagan Philistines.

This is really important to understand! No matter what happens in the world, no matter what a nation does, no matter what the media does, no matter what the terrorists do, no matter what anybody does, you cannot change or hide or diminish the glory of God. So even though there's no soldiers, there's no army, there's no people of God, even though the glory has departed from Israel, the glory has not departed from God because God by definition is God and He is glorious. So that's what's being said in verse 6.

**Now the hand of the LORD was heavy (*glorious*) on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god.” So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines (*so this would be the mayors or the governors*) to them and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” And they said, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath.” And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around. After they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city with very great confusion; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. (Vs. 6-9)**

So the lords get together, and say, “We can’t take this. What are we going to do?” “I suppose that there’s a possibility that it was a coincidence that the ark came to town and so did the tumors. So let’s send the ark down the road and see what happens.” So they decide to send the ark over to Gath, so twelve miles to the east. Later in the Samuel story we’ll meet a famous member of the city of Gath by the name of Goliath. Most likely at this point of the story, Goliath isn’t even born yet, but this is his hometown. So the ark gets there, and the tumors break out and the same thing happens again.

At the end of verse 9, I’m going to give you maybe more information than you want to know. Where it says **tumors broke out on them**, the Hebrew is literally *in their secret place*. Most scholars think it was something like a hemorrhoid in their secret place. You kind of figure out that’s the part of the anatomy where the tumors are showing up. It was like the bubonic plague or it was like hemorrhoids, but just to understand these weren’t little bumps on their arms. They completely incapacitated the people. They were horrific so the people are in agony. Verse 10:

**So they sent the ark of God to Ekron (*they sent it down the road, basically six miles to the north*). And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people.”**

So this is only six miles away; they are aware of what’s going on. And they are like, “We don’t want the ark. Somebody else take the ark.” Verse 11:

**They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, so that it will not kill us and our people.”**

There’s the reference earlier that they put Dagon, their national god, back in his place over the ark of the covenant. Now this part of the story is they want to put the ark of the covenant back in its place and its place is not with us. That’s kind of the beginning and the ending of the story.

**For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven. (Vs. 11b-12)**

So they keep moving the ark and God keeps ravaging the people with these tumors and they are trying to figure out what do we do with the ark now? Now think about this: On one hand, you have the Hebrew people; they weren’t pursuing God; they weren’t worshiping God; they were

worshipping pagan gods; they were not faithful to God. Now their leaders are dead, and the ark of the covenant is gone. They think the ark is gone; the presence of God is gone; the glory of God is gone; we are one step away from the Philistines destroying us. Woe is us! So this is what they are thinking. Meanwhile, among the Philistines, God, without a soldier, without an army, without a leader, without any of His people, is bringing the Philistines to their knees, demonstrating, "I am God! With or without my people, I win." He will bring the Philistines to their knees and they are trying to figure out, "What do we do now?" That very last line where they are crying out to heaven, is very unusual. You are not talking about the people of God. You are talking about the pagans who thought they had won, who thought that their god would reign over the God of the Hebrews. Yet when this part of the story comes to an end, they are actually crying out to heaven for God to give them mercy. It's not that they are suddenly becoming believers, in our sense of the word, but it is clearly waving the white flag, "We give up! You win! Tell us what to do." So what can the Philistines possibly do now? We'll find out next week.

But as we wrap this up this morning, this is one of the most interesting texts in the Old Testament. This is God without a soldier; this is God without His people; this is God alone making a clear statement: "I am God." God by Himself is a majority. God wins. With or without us, God wins! The one thing we know for sure is when the story is over, no matter what happens, God wins. God can't be lessened; He can't be diminished; His glory cannot be taken away or diminished or hidden in any way. No matter what happens, God wins.

Years ago, when I was a kid, I played midget football. I played for Lincoln Welding. This particular year, we were average. The last game of the season was against the best team in the league—undefeated, pretty much crushed everybody. They were big; they were fast; they were strong. I remember our coaches, the very beginning of that week of practice, telling us that we can win this game, that if we believe in ourselves, that if we play together, we come together as a team, we can pull off the upset of the year. They did a masterful job of convincing us this was true. With each passing day I remember how much more excited, how much more enthused we became throughout the week. It was the best week of practice. We were so inspired; we were so excited; we were working hard; we were pulling together. "We can actually win this thing." I remember entering the oval at Lincoln High, which was where we used to play our games. And they were big and intimidating. But the coach again inspired us that we can win this. We can pull off an upset; we have to believe in ourselves. Once again we were inspired; we were encouraged; we were enthused. I remember being absolutely convinced we can win. It was awesome! Then we played the game (*laughter*) ...and we got crushed!

You can be a positive thinker; you can sincerely believe anything you want to believe, and you can believe it with all your heart, but eventually our belief systems hit reality, and reality always wins. Reality always wins! People today can believe if they want that all roads lead to God. They can believe if they want that all religious truth claims are equally true and valid. They can believe they can go to the buffet and create whatever religious system works for them. They can believe that they define God and they even judge God. They can believe that with all their heart. But at the end of the story those beliefs hit reality and reality always wins. And the reality is this: There is one God who reigns supreme. He is the King of kings; He is the Lord of lords. He is not a God of our own making. He is God! He is a God that has defined Himself through creation, that has defined Himself through His Word. He is a God that ultimately judges us. He is the God of unlimited glory, and no one can diminish or take away His glory. With or without you, with or without me, God will accomplish His mission. God will win!

It does not matter which direction this nation goes; it does not matter what the terrorists do; it does not matter who's in the White House; it does not matter who's elected to office; it does not matter who sits on the Supreme Court; it does not matter what the celebrities or the media says. None of that changes the fact that, at the end of the day, this we know: God wins! And He will win with or without us. But here's the reality of that: Because God is good and gracious and loving, He has created you on purpose, for a purpose, and He has graciously called you—an invitation to be part of something that will matter forever. God doesn't need me, but God has graciously invited me to be part of something that will matter forever. I am not doing God a great favor by serving Him, or by giving to Him. God has granted me the unimaginable favor of being invited in to be part of something that will matter forever. I can choose to say yes to that or I can choose to say no to that, but God will win with or without me.

If that's true, if at the end of the day God wins, that's the reality. Then no matter what you are facing this morning, no matter what you are going through, no matter how hard life is for you right now, if God is God and this we know, at the end of the story God wins, then it would be right to say: Christ is enough! This one God has said: This is the one way of salvation, that He would give up His own Son to become a man, walk on this earth and be nailed to a cross in payment for sin, that He would be buried and that He would be resurrected from the dead and He would offer salvation freely as a gift. Jesus Himself would say, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, nobody comes to the Father but through Me." One God! One Way! If it's true that there is one God, one Way and at the end of the story, this we know that one God wins, then it's right to say this morning: Christ is enough! No matter what you are going through, no matter how hard it is, no matter how confusing it is, this we know: Christ is enough. There is no need for fear; there is no need for anxiety; there is no need to worry everyday about what's going to happen. There is every reason tonight to put your head on the pillow in peace because this we know: no matter what, Christ is enough!

*Our Father, we celebrate this morning that great truth: You are not one God among many. You are God, and You have made a way of salvation, one and only way, through the death, burial and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus. Lord, we've read the last chapter of the Book, and it's very clear You win. God, for every single person here this morning, no matter what we are going through, no matter how hard it is, no matter how confusing it is, no matter how dark it seems, because You are God, this we know: Christ is enough. Lord, give us the courage to believe. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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## **God Wins With or Without You**

*Courage to Lead Series*

**1 Samuel 5:1-12**

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. Is leadership essential to accomplish God's mission? Why or why not?
2. Is God limited to the faithfulness and courage of human leaders to get the job done?
3. Imagine watching a sporting event on television that is a rerun. You already know who wins. How does this effect how you respond to the ups and downs of the contest along the way? In the same way, how should you respond to the ups and downs of life if you believe in the end God wins?

### **Bible Study**

1. Review the story of 1 Samuel so far. What have you learned?
2. Read 1 Samuel 5:1-5. What happens when the Philistines put the Ark of God in the temple of Dagon? What is the message God is sending to the Philistines and to us as the readers?
3. See Deut. 4:28, Habakkuk 2:19, Isa. 2:8; 37:19; Ps. 115:4. What is an idol and what would be examples of idols in our culture today?
4. A popular view today in our culture is called "pluralism." This is the belief that all religious beliefs are equally valid and equally true. Therefore all roads lead to God. What is God's response to the claims of pluralism based on this text in 1 Samuel?

5. Read 1 Samuel 5:6-12. The term “heavy” used several times in this text is the same root word as “glory” from 4:21, 22. Can people ultimately “take” the glory of God? While the hands of Dagon were cut off the hand of God was reflecting His glory. What is the message God is sending?
6. Do nations or communities or individuals need a majority to win if God is on their side? How should this effect how we view the issues in our culture? Is God losing?

### **Application**

1. If at the end of the story God wins, how should that affect my daily perspective? If I truly believe God wins should my daily attitude be one of fear and anxiety or one of confidence and courage? Which attitude more likely reflects your daily experience? Why?
2. Is there anything in your life right now too big for God? Is there anything too big for God? Is God dependent on anyone else to meet your need?
3. How should leaders view their calling in light of the fact that God will win with or without us? Is anyone indispensable? Am I needed or invited in by God?