

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Philistines

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

January 28, 2024

Readings

1 Samuel 4:1-11 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹ And Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle, and encamped by Eben-ezer; and the Philistines encamped in Aphek. ² And the Philistines set themselves in array to meet Israel; and the battle extended; and Israel was stricken by the Philistines; and they smote in the battle array in the field about four thousand men. ³ And the people came to the camp, and the elders of Israel said, "Why has Jehovah stricken us today before the Philistines? Let us take to us from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of Jehovah, and let it come into our midst, and it shall save us from the palm of the hand of our enemies." ⁴ And the people sent to Shiloh, and carried from there the ark of the covenant of Jehovah of Armies, who sits upon the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

⁵ And it was, when the ark of the covenant of Jehovah came into the camp, that all Israel shouted with a great shout, and the earth made a noise. ⁶ And the Philistines heard the voice of the shout, and they said, "What is the voice of this great shout, in the camp of the Hebrews?" And they knew that the ark of Jehovah was come into the camp. ⁷ And the Philistines feared; for they said, "God is come into the camp." And they said, "Woe unto us! for there has not been such a thing yesterday and the day before." ⁸ Woe unto us! Who shall rescue us from the hand of these magnificent gods? These are they, the gods who smote the Egyptians with every smiting in the wilderness. ⁹ Strengthen yourselves, and be men, O you Philistines, lest you serve the Hebrews, as they have served you; and be men, and fight."

¹⁰ And the Philistines fought, and Israel was struck down, and they fled, a man to his tent; and there was a very great smiting; and there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. ¹¹ And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

1 Samuel 5:2-4 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

² And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it into the house of Dagon, and placed it beside Dagon. ³ And the Ashdodites got up early on the next day, and behold, Dagon was fallen on his face to the earth before the ark of Jehovah. And they took Dagon and returned him to his place. ⁴ And they got up early on the morning of the next day, and behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of Jehovah; and the head of Dagon and the two palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of him.

Isaiah 14:29-32 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

- 29 "Do not be glad, Philistia, every one of you,
That the rod of him that smites you is broken;
For from the root of the serpent shall come out a basilisk,
And his fruit will be a fiery flying serpent.
- 30 And the firstborn of the poor shall pasture,
And the needy shall lie down in safety;
I will cause your roots to die with famine,
And what is left of you he will kill.
- 31 Howl, O gate! Cry out, O city!
O Philistia, all of you is dissolved;
For from the north comes smoke,
And no one shall be alone in his congregations."
- 32 And what shall be answered to the messengers of the nation?
That Jehovah has founded Zion,
And that in her shall the afflicted of His people have confidence.

Matthew 5:19,20

¹⁹ [Jesus said,] "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of the heavens; but whoever does and teaches them, shall be called great in the kingdom of the heavens. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your justice exceeds the justice of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of the heavens."

Matthew 23:1-4

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind burdens, heavy and difficult to bear, and put them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger."

Doctrine of Faith 49-50

People Whose Faith Is Divorced from Charity Are Represented in the Word by the Philistines
There are two harmful forms of religion into which every church degenerates in the course of time: one that adulterates its goods, and one that falsifies its truths. The form of religion that adulterates the church's goods takes its origin from a love of ruling, and the other, the religion that falsifies the church's truths, takes its origin from a conceit in its own intelligence. The religion that takes its origin from a love of ruling is meant in the Word by Babylon. And the religion that takes its origin from a conceit in its own intelligence is meant in the Word by Philistia. [S]ince this religion, which is one of faith divorced from charity, continually endeavors to invade the church, therefore the Philistines remained in the land of Canaan and harassed the children of Israel again and again.

Introduction

- There are two main ways that religions get corrupted – that’s what the last reading said.
 - Two ways that a religion goes from being something good and useful to being something twisted and harmful that has lost everything that made it worthwhile.
- The passage said that these two forms of messed up religion are represented in the Lord’s Word by Babylon and Philistia.
 - We’ll talk about Babylon at some later date but today we’re going to continue our series on knowing our spiritual enemies by focussing on the Philistines.

Outline

- First, we’ll go through some background on the Philistines – who were they, what were they like, and what their spiritual significance is.
- Then, we’ll talk through the story we read in our lessons.
- Finally, we’ll talk about how to fight against the Philistines, drawing on a few other stories about the Philistines.

Background on the Philistines

- The Philistines lived in an area south-west of the land of Canaan, in the lowlands along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.
 - The Philistines being in the south-west means that they symbolize people who have light but lack warmth – who have knowledge but lack love.
- It’s worth making clear that the focus of this sermon is on the spiritual symbolism of the stories about the ancient people from that part of the world.
 - We are not talking about what is currently going on in that part of the world, except inasmuch as the problems that we will be talking about today are universal problems for every member of the human race and so, of course, are also at play in that part of the world today.
- Philistia was a collection of city states, each with their own ruler.
- They had a developed and sophisticated culture, with influences from Egyptian and Phoenician culture.
- Like many of the nations that we’ve already covered in the series, there is a time at the beginning of the story when the Philistines represent something good, then there is a long time of them being an enemy to the children of Israel, and then there is some promise in the prophets about how they could be restored and brought back to order be at peace with the children of Israel in worship of the Lord.
- When the children of Israel were on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, we read, “Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt” (Exodus 13:17).
 - There are two ways of looking at this:

- One is that we're not ready to take on the Philistines, early in our spiritual lives.
- The other is that the Philistines are an enemy that comes with the territory of getting a bit more established in our faith.
 - If we're feeling like we're starting to understand how religious life works, then we should expect attacks from the Philistines.
- The teachings of the New Church say that the Philistines symbolize "the knowledge of religious concepts" or, if you prefer older translations, the Philistines symbolize "knowledge of the cognitions of faith" (*Secrets of Heaven* 1197:3).
 - One New Church scholar, the Rev. Carl Theophilus Odhner, suggests the phrase "systematic theology" (*Correspondences of Canaan* p.97).
 - The Egyptians who were on the one side of them symbolize a more worldly knowledge.
 - And Tyre and Sidon who were on the other side of them, up the coast, symbolize the religious concepts themselves – like the beautiful wood and other raw materials that came from that area.
 - Philistia, which is in-between these two symbolizes those religious raw materials after they have been put in warehouses or manufactured into something – well-organized religious concepts, systematic theology.
- That can be a very good thing, which is why Abraham and Isaac spent a lot of time in Philistia, made covenants with the Philistines, and were blessed by the Lord in their time there.
- But when people who are knowledgeable in religious things start to believe that they are better than other people just because they know more, then the Philistines start to symbolize something corrupt and hellish.
 - It's sometimes called the pride or conceit of self-intelligence.
 - It's an arrogance and a contempt for anyone who knows less than us and a contempt for the Lord and anyone who believes that we need to actually live according to what the Lord teaches (see *Divine Providence* 340).
- *Secrets of Heaven* 1197:1, 3
 - The ancient church used the label of Philistine for all those who talked and talked about faith and about the idea that salvation is found in faith and yet completely failed to live a life of faith. For this reason, Philistines more than any others were also described as uncircumcised, meaning that they lacked charity.

Philistines in general symbolize the knowledge of religious concepts and in particular those who place faith and salvation in knowledge alone, which they turn into memorized information.
- Now let's turn to our story and see how this meaning shines through the details of the story.

The Philistines Capture the Ark

Why Having the Ark Didn't Save Them

- In the first sermon in this series on knowing our spiritual enemies we learned that, when the children of Israel fell into a particular evil, they were then attacked and punished by an enemy that represented that particular evil (*Divine Providence* 251:3).
 - We can see that in this story.
- The children of Israel were fighting with the Philistines and they had just lost four thousand men in one battle.
 - But then they realized what they should do: they would bring the ark of the covenant into battle with them and that would save them.
 - Even the Philistines were frightened.
 - But the Philistines strengthened themselves and fought against the children of Israel and killed thirty thousand of them!
- What was wrong?
 - Why didn't the ark of the covenant help them in battle, as it had at Jericho, for example?
 - They had the ark but they weren't following their side of the covenant with Jehovah.
 - They weren't obeying the commandments written on the tablets inside the ark.
 - They were worshipping other gods and when their priests, Hophni and Phinehas, were offering sacrifices to Jehovah, they weren't obeying Jehovah's rules.
- This is a picture of the evil that the Philistines represent: believing that just because we have the religious content, we will be saved.
 - Not thinking that we actually have to live according to what that religious content teaches.
 - We are not saved because we know stuff.
 - As *Secrets of Heaven* puts it, "Neither secular nor religious knowledge means anything to us in the other life – even if we have learned all the secrets that have ever been revealed – unless it permeates our life" (1197).

Imagine a Football Game

- We can see how silly the belief that we would be saved by our religious knowledge is if we imagine the idea in a different context like sports.
 - Let's imagine that I know the most that anyone has ever known about football – the minute details of all the rules, all the history of all the players and teams and games that have happened, and all the best offensive and defensive plays and strategies.
 - Let's say that I've got all of that information and then we go to play a game of football and I just stand there with all my knowledge and expect to win because of it.
 - You wouldn't even have to be that good to beat me.
 - You would just need to actually play the game.
 - Religious knowledge is the same way: it's only of any value if you're actually trying to play the game – if you're actually going to try to live according to those rules, and learn from that religious history about what to do and what not to do, and try to employ some of those strategies to shun evils.

Dagon Falls on His Face

- The Philistines rout the children of Israel and they take the ark of the covenant captive and triumphantly place it in the temple of their god, Dagon.
 - But they soon discover who actually has the power.
- Dagon was half-man, half-fish (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture 23:2, et al.*), kind of like a merman.
 - And you can almost picture it like one kid on another kid's shoulders in an adult trench coat, pretending to be an adult.
 - Fish represent knowledge and a man represents intelligence and it's like you're pretending that if you take some knowledge and some intelligence and whip it together you get a powerful god worth worshipping.
 - No, Dagon is just a made-up idol, a powerless chunk of metal or wood.
 - And the Philistines discover this when they come back to their temple the next day.
 - They find the idol of Dagon fallen on its face in front of the ark of Jehovah.
 - They stand it back up and then come back the next day and discover it fallen on its face in front of the ark, now with its head and hands broken off.
 - A bunch of religious knowledge does not have intelligence or power in and of itself.
- On top of their idol getting broken, the Philistines are also dealing with lots of plagues because of having the ark with them.
 - They pass the ark around to their various cities and each city that it goes to experiences the plagues.
 - And so the Philistines figure out a way to send the ark back to the children of Israel.
 - The Philistines have learned their lesson (at least in this story), but what about the children of Israel?

The Children of Israel Repent

- Samuel tells them what to do.
- 1 Samuel 7:3 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ³ And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, saying, "If with all your heart you return to Jehovah, remove the foreign gods from your midst, and the Ashtaroth, and prepare your heart for Jehovah, and serve Him alone; then He will rescue you from the hand of the Philistines."
- It's not complicated, but are they going to do it?
- 1 Samuel 7:4-6 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ⁴ And the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and served Jehovah alone. ⁵ And Samuel said, Bring together all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray for you unto Jehovah. ⁶ And they came together toward Mizpah, and drew water, and spilled it before Jehovah, and fasted in that day, and said there, "We have sinned against Jehovah." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel in Mizpah.
- Hooray! But then the Philistines gather to attack the children of Israel again and the children of Israel are understandably fearful.
 - But listen to how easily the Philistines are defeated:

- 1 Samuel 7:10 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ¹⁰ And it was, as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines approached to battle with Israel, that Jehovah thundered with a great voice on that day against the Philistines, and routed them; and they were stricken before Israel.
- The children of Israel hardly had to do anything and the Lord gave them victory over the Philistines.
 - Let's talk now about how we can have victory over the Philistines.

How to Fight the Philistines

- The Philistines are this powerful, persistent enemy that kills thousands of the children of Israel, including King Saul and his son Jonathan.
- But they are also often defeated quite easily when one or two people have the courage to take them on, with the Lord's help.
 - The giant Goliath fell before David and his sling.
 - Twenty Philistines fell before Jonathan and his armor bearer and then the children of Israel routed the Philistines.
 - Six hundred Philistines fell before the judge Shamgar.
 - And Samson killed thousands of Philistines all by himself.
- Here are two ideas to keep in mind while fighting Philistines:
 - 1) You don't need a sword.
 - 2) Don't let them cut your hair.
 - 3) Being right might be being a Philistine.

1) *You Don't Need a Sword*

- One place that we may encounter Philistinism is through other people.
 - Other people may try to convince us that faith alone saves and that our actions do not matter.
 - And they may be well-armed.
 - They may know more passages from the Bible and have better constructed arguments than we can come up with.
 - They may express disdain about the idea of being saved through the way that we live our lives.
- This is an interesting trait of the Philistines – they tend to attack in a very obvious way.
 - They're not typically a sneaky enemy.
 - They usually bring their big army and line up for battle.
 - It's an obvious frontal attack – an organized, well-put-together, sophisticated argument.
- We might feel like we need to arm ourselves with lots of weapons to face the Philistines.
 - But that's going to be hard because, at one point in the story, the Philistines have all of the blacksmiths so that the children of Israel can't make swords or spears.
 - The children of Israel had to go down to the Philistines to get their farm tools sharpened by them (1 Samuel 13:19-22).

- But that didn't actually matter because, more times than not, people defeated the Philistines without swords and shields.
 - David famously used a sling and a stone to knock down Goliath and then killed him with his own sword.
 - Shamgar used an ox goad and Samson used the jaw bone of a donkey.
 - As David said to Goliath,
 - 1 Samuel 17:45-47 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ⁴⁵ And David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of Jehovah of armies, the God of the battle arrays of Israel, whom you have disdained. ⁴⁶ This day Jehovah will shut you up into my hand, and I will smite you and remove your head from you. ⁴⁷ Then all this assembly shall know that Jehovah does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is Jehovah's, and He will give you into our hand."
- The reason that David was skilled enough with his sling to defeat Goliath was because he had had plenty of practice while protecting his sheep.
- We can defeat any Philistines with the same tools we've used to protect innocence and goodness.
 - Someone can make all sorts of arguments and quote all sorts of passages and we can respond with, "Yes, but the Lord says that I need to repent and work on keeping the 10 Commandments so I'm going to keep trying to do that."
 - Nothing else needed.
 - You don't need a sword to defeat the Philistines.

2) *Don't Let Them Cut Your Hair*

- A second principle to keep in mind when dealing with spiritual Philistines is don't let them cut your hair.
- The Philistines had absolutely no power against Samson until they used Delilah to find out where his strength was and then cut his hair (Judges 16).
- Hair, as the most external thing on a person's body, symbolizes the most external part of the Word, the literal sense (*Apocalypse Revealed 47, et al.*) and it seems like it also relates to applying religious ideas in our external life.
- If you're having religious debates with people, don't let them cut off your connection to the literal sense of the Word and the literal application of religious ideas.
 - Yes, there are many things in the Lord's Word that we understand in a more internal way but we still need to be living our lives differently because of those teachings.
 - Don't let people talk you out of the importance of living according to what the Lord says, don't let them cut your hair.

3) *Being Right Might Be Being a Philistine*

- Finally, let's think about a common way that the Philistines might attack.
 - Where does this thing of believing that we're better because of what we know come in?
- One place might be in arguments with other people.
- Let's say you get into an argument with your friend or family member about something.
 - They say it's this way; you say it's that way.
 - The argument gets heated.
 - You know that you are right; they're convinced that they're right.
 - And then let's say that it magically becomes obvious that you were right.
 - Imagine how you would feel. Imagine what you might say.
 - "Uhhh! I told you! See? I was right! You were wrong!"
 - Feels pretty good doesn't it?
- But let's pause for a second here.
 - Why do you feel better than the other person?
 - "Well, duh! Because you were right and they were wrong – better and worse."
 - But so what? You happened to have the more accurate knowledge in this particular instance – that's fine but it doesn't really mean anything about you or the other person.
 - Believing that it *does* make you better is the belief of a Philistine.
- It doesn't actually matter who has more knowledge.
 - But you know what does matter? How you treat the people around you.
 - Even how you treat the people around you when they're wrong.
 - Do you call them fools and look down on them or do you humble yourself and remember the times when you've been wrong?
- Instead of focusing on *being* right you can focus on *doing* what's right and treating other people right.

Conclusion

- The Philistines were an enemy of the children of Israel for a long time.
- It went back and forth as to who was winning the war.
 - The war with the Philistines within you will also likely go back and forth as to who is winning.
 - Maybe you're safe today but then keep an eye out for them in the future.
 - Remember that they are one of the two primary ways that religions get corrupted so you are undoubtedly going to deal with Philistines at some point in your life.
- And if you're feeling like the Philistines have been winning a lot of battles in your life recently, remember that there's always another battle.
 - You can turn back to the Lord and He will help you.
 - As Samuel said to the people, "If with all your heart you return to Jehovah, remove the foreign gods from your midst, and the Ashtaroth, and prepare your heart for Jehovah, and serve Him alone; then He will rescue you from the hand of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 7:3).
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.