

“Don’t Mess With God!” (1 Samuel 5:1–12)

The phrase, “Don’t Mess with Texas,” is a trademark of the Texas Department of Transportation which began as part of a statewide advertising campaign in 1986. The intention behind the “Don’t Mess with Texas” campaign was to reduce littering on Texas roadways. The phrase was prominently shown on road signs on major highways, television, radio, and in print advertisements. The campaign is credited with reducing litter on Texas highways roughly 72% between 1986 and 1990. While the slogan was originally not intended to become a cultural icon, it did.¹ Whenever Lori and I have been in Texas, we have seen the slogan on T-shirts, caps, bumper stickers, etc. It’s everywhere! Proud Texans want the world to know, “Don’t Mess with Texas!”

I wonder, however, how many Texans would say, “Don’t Mess with God. If you have to mess with Texas, so be it. But whatever you do, Don’t Mess with God!” Closer to home, would you exclaim, “Don’t Mess with God”? I don’t know about you, but I am consistently grieved by my unwillingness to take God seriously. There are times in my personal life and church ministry when I question my own zeal and devotion toward God. How is it that I can know God in an intimate and meaningful way and yet, at times, live like a Christian agnostic? Perhaps you have also wrestled with how carelessly you respond to God. Maybe you, too, are grieved by the things that you think, say, and do. If so, 1 Samuel 5 is a story that will get your attention and hit you between the eyes.

1. God obliterates His supposed competition (5:1–5). Our story begins with a historical note: “**Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod**” (5:1).² The time sequence of this event harkens back to 4:11 when the ark of the covenant was captured. In chapter 5 the narrator explains what was happening among the Philistines as news of the ark’s capture brought death and despair to Israel. By way of reminder, the “ark of God” was a small gold-plated box that held the two tablets of the Law (cf. Deut 10:1–5). It was placed in the innermost shrine of one Israelite sanctuary after another, including Shiloh, and subsequently Jerusalem. The ark symbolized the presence of God. During the Israelites’ long period of wandering between Egypt and the promised land the ark was mobile, traveling with them; and, it played a special role whenever an enemy confronted them or tried to obstruct them (see Num 10:33–36).³ In 1 Sam 5 God’s enemies “took” the ark from Ebenezer (i.e., the stone of help) to Ashdod. Ashdod was one of the five major Philistine cities located in the promised land at this time (cf. 6:17) and apparently was the site of the most important worship center for the god credited with the Philistines’ recent battle success.⁴

In 5:2 the narrator pens infamous words: “**Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon.**” After reading this verse we ought to say, “Uh-oh.” The Philistines and their god, Dagon, defeated Israel and took the ark. They were overconfident. Notice the action verbs in 5:1–2: the Philistines “took,” “brought,” “took,” “brought,” and “set.” The Philistines are the subject of all the active verbs. The ark of God, the passive object of each verb, was completely in their power and control, just as the people of Israel had been crushed beneath the Philistines’ might.⁵ It appears that the Philistines had two reasons for showcasing the ark:⁶ (1) The Philistines wanted to humiliate the Israelites and display their victory trophy.⁷ Yahweh, as the defeated God, would stand in service before the victorious Dagon.⁸ Dagon means “grain” in Hebrew,⁹ and he was thought to be the “grain-god,” associated with vegetation and fertility.¹⁰ (2) The Philistines also thought that if they adopted Yahweh as their God also, He might do wonderful things for them. But although they brought God into their temple, they didn’t put Dagon out! There are many people who think it’s useful to have God on their side. In a way they want to honor God. They will go to church. They will say prayers. They will ask a pastor to bless a marriage or their new house. The kind of God they want is simply a God who will help them get their own way and win their own battles. They want God to be a servant to help them get things done, but at the same time they want to have their own views and live their own lives.¹¹

Before the Philistines were able to eat their Lucky Charms¹² the next morning, a surprising event occurred: **“When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD.¹³ So they took Dagon and set him in his place again”** (5:3). This verse should amuse you. The fall of Dagon’s statue was a clear indication that Yahweh was not defeated in the battle at Ebenezer (cf. 4:1–11). Dagon, who was thought to be so virile on the battlefield can’t even lift his face out of the dust in the confines of his own dwelling!¹⁴ Falling on one’s face was a posture associated with worship. Dagon’s new posture reflected an act of reverence and submission before the Lord, the true God enthroned above the ark (Num 7:89). Dagon would serve Yahweh! What is especially amusing is that the Philistines had to put Dagon back in his place.¹⁵ (He has fallen and he can’t get up.) *They* had to lift the poor fellow back to his feet. *They* had to set him back in his place.¹⁶ Imagine a God whose worshipers have to stand him back up! This is a hilarious punch line.¹⁷ Dagon, like all the other pagan gods of that time, needed the help of people to sustain him.

The next day’s events become even more fascinating: **“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 the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him”** (5:4). This is a case of déjà vu, for once again Dagon falls on his face before the ark. Only, now Dagon is without his head (a hint that he cannot rule) and without his hands (a hint that he cannot do anything).¹⁸ Dagon has been robbed of his power and emptied of his dignity.¹⁹ This is a regular Humpty Dumpty situation with no Elmer’s glue.²⁰ The verb “cut off” (*karath*) suggests that the head and hands had not been “broken off” (*contra* HCSB, NIV, NLT) by the fall of the image, but had been “sheared” (NET) with deliberate care and placed disdainfully upon the threshold.²¹ Displaying the head of a conquered foe was done typically to confirm his death. This is what David did when he defeated the Philistine champion Goliath (see 17:49, 51).²² Cutting the hand off of a dead enemy was a common practice in the ancient Near East for counting casualties (Judg 8:6). Egyptian monuments show piles of hands gathered after a battle.²³ On another amusing note, the last phrase in 1 Sam 5:4 literally reads: “Only Dagon remained on him.” No head, no hands, only Dagon—a potent way of saying what Dagon was. He never could think, speak, or act. Chop off his head and hands, and you still have Dagon left!²⁴ What a powerful picture! Just as the Philistines defeated Israel twice on the battlefield, so Yahweh defeated Dagon twice on his own turf.²⁵ Yahweh, who was presumed to be defeated, dominated on foreign soil.

Dagon’s shellacking leads to an editorial comment in 5:5: **“Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon’s house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.”**²⁶ Temple thresholds were considered especially worthy of respect because they separated sacred and common areas.²⁷ Moreover, in this context since Dagon was conquered on the threshold, the Philistines stepped over this zone of Dagon’s trouble.²⁸ As the pagan priests of Dagon hopped over the threshold, they were undoubtedly confronted with a theological problem. Is not Yahweh greater than Dagon? Apparently, they concluded that this was not the case, so they just developed a new tradition. What a tragedy it is when people refuse to see God’s power over their idols or worldview. Throughout the Bible and in personal experience God frequently shows His power over all other so-called “gods.” If you are questioning God’s power or have refused to believe in the one true God—believe in Him today. He wants to reveal Himself.

God wants us to think through this brief account. The contrast between Dagon and Yahweh is deliberate. Unlike Dagon, Yahweh does not need anyone to set Him up again. He can fight the Philistines by Himself. He doesn’t need His people to cheer Him on. He doesn’t need our support to carry Him. If any carrying is to be done, He will carry us (cf. Isa 46:1–4).²⁹ The supremacy of Yahweh is independent of Israel. The God of the Bible doesn’t need us. Thus, we must see Him as all-sufficient. He can accomplish anything He wants with or without us. With that said, Yahweh does want to use you in the accomplishment of His plans and purposes.³⁰ Are you available to answer His call? Today, He is urging you to step out and step up to be used by Him.

2. God judges His enemies with tumors (5:6–12). Our story now intensifies as the Philistines' trophy turns out to be a menace.³¹ **“Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories”** (5:6). This verse demonstrates that it's not a good idea to steal someone else's property—especially when that property is God's!³² The reason is obvious: God is a just judge. The narrator introduces a major motif in the account: “the hand of the Lord” (cf. 5:7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9; 7:13).³³ This theme is contrasted with Dagon's hands being “cut off” and rendered helpless. The Lord's hand is said to be “heavy” upon on the Ashdodites. In other words, He severely judged the Ashdodites with tumors because they possessed the ark.³⁴ Interestingly, the word “heavy” (*kabed*) is from the same root translated “glory” (*kabod*) in 4:21–22. The inevitable conclusion is that the Lord is glorified even when He judges people for their sin.

God's judgment upon the Philistines continues in 5:7–9: **“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 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;³⁵ and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.”** Ashdod quickly figured out that the “hand of the Lord” was against them, so they called a Philistine town hall. They concluded that there was bad karma in Ashdod, so they presumed they would have better luck in Gath. Maybe they said: “If in Ashdod you don't succeed, try, try again in Gath.” Yet, the tumors attacked the people of Gath as well. The Hebrew word translated “broke out” (*sathar*, 5:9) occurs only here in the Old Testament. The Septuagint (i.e., Greek Old Testament) translators interpreted it accurately as “groin.” These tumors were apparently most prominent in the groin area. Tumors in the groin are a symptom of the bubonic plague (see 6:5).³⁶ Since the Philistines associated mice with this plague (6:4–5), and mice carry the bubonic plague, it seems likely that the hand of Yahweh sent this particular affliction on them because He protects His holiness by cursing those who fail to approach Him with the proper fear and carefulness. What a dreadful judgment!

The other Philistine cities didn't even want to receive the ark. Rather, they wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible. The ark had become a “hot potato.” The object of hot potato is to not be the one holding the potato when the music stops. Gath passes the hot potato to Ekron in 5:10–11: **“So they [the Gathites] sent the ark of God to Ekron. 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.’ 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.’ For there was a deadly confusion³⁷ throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there.”** No one would accuse the Philistines of being very bright, but they were starting to wake up and get the message. There was no waiting for a council decision this time. Instead, they just sent the ark away and let the problem rest on the next city. I don't mean to make light of this account, but I can't help but think of the card game “Old Maid.” When I was growing up my family enjoyed playing this classic game. There was always a giddy joy when one member of our family passed off the “Old Maid” card. However, there was also great agony to the one who was on the receiving end. In this case, the Ekronites are on the receiving end of something far worse than “Old Maid.” As a result, they feel much more strongly about being selected to receive the ark of God. It becomes obvious that if no Philistine city will take the ark, then it will have to be sent back to Israel. Without a military confrontation, without international negotiations, Israel is getting back the ark it lost some seven months earlier.³⁸ Yahweh did this work Himself. God demonstrated His power in irrefutable ways when no one else was present. He is supreme! God loves to come up big in our lives when no one else is involved. In situations like this, He receives all the glory. If your circumstances seem hopeless and helpless look for God to come up big. He is more than able.

Our story closes in 5:12 on a powerful note: **“And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.”** The Philistines acknowledged that the God of Israel has prevailed over them. The outcry of the city went up to heaven. This suggests that the Ekronites were forced by their circumstances to call on the one true God to relieve their suffering (cf. Exod 2:23).³⁹ According to Jonah 4, the God of Israel would heed the cry of even a wicked nation like Assyria. This, of course, applies to Philistia as well.⁴⁰ Death is the great equalizer; in it, even the pagan mind might recognize the sovereign hand of God.⁴¹ The message of this passage is that “the hand of the Lord” reigns supreme. *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.* Although the Lord doesn’t need applause, He loves it when we glorify Him. But it is up to us to recognize that our God is glorified every bit as much in His judgment as He is in His love. *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.*

Let’s conduct a post-fight analysis on 1 Sam 5. First, the Philistines underestimated the ark. It was not some magical tool, idol, lucky charm, or piece of spiritual technology. The Philistines were like the Nazis in “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” who regarded the ark as a weapon they could control. Both thought that possession of the ark would provide them with supernatural power. But God was not at their disposal! Likewise, He will not do our bidding, but He will do what He’s promised. Hence, we must not attempt to appease, manipulate, or coerce God. He will not be put in a box! He is sovereign and powerful; His judgments are faithful and true. *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.*

Secondly, the Philistines didn’t learn their lesson from history (i.e., “His-story”). Even though they spoke about God’s power in the Exodus event (cf. 4:8), they failed to learn from it. Moreover, they didn’t learn their lesson from Samson either. In Judg 16:18–31 the Philistines brought another trophy of Israelite war into the temple of Dagon—Samson—and in that case not only the image of Dagon but the whole temple was destroyed, along with the lords of the Philistines. Before you are too hard on the forgetful Philistines, shine the light of God’s Word on your own heart. How many times have you ignored or refused God’s instruction and discipline? How has the Lord demonstrated His faithfulness to you in spite of yourself? In what ways has He lovingly chastened you to get your attention? *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.*

Thirdly, the Philistines misinterpreted their victory. The only reason that they had defeated Israel was because Yahweh was using the Philistines to discipline His people. How much better it would have been for His glory to be revealed on the battlefield, but He couldn’t give victory to a disobedient people. The living God cannot be used, manipulated, or managed.⁴² God allows Himself to be humiliated and exalted.⁴³ But through it all He will not compromise His holiness or integrity. In the church God often appears to be losing because Christians refuse to submit to His lordship. The Lord longs to show up in a powerful way, but He is waiting for us to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:16). So instead of blaming the church for being anemic, lethargic, and irrelevant, perhaps we should blame ourselves. God’s judgment is for our good and for His glory. *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.*

God controls history and He is a just judge. Yahweh’s sovereignty extends even to the temple of Dagon. Certainly, even though the ark was captured, the Lord wasn’t vanquished.⁴⁴ In the same way, God wants to do a new work in America and in your county. God’s enemies can’t stop Him from having His way. We must have confidence in the Lord’s power to overcome and judge evil. We must remember that “the hand of the Lord” reigns supreme. *Let’s give the Lord a hand for His judgment.*

Scripture References

1 Samuel 5:1–12
1 Samuel 4:6–9
Judges 16:21–30
Zephaniah 1:4, 9
Deuteronomy 28:58–60
Isaiah 40:18–26
Isaiah 46:1–5

Study Questions

1. In what areas of my life am I prone to overconfidence (1 Samuel 5:1–2)? How do I live independently of God? Am I truly convinced that I can do *nothing* of eternal significance apart from Christ (John 15:5)? What steps can I take this week to humble myself before God and rely on Him? Will I ask someone to hold me accountable in my spiritual quest to depend upon Jesus?
2. How can I go about rekindling my fear of God and respect for His holiness (1 Samuel 5:3–5)? Where have I crossed the line and introduced presumption and carelessness into how I approach God? Do I exhibit respect for God when I worship Him with His people? What practical ways do I honor God for who He is in church and in my personal life?
3. Do I take God's power seriously (1 Samuel 5:3–5)? How has God shown His power in my life? In what ways have these experiences changed the way I view God or respond to Him? Have I stopped to recognize that God doesn't need my support to carry Him? If any carrying is to be done, God will carry me (see Isaiah 46:1–4). Am I daily acknowledging God's power and my powerlessness?
4. How often do I reflect upon the fact that God could take my life in a millisecond (1 Samuel 5:3–5)? Have I made the mistake of assuming that I am guaranteed a lengthy life? Read James 5:19–20 and 1 John 5:16–17. What do these passages teach about premature death for believers? How can I avoid God concluding my life and ministry before its time?
5. When have I experienced the "hand of the Lord" in discipline (1 Samuel 5:6–12)? What did God's judgment look like? How did I respond to His discipline? Has my life changed since God mercifully intervened? Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34. How did the Corinthians abuse the Lord's Supper in the context of worship? What sin(s) were they guilty of? How did God respond (see 11:30)? What can I learn from this account?

Notes

- ¹ See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don't_Mess_with_Texas; accessed 31 October 2011.
- ² Woodhouse writes, “First Samuel 5:1 begins, literally, “And the Philistines . . .” The Hebrew syntax both signals a new episode and emphasizes the new subject.” John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*. Preaching the Word series (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 560 n. 1.
- ³ David Frank Payne, *I & II Samuel*. The Daily Bible study series (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 30–31.
- ⁴ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*. New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 97.
- ⁵ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 105.
- ⁶ Sailhamer writes: “The text does not state their [the Philistines’] reasons for doing this, though it appears to have been there as a trophy of sorts. It is also possible that they were expecting a blessing from it.” John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 221.
- ⁷ Another view is that the Philistines were honoring Yahweh as if He had abandoned His own people to acknowledge the power and superiority of their gods. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1983), 49.
- ⁸ Stephen J. Andrews and Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*. Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), Electronic ed.
- ⁹ Previous scholars associated the Hebrew term *dag* with “fish.” But the better understanding is to make a connection between the Hebrew word *dagan* and “grain.” Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 17.
- ¹⁰ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 105 suggests that Dagon was probably the highest of the Philistine gods (Judg 16:23; 1 Chron 10:10). Gordon notes that in Ugaritic texts Dagon is described as the father of Baal who appeared throughout the OT as the enemy of Yahweh. Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*. Library of Biblical Interpretation series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 98.
- ¹¹ Michael Eaton, *1 Samuel*. Preaching Through The Bible (Kent: Sovereign World, 1995), 28.
- ¹² See my previous sermon “Gone with the Glory” (1 Samuel 4:1b–22).
- ¹³ Throughout this text the ark is called “the ark of God” (1 Sam 5:7–11), but here it is called “the ark of the Lord.” This is likely a significant. See David Toshio Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*. New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 205.
- ¹⁴ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 97.
- ¹⁵ See Isaiah 46:7: “They lift it [Babylonian idols] upon the shoulder *and* carry it; they set it in its place and it stands *there*. It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; it cannot deliver him from his distress.”
- ¹⁶ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 106.
- ¹⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel*. Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000 [1988]), 47.
- ¹⁸ Eaton, *1 Samuel*, 28–29.
- ¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 36.
- ²⁰ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 47.
- ²¹ James E. Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*. College Press, NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, 2000), 93.
- ²² The same Hebrew verb *karath* is used in both passages. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 97–98 notes that this treatment suggests a military execution (1 Sam 17:51; 31:9; 2 Sam 4:12).
- ²³ Andrews and Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*.
- ²⁴ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 106.
- ²⁵ Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 93.
- ²⁶ The custom of 1 Sam 5:5 is mentioned again in Zeph 1:9.
- ²⁷ Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, 206.
- ²⁸ Gary D. Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David* (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2008), 77.
- ²⁹ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 47.
- ³⁰ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 48.
- ³¹ Andrews and Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*.
- ³² Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 82.
- ³³ See esp. Patrick D. Miller, Jr. and J. J. M. Roberts. *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the “Ark Narrative” of 1 Samuel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977). There are several parallels between 1 Sam 5 and the record of God sending plagues on the Egyptians (Exod 7–12). The first use of “the hand of the Lord” is Exod 9:3.
- ³⁴ Tumors were one of the curses that would be inflicted on the Israelites if they disobeyed God (Deut 28:58–60).
- ³⁵ The Hebrew word *mehumah* that is most commonly translated “panic” (NET, ESV, HCSB, NIV, NRSV, NLT) or

“confusion” (NASB) or even “destruction” (KJV, NKJV) typically describes the terror that God brought on the enemies of Israel in war, leading to destruction (see Deut 7:23; 28:20; 1 Sam 14:20; Isa 22:5; Ezek 7:7).

³⁶ Alter, *The David Story*, 18; Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 631. Baldwin notes that this plague is known to kill over half the people who contract it. Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*. Tyndale Old Testament commentary series (Leicester; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 74. The disease is usually transmitted by the bite of a flea from small rodents, such as rats, squirrels, or mice (6:5). It is characterized by chills, fever, nausea, and the formation of mountains or “buboes” in the region of the lymph nodes, armpits, and groin. If uncontrolled, the plague can have a devastating affect on the infected area. More than a fourth of the world’s population died as a result of this plague during the Middle Ages. As recently as 1910, over 60,000 deaths were attributed to this disease during an epidemic in China.

³⁷ Lit. a “panic of death.”

³⁸ Revised and adapted from Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Hands of Dagon and the Hand of God” (1 Sam 5:1–7:17): www.bible.org/seriespage/hands-dagon-and-hand-god-1-samuel-51-717; accessed 1 October 2011.

³⁹ Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 96.

⁴⁰ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 52.

⁴¹ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 82.

⁴² Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 46.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 35.

⁴⁴ Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, 202.