

Part 7

Knowing the Power of God

1 Samuel 6

Someone somewhere once devised a little ditty, evidently designed to motivate Christian people to take their service for the Lord seriously. It went like this:

"He has no other hands than our hands; he has no other feet than our feet."

The point was that God works in this world *through us*. As we who have come to know and love God through Jesus Christ do good, as we speak truth, care for others, work for justice, oppose evil, God is at work.

Furthermore, is it not clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ will only reach the peoples of the world—not to mention the people of my neighborhood—if we who know and believe this gospel take it to them?

How will my friends and family ever hear the news of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life if I do not tell them? How will the people of our world learn of the Savior every human being needs if Christian people (like us!) do not tell them? These thoughts were summed up in the catchy words, "He has no other hands than our hands; he has no other feet than our feet."

However, 1 Samuel 6 will teach us that this way of thinking, and the jingle that sums it up, is missing something very important.

The circumstances of the story we are about to hear are summed up in the first sentence of the chapter:

"The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months" (v. 1).

Those words put in a nutshell the very great calamity that had occurred for the people of Israel. In the history of Israel this was a monumental crisis. We have seen in the preceding two chapters (especially 1 Samuel 4:8, and we will see it again in chapter 6) references and allusions to the great defining experience of Israel—namely, the exodus from Egypt. While it would be an exaggeration to regard the experience of these days as of equal importance to the exodus, we do need to appreciate that it was another time that would change Israel forever.

The brief summing up of the crisis is that *the ark* was in the land of *the Philistines*. The significance of this can hardly be overstated.

The ark represented the covenant, that arrangement by which God was to be Israel's God, and Israel was to be God's people (see Exodus 19:4-6; 29:45, 46; Leviticus 11:45; 26:12).

Israel knew God, for God had made himself known to them by his name Yahweh.

Now "the ark of Yahweh was in the country of the Philistines." The Philistines were, at this time, Israel's archenemy.

A vital aspect of the covenant was that Yahweh would deliver Israel from her enemies (for example, Leviticus 26:7; Deuteronomy 23:14; 28:7).

The first words engraved on the stone tablets carried in the ark were "I am Yahweh your God, who *brought you out of the land of Egypt*, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2).

Although there had been difficulties in Israel's subsequent experience, never before had Israel lost possession of the ark. They had suffered setbacks from enemies, but no enemy had ever taken the ark of the covenant of Yahweh. "The ark of Yahweh was in the country of *the Philistines*." What did this mean for Israel?

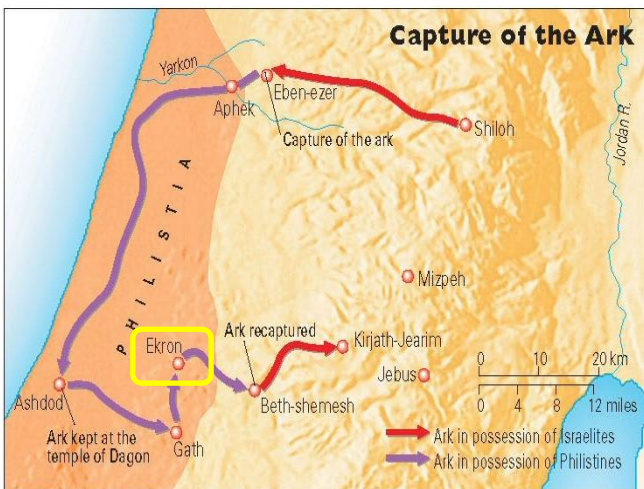
Before we learn what it meant for Israel, we have been hearing what it meant for the Philistines. In short, abject terror, as we saw in chapter 5. This lasted, we are told in 6:1, for seven months. First Samuel 6 is the account of how those seven months came to an end and where that left Israel.

Philistine Perplexity (vv. 2-9)

The Philistines had a problem. They had deduced that the plagues that came upon them were connected with the Israelite ark. Eventually they wanted to be rid of the wretched thing. They instructed their rulers to "return [it] to its own place" (1 Samuel 5:11), but no one seemed to know how to go about that without bringing more troubles. Clearly acknowledging that their problem was beyond the capacity of their "lords," advice was sought from their "priests and... diviners" (6:2).

Their Question (v. 2)

And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." (v. 2)



The location is still Ekron. "The Philistines" took the initiative again, the "lords" (5:11) having failed to solve the problem. But they simply did not know what to do. The lords had sent the ark from place to place in their own land, from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron. That had been a disaster. They were now very keen to "send it to its place," by which they presumably meant the land of Israel (although I doubt they had any clear idea what they meant). "With what shall we send it...?" suggests they were aware that simply dumping the ark up in the hills might not be the wisest course of action. So they asked the people they hoped might know about this sort of thing, the priests and diviners.

Their Answer (v. 3)

Here is the answer they were given:

They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." (v. 3)

It is fairly clear that the priests and diviners had no sure answer. They simply advised what should be done *if* it was decided to send the ark away.

However, in Biblical narratives we often hear words spoken that are more significant than the speakers themselves could have known. This is the case here. The whole account of the sending of the ark out of the land of the Philistines and back to the land of Israel contains numerous reminders of the story of the exodus from Egypt. In these words of the Philistine advisers there are four surprising echoes of the exodus!

First, the verb "send away" itself is the word used many times for Pharaoh's dismissal of Israel from Egypt. It is the word Moses used when he famously said "Let my people go" (Exodus 5:1). The ark's departure from the country of the Philistines would in some sense be like the departure of Israel from Egypt.

Second, the Israelites were not to leave Egypt "empty." They were to take gold and silver jewelry from the Egyptians with them (Exodus 3:21, 22; 11:2, 3). Just so, the advisers say (unaware, no doubt, of the analogy they were helping to develop), the ark must not be sent away "empty." They would shortly advise that gold objects from the Philistines should go with it.

Third, the most surprising piece of advice is that the Philistines should return to the God of Israel a "guilt offering," or as this Hebrew term might be better translated, "reparation offering."

While we ought not to imagine that the Philistine clergy knew the Law of Moses, it is striking to hear from them an important term in the Law given to Israel after the exodus (see Leviticus 5:14-6:7). In the book of Leviticus the "guilt/reparation offering" contributes to the complex of symbols representing the seriousness of human sin in the face of the holiness of God. This particular offering "presents a commercial picture of sin. Sin is a debt which man incurs against God. The debt is paid through the offered animal." While we need not try to guess what precisely was in the mind of the Philistine advisers, we can be confident that the narrator and informed readers of this story will see in the term "guilt/ reparation offering" an implicit (possibly unconscious!) acknowledgment by the Philistines that they had incurred a debt against the God of Israel that must be repaid.

The fourth allusion to the exodus in the advice of the Philistine experts is the expectation that when it is all over they will know something about God. A great theme in the Bible's account of the exodus is that by the mighty display of the power of God, the Israelites, the Egyptians, and indeed all the earth would "know" something about the God who did this. In this case the Philistine professionals anticipated that if their afflictions were healed, then they would know that it had been the hand of the Lord against them because of the guilt they had incurred.

Their Uncertainty (vv. 4-9)

Do not be deceived by the surprising insights the Philistines appeared to display. They were uncertain and confused, ready to give anything a try. The fact that they happened to speak more truly than they knew is further evidence of the hand of the Lord in this whole situation. Their confused uncertainty soon became evident.

Tumors and Mice (vv. 4, 5)

The bit about a guilt/reparation offering caught the attention of the Philistine questioners:

"And they said, 'What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?'" (v. 4a).

How do you repay a debt you cannot assess to a God you do not know?

They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land." (vv. 4b, 5)

This is very strange! As in the previous chapter, it is difficult to imagine the narrator keeping a straight face as he tells the story! The advice of the Philistine clergy was to make five little golden models of their tumors. Perhaps one of the lords of the Philistines could pose for the craftsman!

The five golden mice are a surprise but indicate that the afflictions on the Philistines were more extensive than reported in the previous chapter. There was also a plague of mice that "ravaged" the land." The making of five models of the mice out of gold is almost as comical as the five golden tumors.

The fact that they were to be of gold, however, reminds us again of the Israelites who "plundered the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:35, 36) when they were sent away carrying Egyptian gold.

The call to give glory to the God of Israel is yet another echo of the exodus, as well as of more recent events. God had said, "I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host" (Exodus 14:4). In this event the God of Israel will "get glory" from the Philistines. We also remember that in Israel the question had been asked, "Where is the glory?" and it had been said, "The glory has departed from Israel" (1

Samuel 4:21, 22). That may be so, but the "glory" or "weight" of the God of Israel was being recognized by the Philistines. They longed for that which was mourned in Israel—namely, that the "weight" would depart from them.

The hand of the God of Israel was heavy on "you and your gods and your land." This supports the suggestion that only some of the troubles experienced by the Philistines were reported in chapter 5. Certainly if we take the words of the clergy literally here, something had happened to other gods, in addition to Dagon.

It is important to notice the word "perhaps." These advisers were able to promise nothing. They did not *know* what to do. All they could offer was "perhaps."

Exodus Analogy (v. 6)

"Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?" (v. 6)

The allusions we have seen to the exodus story were no doubt largely unconscious, but the Philistines knew of the exodus (slightly confused though their understanding may have been; see 1 Samuel 4:8) and saw their situation as analogous to that of the Egyptians.

The play on the ideas of "glory" and "weight" expressed in one Hebrew word (*kabod*) continues. Literally verse 6 says, "Why should you *make heavy* your heart as the Egyptians and Pharaoh *made heavy* their heart?" The heavy or hard heart describes defiance toward God, like that of Pharaoh, and now of the Philistines. Such defiance brings God's *heavy* hand of judgment, as the Egyptians learned (see Exodus 3:19, 20; 6:1; 7:4, 5; 9:3, 15; 13:3, 9, 14; 15:6, 12), and as the Philistines had now experienced (1 Samuel 5:6, 7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9). The only answer for the Egyptians was to "send away" the Israelites (1 Samuel 6:6). So, by implication, the Philistines must "send away" the ark (v. 3).

Cautious Instructions (vv. 7-9)

For all that, the Philistines were not sure. They did not *know* that it was the God of Israel behind their troubles. So the priests and diviners devised very cautious instructions, attempting to keep their options open.

"Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Bethshemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence." (vv. 7-9)

All precautions were to be taken. A new cart would avoid any offense from previous uses to which a cart may have been put. The two milk cows, however, were part of an ingenious test. It might remind us of Elijah's later test on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) (water covered altar). A situation was devised in which the probability was so strongly stacked in one direction that only the power of God could bring about a different outcome.

The cows had not been yoked before—they would be unlikely to cooperate.

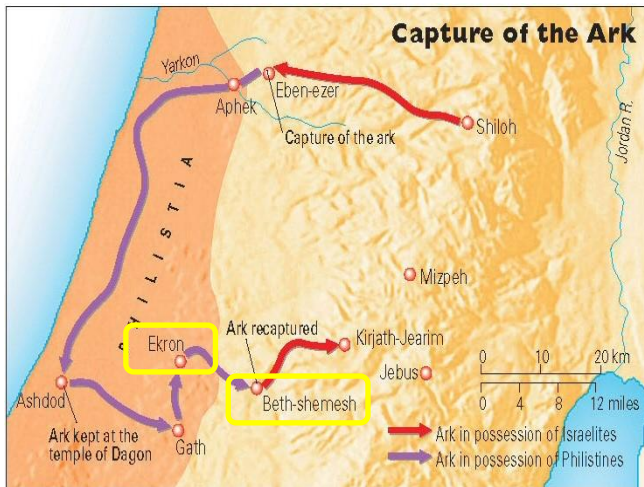
Furthermore they were feeding calves, which were to be penned up; the cows would not naturally go away from them.

The cows were then to be let go, harnessed to the cart carrying the ark and the gold objects.

If in these unlikely circumstances the cows pulled the cart to its destination, then the Philistines could be sure that their guesses were right—their troubles had indeed been inflicted by the God of Israel.

But if the cows did something more natural, then they could safely conclude that it had all been a horrible coincidence.

Bethshemesh was located about seven miles east of Ekron in the foothills of the central mountain range, in the territory of Judah. It was probably chosen as the nearest Israelite settlement to which the ark could be sent. It also happened to be a Levitical city, the point of which will become clear shortly (Joshua 21:16).



The New Exodus (vv. 10-18)

The advice of the priests and diviners was followed to the letter (and a bit beyond, as we will see), and the outcome was astonishing.

The Highway for Our God (vv. 10-12)

The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. And they put the ark of the LORD on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. And the cows went straight in the direction of Bethshemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the

lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Bethshemesh. (vv. 10-12)

The direct, straight route taken by the cows is emphasized. It was as though they were on a highway! Mind you, the cows "lowing as they went" suggests they were being driven against their natural inclinations by a power beyond them, as, of course, they were.

Many years later Isaiah looked forward to the day when God would save his people from the exile and bring them back home in a new exodus. His language would be reminiscent of this scene:

*... prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together.... (Isaiah 40:3-5)*

That day the road from Ekron to Bethshemesh became "a highway for our God." It was like the exodus again, except that rather than the people of Israel coming up out of Egypt, the ark of the Lord was coming up from the land of the Philistines.

The lords of the Philistines watched and no doubt wondered.

The Arrival (vv. 13-15)

Suddenly our perspective shifts, and we join the workers in the fields of Bethshemesh. For them seven months had passed since the dreadful defeat of the Israelites at Aphek. Clearly life went on for these people, but we know nothing of their experiences over the seven months since the Philistines had taken the ark.

It was a day they would never forget. They probably heard the strange, constant lowing of two cows before they saw anything. When they lifted their eyes, they saw the bizarre noisy procession making its way up the hill toward them from the Philistine land:

Now the people of Bethshemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. (v. 13)

This was the reversal of Ichabod. The captured ark was returning. Did that mean the glory too? The joyful reaction of the people of Bethshemesh suggests they may have thought so.

The cart apparently (and actually!) guided by an unseen hand came nearer:

"The cart came into the field of Joshua of Bethshemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there" (v. 14a).

We know nothing else about this Joshua, but his name is enough to catch our attention.

The cart carrying the ark that had moved so directly up to Bethshemesh stopped there in Joshua's field, beside a great stone.

The implication was apparently obvious to those people of Bethshemesh:

"And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD" (v. 14b).

In Israel's Law the burnt offering was "the commonest of all the Old Testament sacrifices." We cannot tell the thoughts and motivations of those who offered this sacrifice, but like the "guilt offering" of the Philistines, this offering was at least an implicit acknowledgment of Israel's guilt before the Lord of the ark.

The response of the people in joy (v. 13) and burnt offering (v. 14) were the first things the narrator tells us. He then goes back for a moment to tell us about the taking down of the ark (presumably before the cart was chopped up and burnt!):

And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. (v. 15a)

The Levites were the appropriate people to handle the ark (Numbers 3:31; Deuteronomy 10:8; 31:9, 25; Joshua 3:3; 8:33). Their presence is no surprise as Bethshemesh was (as we have noted) a Levitical city.

It seems that so far at least all was well. The people responded gladly, but with humble reverence at the unexpected arrival of the ark of the Lord among them. This response is elaborated:

"And the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD" (v. 15b).

Further burnt offerings and also sacrifices were made "on that day." There was a clear recognition that the occasion was of very great importance.

The Witnesses (vv. 16-18)

The whole remarkable sequence of events had a number of witnesses. In verse 12 we heard that the lords of the Philistines followed the cart as far as the border of Bethshemesh. Astonished, no doubt,

they watched the cart make its remarkable way straight to Joshua's field. Then in verse 16 we see the lords of the Philistines still watching with wonder:

"And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron" (v. 16).

In verse 13, from a different vantage point (and with a different mood), the people of Bethshemesh saw it all.

To these eyewitnesses the narrator adds further "witnesses" to the remarkable events of this day in Bethshemesh:

These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. (vv. 17, 18a)

It sounds as though these golden objects were still around as the narrator wrote this account. His readers knew of them. The known golden articles testify that the Philistines followed the advice of the priests and diviners with regard to the golden tumors. There were five of them, one for each of the Philistine cities. With the mice, however, they went way beyond the suggested offering. Perhaps because the mice plague was more widespread, they decided to add a golden mouse for every city, town, and village. Better to be sure than sorry! However, the point is that the evidence for this great day was still there as this account was being written.

Furthermore:

"The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Bethshemesh" (v. 18b).

It is still there, the writer was telling his readers, for anyone to go and see where these great things happened.

The Problem With The Power Of God (vv. 19-21)

It would be nice if the story ended at verse 18. You might recall that we began looking at the story of the ark in chapter 4 by considering the problem of the power of God. We have seen that the Israelites could not presume on the power of God, and the Philistines could not defy the power of God. At the end of this extraordinary story we learn the sobering news that the power of God was no less terrifying at the end than it was at the beginning of this sequence of events.

The Disaster at Bethshemesh (v. 19)

And he struck some of the men of Bethshemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. (v. 19)

All the humor that has been part of this story and the mockery of the foolish Philistines stops at this point. There is nothing funny now. The return of the ark did not signal that God was less terrifying than he had ever been. If he was not to be mocked and ridiculed in the pagan land, set up beside the god Dagon, he was not to be taken lightly in Israel either.

It seems that some of the men of Bethshemesh looked at the ark in some improper way. This cannot mean simply that they saw it. Everyone saw it. But some gazed as they should not have gazed. The description is no clearer than that. But the consequence was terrible. Seventy died.

Furthermore the last words of verse 19 make clear that the problem Israel had seven months earlier had not been solved. A "great blow" is the same expression in Hebrew as "great slaughter" in 1 Samuel 4:10. The numbers, of course, are different, but the power of God was still a terrible threat to the Israelite people. Precisely why will not be made clear until chapter 7.

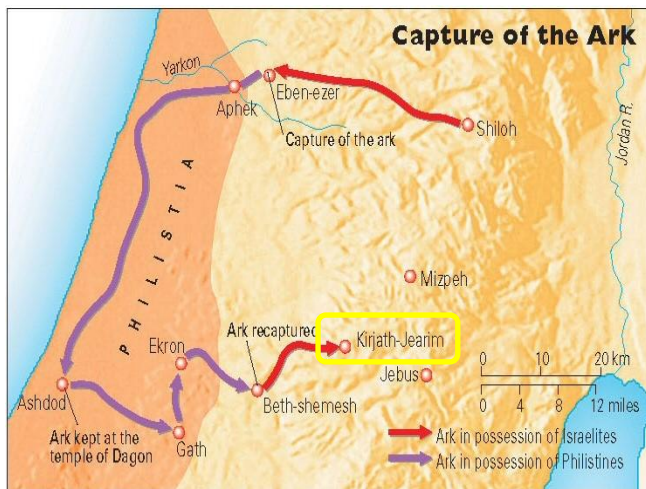
The Question at Bethshemesh (v. 20)

At the beginning of the chapter the Philistines had their perplexed question ("What shall we do with the ark of the LORD?"). At the end of the chapter the people of Bethshemesh had a similar question about God himself:

"Then the men of Bethshemesh said, 'Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?'" (v. 20).

They found themselves no more comfortable with the God of the ark than did the Philistines. Hannah had said in her prayer, "There is none holy like the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:2). The people of Bethshemesh learned from experience, as the Israelites had earlier, that this can be a very disconcerting truth.

No Answer at Bethshemesh (v. 21)



This chapter concludes:

So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you." (v. 21)

Kiriath-jearim was a town not far from Bethshemesh, further to the northeast, and therefore both away from the Philistines and toward Shiloh, from whence the ark had been taken.

These geographical facts may account for the appeal being directed there. The impression is given that the messengers from Bethshemesh did not tell the whole

story of what had happened and why they were so keen for the ark to be taken away from them.

What then happened to the ark and what then happened in Israel is the story that will be taken up in chapter 7.

What are we to make of this story of the ark of the covenant of the Lord? There is so much that is strange (we might be tempted even to say weird!) about the events that have been recounted in these three chapters of 1 Samuel. In due course we will reflect on the important message of these chapters in the unfolding story of the book of 1 Samuel. At this point, however, I would like to think about the place of this story in the Bible as a whole.

We have already heard numerous echoes of the exodus story. Just as the people of Israel went down into Egypt and became slaves, so the ark was taken captive into the land of the Philistines. Just as the Israelites were liberated from their captors by the mighty hand of God, so the ark was brought out of Philistia by God's hand. Like the story of the exodus, this has been a story of bondage and liberation, humiliation and vindication, suffering and glory.

It is important to see that both of these stories are part of a bigger pattern still. This is the way of the God of Israel. Hannah saw it: "The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up... he brings low and he exalts" (1 Samuel 2:6, 7). Israel was to experience this again toward the end of the Old Testament period when the Babylonian exile would be followed by the return from exile. Suffering was followed by glory.

This pattern came to its climactic expression in the person of Jesus:

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of

men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

Humiliation followed by glory.

This is the pattern of life for all those who come to belong to Jesus. "[T]he sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

The strange story of the ark of the covenant of the Lord in 1 Samuel 4-6 is part of the whole Bible message that the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the one whose power always and inevitably accomplishes his purpose. He does bring low, and he does exalt.

As we stand beside the lords of the Philistines, watching the ark making its way straight up to Bethshemesh, we should see that this God has the power to raise the dead, to turn humiliation to triumph and suffering to joy, to wipe away every tear. As we stand beside the people of Bethshemesh and see the ark coming up the hill, dragged by those protesting cattle, what do you think of "he has no other hands than our hands; he has no other feet than our feet"?

We should now hear that ditty for the nonsense that it is. One writer has described the sentiment in that jingle as "cowardly modernity that leads us to exhaustion and despair." He is right.

Some of us would do well to reflect on our plans, strategies, programs, goals, and targets to see whether our energetic activity has something of "cowardly modernity" about it, something that *does* assume "he has no other hands..." Is it possible that some of our exhaustion and despair, our frustrations and disappointments, our endless activism and busyness, our difficulty in finding contentment, our inability to relax might have something to do with our assumptions about the power of God and his pathetic dependence on our little hands and feet?

The truth is, we serve a God who is immeasurably powerful. The one who brought the ark up from the Philistines is the one who raised Jesus from the dead, and he will accomplish his purposes. His victory does not depend on me or on you any more than it depended on the people of Bethshemesh.

Trust him—but do not, whatever you do, defy him.