

=UNUSUAL BIBLE STORIES=

Lesson 5

Dagon and the Stolen Ark

SCRIPTURE: I Samuel 5

AIM: to teach my pupils the importance of always following the will of God

POINT OF CONTACT: A picture of the ark of the covenant could be drawn on the chalkboard. The teacher could ask the pupils to identify it. They could continue guessing until successful or until the teacher has to give the answer.

There are three arks mentioned in the Bible: Noah's ark, Moses' ark and Israel's ark of the covenant. The teacher could ask the class to name the three arks. Perhaps a prize could be given to each pupil who names all three.

INTRODUCTION: The ark of the covenant was an oblong chest 2½ cubits long (approximately 3¾ feet) and 1½ cubits wide and deep (approximately 2¼ feet). It was the only piece of furniture in the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt among His people. It was always to precede the Israelites on their journeys. When they were to journey, God would lift the pillar of cloud and have the proper men transport the ark of the covenant following the cloud. The people were then to follow. The ark of the covenant was always to be in front. It represented God's leading of His people. This ark was once stolen by the Philistines and taken to the temple of Dagon, their national god. Though it was returned later, an interesting story (recorded in I Samuel 5) is found in its trip to Ashdod, where the temple of Dagon was located.

- I. THE ARK. The ark represented the presence of God.
 1. It was made of shittim wood or acacia wood, which was a wood grown in the desert in dry ground. Our Lord was called "a root out of dry ground."
 2. It was overlaid within and without with pure gold. This pictures the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 3. It was covered by a lid of solid gold. The lid was called the mercy seat. On the cover were two cherubims of gold, one at each end, with their wings extended. Over the mercy seat was the Shekinah Glory, representing God's presence with His people.
 4. By means of staves that passed through two golden rings on each side, it was carried by the Kohathites. See Numbers 7:9.
- II. THE FOLLOWING OF THE ARK. Here is the meat of the lesson. God's people were to follow the ark always. This way they were following Him.
 1. They followed the will of God. When the Israelites were camped, over the ark there rested a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When God wanted them to leave, He would lift this pillar and move it in the direction of His will. They were to follow the will of God.

(Teacher, stress emphatically here the importance of every person following God's will. The only safe place is the will of God. The only happy place is the will of God. It is very vital that every pupil in our classes, especially the children and young people, be taught this. In teaching teenagers, ask them if they know the will of God for their lives. Perhaps a child even could be asked the same question. Discuss the importance of doing the will of God.)

2. They followed the Word of God. Inside the ark of the covenant were the tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments. In other words, the law of God was there. There was also a golden pot of manna. This was the food that God had given the Israelites every morning. Each morning God covered the ground with manna from Heaven. Each morning the Israelites were to gather enough manna for the day. They could not gather enough manna for two days or it would spoil; that is, except for the Sabbath day. The day before the Sabbath they were to gather enough for two days, and in this case, God would not allow the food to spoil. The teaching here is that we need to follow the Word of God day by day. We need to read it, memorize it, meditate on it, carry it to school, believe it, love it, obey it, etc. Read Exodus 16:32-34; 25:21; Deuteronomy 10:3, 5; 31:26; Hebrews 9:4.
3. They followed the man of God. Inside the ark of the covenant was Aaron's rod that budded. This has to do with the Bible account of Korah, who rebelled against Aaron and Moses and before whom Aaron's rod budded that God might show His pleasure with His leaders, Moses and Aaron. Hence, the rod that budded was in the ark of the covenant, and the Israelites were to follow it, signifying the fact that they were to follow the man of

God. God has given us spiritual leaders. They are not perfect, to be sure, but we are to weigh carefully their advice and to heed the admonition of the Apostle Paul, who said, "Be ye followers of me." See I Corinthians 4:16 and Philippians 3:17.

4. In following the will of God, the Word of God and the man of God, there is certain victory. The ark, borne by the priests, the Kohathites (a family of the Levites to which Moses and Aaron belonged), preceded the Israelites in their desert wanderings and in the crossing of the Jordan River. Read Numbers 10:33; Joshua 4:9-11. It was carried around Jericho (Joshua 6:1-20) and was placed in Shiloh (I Samuel 3:21; 4:4). Every time the Israelites followed the ark of the covenant, they won the victory.
5. There is defeat in not following the will of God, the Word of God, and the man of God. The Israelites had won the battle of Jericho by following the ark of the covenant around the city 13 times; they then came to a little city called Ai. This was an insignificant battle as compared with the battle of Jericho, so they left the ark of the covenant behind. They were brought to shame in the losing of this battle; and though there is some merit in laying the blame at the feet of Achan, there is also much evidence that they lost the battle because they did not follow the ark of the covenant.

(Teacher, stress the importance here of always following the will of God, the Word of God and the man of God. Explain the tragedy that comes when one fails to do so. Again, stress this truth to the children and young people.)

6. The final history of the ark of the covenant. The ark was stolen by the Philistines. It was, however, returned to the Hebrews. (See I Samuel 6:11.) Then the ark was brought by David to Jerusalem and placed in a tent. (See II Samuel 6:17.) Finally Solomon had it placed within the Holy of Holies of the temple. (See I Kings 8:1-9.) Hence, the only piece of furniture that was found in the temple that had also been in the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant. Nothing has been known of the ark since the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

III. THE CAPTURING OF THE ARK. The Philistines noticed that there was something powerful about the ark of the covenant. Being worldly-wise, they captured the ark, and some interesting things happened. Read I Samuel 4:1-22.

1. They set the ark in the house of Dagon right beside their god. Notice I Samuel 5:1-4. They thought that certainly with the ark of the covenant and their great god, they would never lose a battle. To their complete surprise, Dagon fell on his face before the ark of the Lord! They took their god and set him in place again and came back the next morning only to find he had fallen on his face again with this result: "...the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him," I Samuel 5:4. Only the stump was left!
2. Everywhere the ark went in the hands of the Philistines it caused a serious illness. See I Samuel 5:6-11. This is very interesting. The people of Ashdod became sick, so they decided to send the ark of the covenant to Gath. The people of Gath got sick, so they decided to send it to Ekron. The people of Ekron got sick, so the Philistines decided to return the ark back to the Jews. Heathen people know nothing about the will of God, the Word of God or the man of God. The thing to do is not bring the will of God to the heathen but bring the heathen to the will of God. Christianity is not to be used for us; we are to be used for Christ. We are not to conform Christianity to fit our lives, but we are to conform our lives to fit Christianity and the will of God. The first thing in the will of God is to leave the heathen religion, leave the world and come to the will of God. They erred in that they wanted to bring the will of God to themselves.
3. It is wrong to mix true religion and false religion. Mixing them never works! They thought with the true God of the ark of the covenant and their heathen god they would have a wonderful ecumenical movement that would bless man. Not so! God's people are to be separate and are not to yoke themselves up with heathen religions or even so-called Christian religions that cast reflection on the inspiration of the Scripture and the deity of Jesus Christ.

IV. THE RETURNING OF THE ARK OF THE COVENANT. The ark of the covenant was brought back to the people of God, but it was brought back on a new cart. It was not God's plan for animals to carry the ark of the covenant on a new cart. It was God's plan for the Kohathites (men) to carry the ark of God. The power of God is always manifested through men. The glory of God is always manifested through men. God uses men and God uses His old methods to do the job today. We don't need new carts; we need the old truths of God. As Jeremiah said, we are to seek the "old paths." The same thing that worked for our grandfathers will work for us. God's message has not

changed; God's methods have not changed. The need today is still for men to follow the will of God, the Word of God and the man of God in the old-time way.

CONCLUSION: Dagon was the national god of the Philistines. His arms and body had the appearance of a human form while the lower portion was like the tail of a fish. The pupils should be taught that it is wrong to bow down before (or even have) other gods, images or idols. Lead them to know the importance of serving God in the heart and always doing His will, obeying His Word and following His command. This eliminates the unnecessary form and ceremony so prevalent in religion.