

The ark of God was a symbol of the presence of God.

1. The presence of God – a precious blessing

1. **The presence of God is a precious blessing.** God was offended at the Philistines' retaining the ark, for at this stage of history his presence was promised only to Israel. Only one people had the promise of the special presence of God. When we use the word 'presence' in this way, we mean his being present in blessing. Of course God is 'present' throughout the whole universe, but Israel was promised the special 'presence' of God in blessing. The promise continues in the revised and re-structured 'Israel', which is the Christian church.

2. The presence of God brings joy

2. **The presence of God brings joy.** The people of Bethshemesh find that they are the ones to whom the ark, the symbol of God's presence, comes. They rejoice¹. The return of the ark holds out hope that God will return to Israel. The radiating, shining, presence of God had been with Israel in the shrine at Shiloh. That glory had departed and in the loss of the ark the symbol of God's presence had been lost also. Now the men of Bethshemesh see something that gives them hope that the presence of God will return.

• Today's spiritual equivalent to the ark

The spiritual equivalent of the ark in the life of the church is the enjoyment of the presence of God. There are times in the life of the church when God seems specially present¹. It is always an occasion of great joy to the church of Jesus when 'the ark comes back' and God's presence in unusual blessing is experienced. This is what we call 'revival'.

3. The presence of God demands consecration

3. **The presence of God demands consecration.** It is a high privilege to have the presence of God with us. It demands some kind of response. The people of Bethshemesh immediately used the wood of the cart and the cows¹ to make 'burnt offerings' (speaking of total dedication to God) and 'sacrifices' (speaking of renewed fellowship). It was a dedication witnessed by the Philistines who were nearby watching all that was going on². We are told the details of what the Philistines had offered to the LORD (6:17-18a; NASV is closer to the Hebrew than the NIV) and we read of the large stone that was remembered many years later in the days of the author or compiler of 1 and 2 Samuel. The story of the way in which God had protected his ark and virtually forced the Philistines to return it was remembered for many years to come³. Despite the folly of the Israelites in using the ark superstitiously, God still had mercy on them and made his own arrangements to get the ark returned. The Israelites got their ark back by God's mercy, not by their own efforts or deservings. This point was memorialised as a permanent witness to God's grace. We too easily forget God's grace and if we are sensible will take some effort to 'keep ourselves in the love of God'⁴. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful.

• God's mercy

• It is sensible to take some effort to 'keep ourselves in the love of God'

4. The presence of God is dangerous

4. **The presence of God is dangerous.** It is his holy presence. The death of the men of Bethshemesh¹ seems harsh to the modern reader. 'He struck seventy among the people, fifty chief men.'¹ But it must be remembered that the ark was meant to be kept in a shrine. Nothing but calamity had come upon Israel's misuse of it. It spoke of the utter purity and holiness of God. No-one was normally allowed even to see it. Certainly no-one was allowed to look inside it. For within the holy ark of God was the law, including its sharpest and most penetrating demand 'You shall not covet.' It is a law no-one can keep (if

¹ 6:13

¹ 1 Cor 14:25

¹ 6:14-15

² 6:16

³ 6:18b

⁴ Jude 21

¹ 6:19a

• *The way into the holy presence of God should be by atoning blood*

the tenth commandment is taken into consideration). If one tries to look directly at the holiness of God, represented by the tenth command which requires that we shall not even desire any sin whatsoever, nothing but death can be the result. The presence of God is his holy presence. If we try to look at him directly, there is no place of safety for the sinner. The law of Moses demanded that the way into the holy presence of God should be by atoning blood. The men of Bethshemesh failed to realise that there can be nothing but the severest judgement if there is any attempt to approach God without atoning blood. It grieved the people^{¶2} and made them realise the holiness of God more than ever^{¶3}. They were afraid to have the presence of God - even in symbolic form - so near and asked that the ark should be taken to Kiriath Jearim^{¶4}

¶2 6:19b
 ¶3 6:20
 ¶4 6:21-7:1

• *The unsearchable mysteries of God*

The story of the men of Bethshemesh is a permanent reminder that our curiosity needs to be controlled when we come to deal with the things of God. It is with reason that Paul cries out '*O the depth of the wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God! How unsearchable are His judgements!*' To look directly at the holiness of God was forbidden by the law itself^{¶1}. God cannot be approached directly. '*Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?*' they said. They were even hoping that God would leave them. '*And to whom shall He go away from us so as to relieve us of His presence?*' (the Hebrew has this sense).

¶1 Num 4:20



• *Only the blood of Jesus enables us to draw near*

The fact is we are invited to draw near to God with boldness only by the blood of sacrifice. At the same time as we come to God we recall that God is a consuming fire^{¶1¶2}. It is only the blood of Jesus that enables us to draw near to God. Only in that way do we get to the joys of his presence.

¶1 Heb 4:16
 ¶2 Heb 12:29

Footnote

1 This is probably the correct translation rather than 'fifty thousand men'. A village such as Bethshemesh would not have 50,000 men in it, and the Hebrew word 'eleph' sometimes means 'chief of a thousand' or 'chief man'.

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible</i> (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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