

How Big is Your God?

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Fiona. So as Fiona's already mentioned, we're going through quite a chunk of 1 Samuel this evening, and I thought it would be good to give you just a little bit of context and things to look out for as we sit through such a long reading.

So up until now in the book of Samuel, it's kind of focused on Eli and his sons and their lack of devotion and the blasphemies that Eli's sons committed in the temple with their mockery of the priesthood.

And then in chapter 3, it focuses in on Samuel and how the Lord calls Samuel and sets him apart as a prophet, a person set apart by God to speak his message to his people.

And now in chapter 4, it changes in chapters 4 through to 6, and it focuses on the Ark of the Covenant. So we've got a physical symbol for the nation of Israel of God's presence here on earth.

So as we read through this passage, there are a few things I'd like for you to keep your eye out for. Look for indications of God's power, God's might, and look for an indication of two different reactions, two different responses to God's power and God's might, and ultimately God's glory of being the sovereign Lord of this earth.

[1 : 1 9] So as we do those readings, as we hear those readings, keep an eye out for those things. And I pray and know that God will bless the reading of his words to us. Thank you. Thank you very much to everyone who's read and participated in the service.

That was a long reading, wasn't it? I wonder if just before we dive into this passage, if we pray together. But to do that, I wonder if we could stand as we pray. We've been sitting down for quite a wee while now, so let's stand and pray together.

Lord God and Heavenly Father, we come before you this evening, the Holy God, the powerful Creator God. And Lord, we are not worthy, but we thank you that we have the privilege of gathering this evening to hear your word.

We ask that you would speak to us this evening and that we would leave here, leave this building with a greater view of your majesty. We ask this in your son's holy and precious name. Amen.

Please take your seats. I wonder if I asked you this evening to close your eyes and picture the biggest and most grand thing you could.

[2 : 3 0] What would it be? Maybe for some of you, it's the thundering noise of Niagara Falls with 567,811 litres of water falling over the edge per second.

Or maybe it's the staggering height of Mount Everest that sits 29,029 feet above sea level.

For me, as I was thinking this week, the sheer size and vastness of our universe came to mind. So on any given clear night in Edinburgh, as you look up to the sky, you can see approximately 2,500 stars.

Of the estimated 200 billion stars that are in our galaxy. The Milky Way. This is a picture of our galaxy, which is just one of the estimated 100 billion galaxies that make up our universe.

Now to put this into context, here's where we are. This earth that we call home, which seems huge to us, looks like a speck of dust in comparison to our galaxy.

[3 : 54] And then consider all the other galaxies that make up our universe. It's huge. But whilst the size of our universe should make us be in wonder and be speechless at the beautiful and wonderful creation that God has made.

The thing that I was thinking about this week is that the universe is only one thought of our almighty creator God. God is bigger than we think he is.

God is not a global God. God is a galactic God. God is bigger than we think he is. God is bigger than we think. God is bigger than we think. And so the question that I think these chapters in 1 Samuel lead us to ask is, how big is your God?

God is bigger than we think he is. I think far too often we put God in a box. We have a nice, neat little box that we put him in because we feel somewhat insecure unless we have God contained within a structure of our own thinking.

And the result of that is our view of God is far, far too small. We minimize God to fit neatly into our own minds, but he is far greater and far bigger than we could ever comprehend.

[5 : 07] So if God made the universe, the size of which we will never comprehend, how much greater and bigger is he? And this week as I studied these chapters, I was amazed at the greatness of God.

And these chapters, I think, invite us to fling wide the doors and windows of our minds and make some failed attempt to see the greatness, majesty and splendor and holiness of the one true God.

How big is your God? So the first thing that we see in this passage in chapter four is an unexpected outcome, an unexpected outcome.

So up until now, Israel has heard the word of the Lord again. God has called Samuel and he's been delivering God's word to his people. And so surely you'd expect Israel to be obedient, to listen to the word of the Lord again.

You'd expect them to praise God as the holy God, especially after they've heard of his judgment on those who do not see him as such.

[6 : 20] The judgment that he predicted on Eli and his sons is because of their lack of religious leadership and their lack of devotion and sincere worship of God being holy.

And then we see almost a kind of flippancy as they fulfill their priestly duties. Israel go to war with the Philistines, but Israel is defeated.

And in verse three, we see a little glimmer of hope because they say in verse three, why did the Lord bring defeat on us today? Now, I say this is a glimmer of hope because they understand that God is not fighting for them.

They seem to realize that they're not basking in the favor of God, but that something isn't right. Some form of sin or some disobedience is preventing God's blessing and presence to be upon them.

And so how do they respond? Do they fall on their knees? Do they weep and mourn in repentance? Do they call Samuel God's messenger to come and speak godly wisdom into their situation?

[7 : 36] Do they take time to reflect on their actions and question whether there's any sin within their camp? No. But in the same breath of their realization that God's actions are actually against them, they say, bring the ark of the Lord's covenant.

And at first glance, this might seem like a good thing because the ark of the Lord's covenant, which would have looked something like this, was a visible sign of God's presence.

So the ark was a golden chest that contained the tablets of God's law given to Moses. It served both practical and symbolic purposes.

It was used instrumentally in both the worship of God, day in and day out in the tabernacle and then later in the temple, but also in miracles, the fall of the walls of Jericho and things like that.

The ark of the covenant was symbolic of God's throne. And it was a physical reminder to Israel that God's presence was with them. In Exodus 25, God says that he would speak to Moses by sitting on the top of this, which is known as the mercy seat.

[8 : 52] This is not just a box, but it is a symbol of God and his presence on earth. And so in verse 3, when we find out Israel's real motive for wanting the ark of the covenant there, we get confused.

In verse 3, they say they want the ark so that God may go with us and save us from our enemies. Do you see the problem?

They aren't treating God as the sovereign God who is in control of all things, who is to be revered and praised, who is to be obeyed, loved and feared, but they treat the ark of the covenant as their lucky charm.

The Israelites are treating this physical symbol of God's presence as some people nowadays treat a rabbit's foot. Or that lucky coin that you've always got in your pocket.

Some people think that if they have their lucky, whatever it may be, then nothing can go wrong. You know that saying, find a penny, pick it up and all day long you'll have good luck?

[10 : 01] That's what Israel is saying about the Lord's ark of the covenant. They wanted God on their own terms. Only if God acted in the way we want him to, do we really want him.

Only if he did what they expected, which was to save them and fight for them, did they want him in their camp. And so at this point, a few alarm bells should be ringing in our minds.

Something's not quite right. This is completely irreverent and totally unacceptable. They're treating God like a cheap trinket. And in verse 4, we get another sign that something isn't right.

Hophni and Phinehas are walking with the ark as it arrives. And at this point, every single alarm bell in our head should be ringing like mad. These men have committed blasphemy against the Lord in chapter 2.

They'd made a mockery of the priesthood. They were not God-fearing men by any stretch of the word. God has even spoken judgment against them.

[11 : 13] And the whole of Israel heard about it in chapter 3. But they don't seem to care. They're too focused on their desired outcome.

On what they think should happen. That they bypass any thought of God. Or any right worship of or devotion to him.

So as the ark arrives in Israel, in their camp, a shout of joy can be heard. And the Philistines are so afraid.

And in verse 7, they say that a God has come into the camp of Israel. See, they have heard of everything that God has done. By bringing them out of Egypt.

But their focus is not God's goodness and God's grace to Israel. Their focus is God's destruction on Egypt for not letting Israel go. Stories of God's power and might precede him wherever his name is mentioned.

[12 : 14] And in verse 8, they say that they are doomed. Because God is with Israel. But they go up to fight.

And again, the Philistines win. Unexpected by the Israelites. Hophni and Phinehas die. And the ark of the Lord is captured. And you see that in verse 11. God's judgment on these priests foretold in chapters 2 and 3 has passed.

God has remained faithful to his promises. And a man ran from the battlefield to tell Eli and the people of Shiloh everything that had happened. And in verse 13, it says that Eli was sitting and watching because his heart feared for the ark of the Lord.

Something seems to have changed in Eli since chapters 2 and 3. His main focus back then was his sons. He cared more about honoring them than he did about honoring the Lord.

But now his main focus is God. And in verse 17, when he's told that his sons have died and that the ark of the Lord was captured. He's distraught.

[13 : 32] But in verse 18, it says that only when the ark of the God was mentioned, did he fall off his chair, break his neck and die. Eli's biggest concern was not his sons, but it was the ark.

It was the presence of God. Such a difference in attitude and devotion to God from chapters 2 and 3. God is faithful. Those promises of judgment were fulfilled on Eli and his sons.

And then this news is too much for Phineas' wife, who was pregnant and soon to deliver. Upon hearing the bad news that the ark was captured, that her father-in-law was dead, that her husband had died, she went into labor and died as a result.

But in her final words in verses 21 and 22, you'll find a summary of the state of Israel at this time. And you see some deep theology.

She named her son Ichabod, which means no glory or where is the glory. And she's saying that because the ark of God has gone, God's glory has departed from Israel.

[14 : 45] But the truth is that God's glory had already departed. Because the nation of Israel didn't care about God, his law, his majesty or his glory.

He was just their lucky charm. They thought that the ark was the thing that would bring them victory. They placed their trust in a physical item instead of putting their trust in the living God.

This is not the outcome that they expected. And the truth that Israel had not yet grasped was that if you feel far away from God, one thing we need to remember is that it is not God who has moved.

God has promised that if his people draw near to him, then he will draw near to them. How big is your God? Now maybe you're thinking that we're not in danger of concluding that God is some kind of good luck charm.

But how often do we put God in a box? How often do we confine God to the rationale of our own minds and put boundaries on who he is and what he can do?

[16 : 00] We seem to feel a little bit insecure about God unless we have him contained neatly in a box. And the result of that is that we have a tiny view of God.

Maybe we pray twice a week about the big things and big problems in our life. But we don't mention the little stuff because we can sort that out.

God doesn't really care about the little things in my life. That's a tiny view of God. Or maybe we pray and when we're asking for forgiveness, do we just give a two second, sorry God I messed up again, I'll try my best not to do it anymore?

Or do we weep? Do we mourn and get on our knees because we realize that we have fallen short of the standards of the holy God?

Or maybe we only go to God in prayer as a last resort when we're at the end of our tether. How big is your God? Let's not forget for a moment who we are talking to when we pray.

- [17 : 15] We are not speaking to a person who's just normal. But we are speaking to God who is powerful. A God who cares. A God who loves.
- A God whose word works in the lives of people. A God whose word carries weight and carries action. We are speaking to the God for whom all the nations of this world are but a drop in a bucket.
- As Isaiah 40 reminds us. And having this big, majestic, glorious view of God will lead us to praise him for who he is.
- The God whose power is unfathomable. The God whose splendor is beyond compare. And the God whose glory is incomparable with anything in this world.
- This is the God that we serve. The God that we worship. The God that we love. And do you know what the best news is? This is the God that cares about you and me.
- [18 : 19] This is the God who patiently waits for us and doesn't chastise us when we disobey. But this is the God who is calling us to himself. Remember how big God is.
- Remember that you could have the grandest and biggest view of God ever possible. And it would come nowhere near how great our God is. Our words fail to describe him and his awesomeness.
- Don't put God in a box like Israel did. But see him in all of his splendor as revealed in the whole Bible. As the God who we should be in awe of.
- Who is to be revered. And who is worthy of all of our praise. How big is your God? And the second thing that we see in these chapters is an unexpected response.
- In chapters 5 and 6. An unexpected response. So in chapter 4 the outcome of defeat was completely unexpected by the Israelites. And we saw a declaration that God's glory had departed from Israel.
- [19 : 29] Devastating news. But in these two chapters we see God's glory being revealed to those outside of Israel. And not only that. But their response after seeing God's glory.
- After seeing God's power. Is actually the response that we should be seeing from Israel. After the Philistines defeat Israel in battle. They take the ark.
- And verse 5 tells us that they put it in the temple of their God Dagon in Ashdod. Now this was quite a normal thing to do. If one people defeated another in battle.
- They would take the gods of the losers. And put them in the temple of the winners. God. So though the ark of the Lord is not an idol like Dagon is.
- The Philistines treat it as one. And think that they've won the battle. Because Dagon was on their side. But how wrong they are. They think that God is weak and inferior.
- [20 : 26] But what do they see when they wake up early in the morning? In verse 3 they see their so-called God fallen face down before the ark of the Lord.
- This was supposed to be a presentation of Dagon's power and might. That the ark of God is in his house. But instead this idol who has a mouth but cannot speak.
- Who has hands but cannot move. Is lying flat out before the holy true God. And it's as if. And it's as if it's an ornament that's been knocked off by a clumsy cat walking along the windowsill.
- Or mantelpiece in your living room at home. A lifeless piece of decoration. Because the Philistines. Have to go and pick up their God and put him back in his place.
- And the following morning. God leaves no room for doubt in their mind. Who is more powerful. Because they find their false God dashed to bits on the floor of his own temple.
- [21 : 36] The Philistines needed to rush to put their so-called God in place. Without the intervention of people. This God would be lying on his own temple floor gathering dust.

But God is just about to prove to the Philistines. Just how powerful and glorious he really is. God does not need assistance to get back to Israel.

God does not need help from humans. God is not dependent on the army of Israel to rescue him from this temple. But God will demonstrate that he can bring a whole nation to its knees.

Even though an army couldn't defeat them. Why? Because he is powerful. He is glorious. And when the Philistines realized that. Their response is completely unexpected.

See the Philistines had not yet met God. But they'd only heard of his dealing with Egypt. They didn't know really what to make of this whole situation. I imagine it's like the scene in the Chronicles of Narnia.

[22 : 40] Or the page on the book. Where Mr. Beaver is speaking about Aslan. As the king of the woods. And all the children assume that he's a man. But he's actually a lion. And upon hearing this they are afraid.

And Lucy says or asks one of the probably one of the most quoted questions in the whole book. Is he quite safe? To which Mr. Beaver replies safe?

Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king. Up until this point the Philistines have thought that God was safe.

That he was just another idol. Made by the hands of men. To satisfy their natural desire to worship something. But God will not be tamed by friend or by foe.

God demonstrates his sovereignty. Causing the Philistines to feel the weight of his hand in judgment. And in verse 6 we see the beginning.

[23 : 49] We see God beginning to afflict the cities with tumors. That are probably caused by a rat infestation sent by God. And that's hinted in chapter 6 verse 5.

And the Philistines want rid of the Ark of the Lord. And the reason they want rid of it. In chapter 5 verse 7. Is because they know that neither they.

Nor their fake God Dagon. Can stand against his judgment. Of the one true glorious powerful God. And so they decide to send the Ark away.

Here's a little map of where the Ark traveled in the seven months. Between the capturing of it in Ebenezer. And it being returned. So they send the Ark to a different city.

It goes from Ashdod to Gath. And from Gath to Ekron. It's as if the Philistines think that God's unhappy with a particular city. Because they've done something wrong.

[24 : 49] But that thought quickly goes out of their minds. Because every single city the Ark enters. The same curses follow.

In chapter 6 verse 1. We see that the Ark was with the Philistines for seven months. And during that time. They came to the conclusion. Quite rightly. That God is not to be trifled with.

When the Philistines see the power. And glory of God. Their response is. That they want rid of the Ark. They want nothing to do with it.

Send it back to Israel they say. This response is unexpected. Because of the way they send it back. They cannot suffer the judgment any longer.

But they won't send it back flippantly. They've learned their lesson. So they gather their priests. And they're advised to send it back. With a guilt offering. With golden rats and golden tumors.

[25 : 48] Which is a bit of a strange gift if you ask me. And by these gifts they're acknowledging their own wrongdoing.

But it would appear in chapter 6 verse 3. That they thought that these golden trinkets. Hold some form of magical powers. That would somehow grant them healing from their afflictions.

But all of this. Is to be done in a way. And verse 5 says. Is to be done in a way that gives glory. To the God of Israel. Isn't that shocking?

Do you see the sharp contrast here? But also do you see the great abundance of God? God's abundant grace. Because Israel's failure to honor God.

And handle the ark properly. Led him to remove the ark from them. But now that the Philistines are giving glory to God. God is in his grace.

[26 : 51] Letting the ark return to a people who are unworthy. The stark contrast between these two people is almost unreal. Israel have been recipients of God's blessing.

God's grace. God's love and his laws for years. He saved them from slavery. He fed them in the wilderness for 40 years.

He gave them their own land and promised to bless them. But they flippantly and irreverently dismiss him as a trinket. But now the Philistines.

Who've only been recipients of God's judgment. Say that everybody should give glory to the God of Israel. The Philistines are giving glory when Israel should be.

This is unexpected. And so they take cows who've had young. And they hook them up to a cart. And they send them off. That way if the cows do what they normally do.

[27 : 55] And follow the cry of their young. Then they'll know that it is not God who is afflicting them. But if they go.

Then they know that God is against them. And what happens? Verse 12 says. They did not turn to the left or to the right. They now know without a shadow of a doubt.

That God has been afflicting them. And so the ark arrives in Beth Shemesh. Which is a city assigned to the Levites. Those who've been.

Those who should be. Fulfilling their priestly roles. And who are supposed to be dedicated to serving God. And in verse 14. When they see the ark coming. They rejoice.

And they offer burnt offerings to God. But even here we can see that they haven't learned their lesson. The sacrifice is not done according to the law.

[28 : 53] And then in verse 19. You see again. A sheer lack of reverence. Because a number of people decide to have a glance inside the ark. They didn't learn their lesson from the initial presumptuous handling of the ark.

That led to its capture in chapter 4. And now a similar presumptuous handling of the ark. Leads to God delivering a heavy blow. By killing those who disobeyed God.

And didn't revere him. Their lack of respect. Their lack of humility. Their lack of understanding of how holy God is.

Their lack of desire to praise God properly. Resulted in them. Looking inside this symbol of God's presence. And God's judgment falling upon them.

And in verse 20. We see how the people respond. How can people stand. In the presence of the Lord. This holy God. And they do exactly what the Philistines do.

[30 : 02] And pass it on to another city. Who can stand. In the presence of the Lord. The most holy God. How big is your God?

Today we no longer have the ark of the covenant. But don't we fall into this thinking? So often we forget that God is holy. And we don't ponder the significance.

Or implications of that. God is perfect. His word. His works. His will. His plan. His very being. Is perfection defined.

Who can stand before such a God? God. Our culture tells us. That people are generally good. That there's nothing wrong with us. We're all fine. But the Bible tells us.

The uncomfortable truth. That we all need to hear. We are corrupt. Broken sinners. And our wrongdoing. And rebellion against God.

[31 : 06] Are like filthy rags. Before him. In all of his purity and perfection. Reading. These three chapters.

We can get a sense of the danger. Of being in God's presence. God is not safe. God is not tame. But God is good. God is the king.

God is the king. Jonathan Edwards. A pastor. And theologian. From years ago. Said this. It is the absence. Of godly fear. That signifies.

A lack. Of the knowledge. Of God. It is the absence. Of godly fear. That signifies. A lack. Of the knowledge. Of God. I think too often.

We can be so irreverent. And come before God. In a casual way. Just as we would maybe. Start a conversation. With our best buddy. But let's not forget. Who we're talking to.

[32 : 04] We need to share. An element. Of the attitude. Of the people. Of Beth Shemesh. And each morning. As we wake up. As we open our Bibles. As we pray. Ask ourselves.

Who can stand. In the presence. Of the Lord. The most holy. God. There's a danger. Of becoming too. Familiar with God.

He is holy. We are not. He is pure. We are not. He is perfect. We are not. But we are not left.

In despair. We are not left. Without hope. We're not left. Standing on the sidelines. Looking in. To glory. glory. But as Christians. Through the death.

And resurrection. Of Jesus. We can be brought. Into that glory. Into the family. Of God. And as Romans 8. Tells us. The glorious truth. That should take us. Back.

[32 : 59] Every single day. We can come before God. And call him. Father. We can have intimacy. With God. Because of his son. Can we stand.

Before a holy God. Yes. And one day. We all will. And on that final day. As we stand. Before God. Christ will declare. Us bought.

By his sacrifice. And free. From the condemnation. Of our sins. Can we stand. In the presence. Of a holy God. Yes. That is our blessed. Future.

That awaits. Every Christian. Not by our own works. Not by our merit. But by the sacrifice. Of God himself. Who took the place.

Of corrupt. Sin stained people. Like you. And like me. So that we can be clothed. In righteousness. So that we can. Be declared free.

[33 : 55] And so that we can. One day rejoice. With all of God's people. Before the throne. As we sing. In one voice. Holy. Holy. Holy. Is the Lord God. Almighty. This is our God.

Isn't he. Marvelous. Isn't he. Glorious. Isn't he. Full of splendor. How big is your God. God. The God.

Who flung the stars. Into space. The God. Who created the universe. The size of which. We will never comprehend. The God. Who is so big. That the universe.

Can be described. Just as one thought. Of his. Can you call him father. Or is he your foe. Let's leave this evening.

With. A massive. View of God. And see the seriousness. Of having an unbiblical. And unhealthy. Familiarity. With God. But also.

[34 : 56] Let's see the grace of God. And his goodness. Because we can come before him. And call him father. Let's pray together. God.

You are good. We are not. You are holy. And we are unclean. You are perfect.

And we are fallen. And yet. The glorious news. That your word tells us. Is that. Even though. We are sin stained.

And corrupt. Human beings. We can come before. Your glorious presence. Because of your son. Jesus Christ. Father. We thank you. For that privilege.

For that privilege. Forgive us Lord. For the times. Where we have. A small view. Of who you are. Forgive us. For the times. We confine you. To a neat little box. But Lord.

[35 : 55] I pray. That you would. Rip that box open. And that we would. See you. For who you are. The glorious. Creator God. Who is all powerful. Who is deserving.

Of all praise. And who is glorious. This. Lord. We bring you. Our praise. This evening. In Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.