

This Is The Plague That The Lord Has Made

1 Samuel 5-6 June 28, 2026

On July 14, 1518, a woman walked out onto the cobbled street outside her home in Strasbourg and began dancing.¹ She danced until the dark of night, where she collapsed in exhaustion. The next morning she awoke and began dancing again. People came to watch the strange spectacle as she danced day after day. But then something much stranger happened: Others joined her. Within days there were *thirty* people dancing uncontrollably and unable to stop.

A month later, as many as 400 people were afflicted with what is known as “the dancing plague.”² It seems ridiculous, but it is very well documented by physicians’ notes, cathedral sermons, local and regional chronicles, and Strasbourg’s city council records.

The plague turned fatal. Constant dancing led to heart attacks, strokes,³ and wounds that filled shoes with blood. The death toll was as high as 15 people per day. Still, the dancing continued.

Believe it or not, this was *not* an isolated event. Between 1374 and 1518 there were *ten* recorded outbreaks in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland.

In Strasbourg, the popular opinion was people had been cursed by St. Vitus, patron of epileptics and dancers. Eventually the dancers were taken in wagons to a town thirty miles away where there was a shrine to St. Vitus. There, they were told to dance before the shrine and pray for absolution.

In our text this morning, we have the record of a bizarre plague. On one level it is humorous as we see the bumbling Philistines unable to withstand the awesome power of God. They had crushed Israel’s armies but now an inanimate box shows itself to be greater than their armies, greater than their kings, greater than their diviners, and greater than their god. We watch Yahweh conquer city after city with no need for sword or shield. The Philistines are forced to acknowledge the unmatched power and sovereignty of the God of Israel.

It’s a *great* story. But there’s more than humor here. This is a story about God’s *holiness* and how - though merciful - He is not happy when *anyone* defies His commands or ignores His precepts.

1 Samuel 5:1-5 - ¹ After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, ² brought it into the temple of Dagon, and placed it next to his statue. ³ When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. ⁴ But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, Dagon’s head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon’s torso remained. ⁵ That is why, still

¹ <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/the-dancing-plague-of-1518/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dancing_plague_of_1518

³ <https://www.history.com/articles/what-was-the-dancing-plague-of-1518>

today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

The Philistines bring the ark into the temple of Dagon as a prisoner of war. It was widely believed that if you captured an enemy's god, they were completely conquered.⁴

Dagon worship actually stretches back to the 18th century B.C. and persisted all the way until the 1st century B.C.⁵ In some pagan writings, he was depicted as Baal's father. He was one of Philistia's national deities.

While in Dagon's temple, Yahweh defeats him, *twice*. First, Dagon bows in worship, then he's broken apart. It is reminiscent of the two-fold victory the *Philistines* had just won over Israel.⁶

Do you know what this shows us? Yahweh's sovereignty extends *even into Dagon's temple*.⁷ There is no place where God is not in charge. God was sending a *clear* message to the Philistines: Your god did not help you beat Israel. Yahweh *allowed* them to win. To prove it, Yahweh first shows Dagon as subservient, then the next day as slain. His head and hands are off - Dagon is *dead*.

The sad fact is that the Philistines continued to worship a dead god. Did you notice verse 3? They returned Dagon to his place. He was unable to keep himself on his pedestal, let alone win a battle.

What are you trusting your future to? Not just your afterlife, but your life right now? What is on the pedestal? If it is not the Rock of Christ, remember all other ground is sinking sand. If it's your wealth or your talent or your work ethic or your good deeds, remember what we read in Jeremiah 16:

Jeremiah 16:20 - ²⁰ Can one make gods for himself? But they are not gods.

The Philistines' god is powerless. Silent. But they learn the wrong lesson. Just prop him back up and don't step on the threshold. They should've listened to what the *living* God was revealing, because the next act was not against a statue of stone, but against them.

1 Samuel 5:6-12 - ⁶ The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors. ⁷ When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon." ⁸ So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, "What should we do with the ark of Israel's God?" "The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath," they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God. ⁹ After they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors. ¹⁰ The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got

⁴ David Toshio Tsumura *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: The First Book of Samuel*

⁵ *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Tsumura

⁶ Ralph Klein *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 10: 1 Samuel*

⁷ Tsumura

there, the Ekronites cried out, “They’ve moved the ark of Israel’s God to us to kill us and our people!”¹¹ The Ekronites called all the Philistine rulers together. They said, “Send the ark of Israel’s God away. Let it return to its place so it won’t kill us and our people!” For the fear of death pervaded the city; God’s hand was oppressing them.¹² Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

Dagon hands broke off before the ark. Meanwhile, God’s hand was *heavy* against these cities. The Bible explains that our God is a *hands on* God. His hand can be upon you for strength, for comfort, to empower you for service. Or it can be heavy in judgment against those who reject Him.

Based off the Hebrew words used, many scholars believe the Lord may have afflicted them with the bubonic plague.⁸ It doesn’t *have* to be a normal plague, but the descriptions fit the bill.

No one knew what to do. So they start shuttling the ark around, hoping the problem will go away.

Strasbourg’s city leaders didn’t know what to do either. At one point, they constructed stages, brought in musicians to play for the dancers. They even had strong townsfolk stay near the dancers and, whenever they collapsed, they stood them back up. The physicians in the city believed the only treatment would be to dance themselves free of it. Naturally, this only made things worse.

The Philistines all understood that *Yahweh* was attacking them. They said, “*His* hand is strongly against us *and our god Dagon.*” But, rather than repent, rather than go in humility to Israel for help, they just send the ark to the next town and hope things will turn out better. But not only did things *not* get better, they kept getting worse. Finally, the whole nation is *crying out*. The term used here is an intense one, speaking of people in anguish and at their breaking point.⁹

It would’ve been hard for them to repent, but they *could* do it. Consider Nineveh in the book of Jonah. Notice how they *are* somewhat familiar with the Exodus story. But they don’t stop to say, “Ok, what does this awesome and powerful God *actually* want?” Had they asked that question, maybe they could’ve found an Israelite neighbor who would explain Deuteronomy 28 to them. Where God said to Israel, “If you don’t obey Me and *carefully* follow all My commands and statutes, I’m going to afflict you with things like madness and tumors. Or you can be in covenant with Me.”

Now, *we’re* not Philistines. We’re also not Jews. We’re not under the Law of Moses and are not subject to its curses. *But* God *expects* us to carefully follow His commands and precepts. That’s what it means to build our house upon the Rock. We hear God’s words and act on them.¹⁰

1 Samuel 6:1-9 - ¹ When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory for seven months, ² the Philistines summoned the priests and the diviners and pleaded, “What should we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we can send it back to its place.” ³ They replied,

⁸ Ronald Youngblood *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel*

⁹ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

¹⁰ Matthew 7:24-27

“If you send the ark of Israel’s God away, do not send it without an offering. Send back a guilt offering to him, and you will be healed. Then the reason his hand hasn’t been removed from you will be revealed.” ⁴ They asked, **“What guilt offering should we send back to him?”** And they answered, **“Five gold tumors and five gold mice corresponding to the number of Philistine rulers, since there was one plague for both you and your rulers.”** ⁵ **Make images of your tumors and of your mice that are destroying the land. Give glory to Israel’s God, and perhaps he will stop oppressing you, your gods, and your land.** ⁶ **Why harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened theirs? When he afflicted them, didn’t they send Israel away, and Israel left?** ⁷ **“Now then, prepare one new cart and two milk cows that have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up.** ⁸ **Take the ark of the LORD, place it on the cart, and put the gold objects that you’re sending him as a guilt offering in a box beside the ark. Send it off and let it go its way.** ⁹ **Then watch: If it goes up the road to its homeland toward Beth-shemesh, it is the LORD who has made this terrible trouble for us. However, if it doesn’t, we will know that it was not his hand that punished us—it was just something that happened to us by chance.”**

The physicians in Strasbourg rejected the idea that the dancing plague was caused by supernatural judgment. But, in the end, the leadership of the city decided to bring the dancers up to the shrine of St. Vitus where they would all be wearing red shoes which had been sprinkled with holy water.

The Philistines’ golden tumor idea is strange, but on one level they had better sense than Israel did at the time. Sending the ark back is, politically speaking, admitting defeat.¹¹ And the Philistines say, “We should put together a *guilt* offering.” They recognized they were guilty before Yahweh. *But* they didn’t *fully* believe. They were still holding out hope that this was all just bad luck. And when trying to get right with God, they didn’t bother to consult Him or His revelation. They make a guilt offering that seems good to them. It’s like what Cain did in Genesis 4.

If you think you’re going to make it into heaven by being a “good person,” the Bible is clear: Your offering is not sufficient. You may even *be* a good person in comparison to the rest of us sinners here on earth, but it is not enough because it isn’t what God requires.

Instead of putting a pile of gold carvings together, they should’ve paid attention to what was said in verse 5: “Give glory to Israel’s God.” The word used for glory is one that has been all over these opening chapters of Samuel: *Heavy*. In other words, the Philistines showed contempt for God’s weight - His holiness. And now they should *acknowledge* His holiness and respond accordingly.¹²

1 Samuel 6:10-18 - ¹⁰ The men did this: They took two milk cows, hitched them to the cart, and confined their calves in the pen. ¹¹ Then they put the ark of the LORD on the cart, along with the box containing the gold mice and the images of their tumors. ¹² The cows went straight up the road to Beth-shemesh. They stayed on that one highway, lowing as they went; they never strayed to the right or to the left. The Philistine rulers were walking behind

¹¹ Tsumura

¹² Andy Stirrup *Why Has Yahweh Defeated Us Today Before The Philistines? The Question Of The Ark Narrative*

them to the territory of Beth-shemesh. ¹³ The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. ¹⁶ When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day. ¹⁷ As a guilt offering to the LORD, the Philistines had sent back one gold tumor for each city: Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron. ¹⁸ The number of gold mice also corresponded to the number of Philistine cities of the five rulers, the fortified cities and the outlying villages. The large rock, on which the ark of the LORD was placed is still in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh today.

The test the Philistines set up was designed to fail. If this *wasn't* God's hand, there's no way the ark would've made it back to Israel. The cows had never been yoked. They weren't trained to pull a cart. They're milk cows, with calves that need feeding. The lowing shows they're heavy with milk and maternal instincts, yet they walk *straight* toward Israel for *ten* miles.¹³ This is an act of God.

Beth-shemesh was a city allocated to the descendants of Aaron.¹⁴ Now imagine: You're in your field, suddenly five Philistine kings are standing there with the ark of the covenant. And they just hang out while you offer the cows up on an altar. I wonder how much conversation they had. What a moment! But, sadly, God's people have a knack of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

1 Samuel 6:19-7:1 - ¹⁹ God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. ²⁰ The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?" ²¹ They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and get it." ^{7v1} So the people of Kiriath-jearim came for the ark of the LORD and took it to Abinadab's house on the hill. They consecrated his son Eleazar to take care of it.

The men of Beth-shemesh *knew* better than to do this. But, as we've seen again and again in this period of Israel's history, people weren't worried about *carefully* following the Lord. They did what was right in their own eyes. Look how these priests acted. First, they sacrificed the *female* cows. Only male cows were allowed to be used in a burnt offering.¹⁵ Second, they look into the ark. Big no-no. You know, archaeologists have found Beth-shemesh and studied it. One source writes: "*The material culture at the site is indistinguishable from their Philistine neighbor[s].*"¹⁶ And we know from the next couple of verses that God's people were worshiping foreign gods.

¹³ James Smith *The Books Of History*

¹⁴ Joshua 21:13-16

¹⁵ Bergen

¹⁶ Tsumura

When God judges them for their sin, they don't repent. They act *just like* the Philistines.

Your version may say the Lord struck down 70 persons or 50,070 persons. What's the deal? There are manuscript differences, but also linguists say that the terms used are unusual. Here's something interesting: A possible translation is "one fifth of the clan."¹⁷ When an Israelite sinned against one of the "holy things," they were to make restitution by adding a fifth of the value to their offering.¹⁸

God is a God of love and grace, but whether it's Philistine or priest, *He expects people to obey Him*. To listen to Him. And when we don't the result is judgment. It may not be as dramatic as what we see here, but judgment *is* the result of human rebellion against God. Because He is holy.

They say, "Who can stand in the presence of this *holy* God?" Their implied answer is "no one." They want the ark carted away. Why not back to Shiloh? It was probably destroyed after the battle.¹⁹

These Levites have given up. "No one can stand before God and not be judged!" Except, look: *Eleazar can!* Why? Because he's *consecrated*. He's living a holy life. Meanwhile, the Levites *were* the ones called to carry the ark serve before the Lord's presence! But they had surrendered to ungodly behavior. Their relationship with God was broken and for 20 years they were fine with that.

By sheer coincidence, June 28 is Saint Vitus' Day for those who pay attention to such things. We don't care about that because St. Vitus didn't make anyone dance and he can't do anything for or against you. But the Lord can. And no matter *what* day it is, *today* is the day the Lord has made.

For the unbeliever, *today* is the day of salvation. You may not believe in God, but that makes no difference. He exists. He is King. If you reject Him, you will be judged with a judgment you cannot escape. The good news is even a Philistine's cry for mercy is heard by heaven. God wants to *redeem* you. And if you will call out to Him, He will hear you. Did you know God *still* has promises for the Philistines?²⁰ God wants to save but He waits for you to respond to His revelation.

For the Christians here today: You may not be a Philistine, but that doesn't mean God doesn't hold us to a standard. Are we living like Philistines in any area of our life? Some aspect of God's word or command or calling on our lives that we're not obeying? God is not pleased when we ignore Him or do our own thing. It will bring consequences in our lives. So, if you're a Christian and you know you're outside of some boundary God has given you - you're sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you're giving in to greed, you're holding onto jealousy or bitterness, you're loving the things of this world, you're stuck in selfishness - then *stop* and recognize that you are called to holy consecration. You're called to live and serve in God's presence! Remember: God is a hands on God. And He will put His hand on us to burn away our dross and remove our impurities and restore us to closeness with Him²¹ if we will surrender to Him, give glory to Him, obey Him carefully.

¹⁷ Tsumura

¹⁸ Leviticus 5:16

¹⁹ See Jeremiah 7:12, Psalm 78:60

²⁰ Zechariah 9:7

²¹ Isaiah 1:25-26