

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Samuel 5 records what happens immediately after the Philistines capture the ark of the LORD and transport it to Ashdod, placing it in the temple of their god Dagon. The chapter unfolds in three movements. First, Dagon falls prostrate before the ark — twice. The second fall leaves the idol decapitated and dismembered, its head and hands broken off on the threshold. Second, the LORD's hand falls heavy on Ashdod and its surrounding region with a devastating plague. The city's inhabitants recognize that the God of Israel is behind their affliction and begin the process of transferring the ark away from their territory. Third, the ark is moved successively to Gath and then to Ekron, and in each city the same pattern repeats: the LORD's hand strikes with deadly tumors, terror spreads, and the city cries out that it cannot keep the ark. The chapter ends with the Ekronites urging that the ark be returned before it kills them all, while the hand of God remains heavy and the cry of the city goes up to heaven.

This Text — Intent

God is demonstrating, through a sequence of humiliations and judgments executed inside Philistine territory without any Israelite agent, that He is not a defeated god who can be managed, housed, or domesticated by His captors. The ark's capture in chapter 4 might have suggested to any observer — Philistine or Israelite — that the LORD had been bested. Chapter 5 systematically dismantles that interpretation. God's intent through this passage is to produce in the reader an unshakeable conviction that He is not diminished by circumstances that appear to defeat Him, and that no human power or rival religious system can contain, rival, or resist Him. The passage presses the reader toward awe — specifically the kind of awe that exposes and dismantles false confidence in anything other than the living God.

Subject Sentence: The LORD — in apparent defeat — demonstrates absolute, uncontested sovereignty over all rival gods and powers.

Primary Claim: God cannot be captured, domesticated, or diminished — His sovereignty operates with full force even when circumstances appear to have undone Him. The passage calls the reader to abandon every idol-shaped confidence and stand in awe of the only God who defeats His enemies from inside their own house.

Interpretive Evaluation

On the ark as the LORD's presence versus the LORD's symbol

A recurring interpretive question is whether the ark *is* the presence of God or merely *represents* it. Charismatic and some high-church traditions are inclined to read the ark as the locus of divine immanence in a quasi-sacramental sense — the power is in the object. Dispensational and low-church Baptist readings sometimes swing to the opposite extreme, treating the ark as a purely symbolic container with no special theological weight.

The Reformed reading holds both together more precisely: the ark is the divinely appointed covenant symbol of God's enthroned presence among His people. The power at work in chapter 5 is not inherent to the ark as an object — it is the LORD Himself acting in judgment. The text consistently attributes the afflictions to “the hand of the LORD” (vv. 6, 7, 9, 11), not to the ark's intrinsic power. This distinction matters: God is not a force contained in an object but a person acting through His appointed means. The Philistines' theological confusion — treating the ark as a trophy — is precisely what this chapter corrects.

On the Dagon episodes as polemic versus mere narrative

Some historical-critical readings treat the Dagon episodes as etiological folklore — stories invented to explain why Dagon's priests at Ashdod avoid the threshold (v. 5). On this reading, the passage is interesting as Ancient Near Eastern religious anthropology but carries no normative theological weight.

This reading is to be refuted. The passage is embedded in a sustained theological narrative (1 Samuel 1–7) in which Israel's failure and God's faithfulness are the governing themes. The Dagon episodes function as deliberate theological polemic: the LORD's self-vindication before the gods of the nations is not an etiological footnote but the passage's central claim. The god who cannot stand, who falls on his face, who is found decapitated and handless before the ark — this is the canonical statement about what happens when any rival to the LORD is placed in His presence. Reducing this to folklore empties the passage of its claim precisely where the claim is sharpest.

On whether this passage teaches “seek not the ark but the LORD”

Some expository traditions read chapter 5 against the background of chapter 4's misuse of the ark (Israel brought the ark into battle as a magical guarantee of victory) and treat chapter 5 as a corrective: the ark cannot save Israel, but God can save Himself — therefore seek the LORD, not the ark. This is a legitimate and illuminating application trajectory, but it must be qualified. The chapter itself does not explicitly make this contrast. The corrective to Israel's misuse of the ark is a concern of chapters 4 and 7 more than of chapter 5. Chapter 5 is focused entirely on what the LORD does among the Philistines. Importing the Israel-corrective too heavily into chapter 5 risks obscuring the chapter's own

primary claim — divine sovereignty over rival powers — in favor of a secondary application that properly belongs to the broader unit. The insight is worth noting; it should not become the controlling lens for this chapter's exposition.

Reformed verdict

The Reformed reading of 1 Samuel 5 identifies it as unambiguous divine polemic: the LORD vindicating His own name, sovereignty, and incomparability on Philistine soil, through His own hand, without any human instrument, using the very circumstances of His apparent defeat as the theater of His victory. This reading accounts for the text's own repeated attribution of agency to "the hand of the LORD," the explicit theological humiliation of Dagon, the escalating and spreading judgment, and the Philistines' own recognition (v. 7: "His hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god"). The text interprets itself.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 12:12** — "On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD." God's judgment against rival gods is a defining pattern from the exodus onward; 1 Samuel 5 is the same pattern replayed on Philistine soil.
 - **Psalms 115:4–8** — "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands... Those who make them become like them." Dagon's dismemberment enacts what the Psalms confess: idols have no hands, no head, no power — they are objects, not gods.
 - **Isaiah 46:1–2** — Bel and Nebo "bow down, they stoop, they cannot save the burden" — the great gods of Babylon carried into exile on carts, in ironic contrast to the LORD who carries His people. Dagon's collapse before the ark is the same theological point in narrative form.
 - **Daniel 4:34–35** — Nebuchadnezzar's confession that the Most High "does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand." The sovereignty displayed in 1 Samuel 5 over the gods of Ashdod is the same sovereignty Daniel's narrative proclaims over the empires of the world.
 - **Revelation 19:11–16** — The rider on the white horse as the LORD's ultimate self-vindication before all rival powers. First Samuel 5 is a local, anticipatory display of what the canon concludes with: every knee bowing, every rival power prostrate before the enthroned LORD.
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Aim: To demonstrate from the text that the living God’s sovereignty is not contingent on circumstances, and to call the reader to a worship and confidence grounded in who God actually is rather than in what conditions appear to suggest.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The Philistines bring the captured ark from Ebenezer to Ashdod	Triumph of the victors — the ark as a war trophy
2	The ark placed in Dagon’s temple beside the idol	A deliberate act of religious subordination — the LORD as Dagon’s vassal
3	Dagon found fallen on his face before the ark; propped back up	First fall — prostration; the Philistines correct the “accident”
4	Dagon falls again; head and both hands cut off on the threshold; only the “trunk” remains	Second fall — dismemberment; no accident, a verdict
5	Priests of Dagon avoid treading on the threshold at Ashdod “to this day”	Etiological note — the event’s effects persist in religious practice
6	The hand of the LORD heavy on Ashdod and its territory; tumors afflict the people	Judgment expands from Dagon to the whole region
7	Men of Ashdod recognize the connection: “His hand is hard against us and against Dagon”	Philistine theological awareness — even pagans read the sign
8	Philistine lords convene; decide to move the ark to Gath	First transfer — attempt to escape judgment
9	Ark moved to Gath; the LORD’s hand strikes Gath with tumors — great and small alike	Judgment follows the ark; no geographic escape from the LORD
10	Ark sent to Ekron; Ekronites protest — “They have brought the ark of the God of	Third city; recognition precedes judgment; panic is immediate

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Israel to us to kill us and our people”	
11	Ekronite lords urge the ark be returned; “deadly destruction throughout the whole city”	The hand of God is “very heavy” — superlative language
12	Those who did not die struck with tumors; the city’s cry goes up to heaven	The cry ascending to heaven — same language as Israel’s cry in Egypt (Ex. 2:23)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Trophy: The Ark Installed in Dagon’s House
2	3–5	The Verdict: Dagon Falls, Twice and Finally
3	6–7	The Hand: Judgment Falls on Ashdod
4	8–9	No Escape: Judgment Follows to Gath
5	10–12	No Refuge: Ekron Cries Out Under the Heavy Hand

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD — in apparent defeat — demonstrates absolute, uncontested sovereignty over all rival gods and powers.

Primary Claim: God cannot be captured, domesticated, or diminished — His sovereignty operates with full force even when circumstances appear to have undone Him. The passage calls the reader to abandon every idol-shaped confidence and stand in awe of the only God who defeats His enemies from inside their own house.

Applications (Five)

1. When circumstances appear to announce God’s defeat, refuse the interpretation the circumstances seem to demand.

The ark’s capture at the end of chapter 4 looked like a verdict: Israel’s God had lost. The Philistines read it that way. Many in Israel may have read it that way. Chapter 5 exposes that reading as catastrophically wrong. The pattern repeats for the Christian reader in every season when prayer seems unanswered, when wickedness seems to triumph, when the church seems to be losing, when personal suffering seems to announce divine absence or

impotence. The text does not call for optimism — it calls for a more accurate theology of what God is doing in the seasons that look like defeat. Dagon is being dismembered while his priests sleep. The reader is being pressed to believe this.

[Center: Mind/Belief]

2. Identify the specific idol whose collapse this passage is designed to produce.

Dagon falls in his own house. The passage's claim is not abstract — it is that every specific rival to the LORD is as helpless as Dagon, as unable to stand, as certain to be found broken on the threshold. The reader is not being called to reject “idolatry” as a category but to name the particular idol — financial security, reputation, relational approval, physical health, vocational success — in whose temple they have placed their confidence. The question the text presses is: what is your Dagon? Because the hand of the LORD is heavy on it whether you recognize it yet or not.

[Center: Affections/Worship]

3. Do not confuse God's patience with God's absence.

Three cities. Three outbreaks of judgment. The Philistines had every opportunity to return the ark before Gath, before Ekron. The hand of the LORD is described as escalating — the language intensifies through the chapter. God is not in a hurry to vindicate Himself, but His vindication is absolutely certain. The reader who is waiting for God to act — in a personal injustice, in a cultural moment, in a season of apparent divine silence — is being told by this text that the delay is not evidence of absence. The hand that struck Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron is the same hand that governs every circumstance of every life. The timing is His; the outcome is not in question.

[Center: Mind/Belief]

4. Let the Philistines' involuntary worship call you to voluntary worship.

By the end of chapter 5, the Philistines are doing something they did not intend: they are confessing the LORD's incomparable power (“His hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god,” v. 7), urgently seeking to be rid of His presence because they cannot survive it, and crying out to heaven. The irony is sharp: the people of God in chapter 4 lost the ark because they presumed on God's presence; the enemies of God in chapter 5 are desperately trying to escape that same presence. The reader who knows this God — who has been reconciled to Him through Christ — is being invited to feel the full weight of what it means to have this God for you rather than against you. The awe the Philistines experienced as terror, the believer is freed to experience as wonder. Worship accordingly.

[Center: Affections/Worship]

5. Stop managing God and start trusting Him.

The Philistines' error at every stage of chapter 5 is managerial: they try to relocate the problem, contain the damage, transfer the ark to another city. It does not work. God is not a problem to be managed, a force to be redirected, a circumstance to be controlled. The reader who relates to God primarily through management strategies — keeping Him at arm's length, placing Him in the “religious” compartment of life, trying to maintain control while giving God nominal space — is doing what Ashdod did. The text presses the reader toward the one posture the Philistines never arrived at: genuine, undefended, full-surrender trust in the God whose hand cannot be evaded and whose purposes cannot be frustrated.

[Center: Will/Behavior]

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 5 is a concentrated display of what theologians call God's *aseity* — His absolute self-existence and self-sufficiency — and His *incomparability* — His categorical difference from every other claimed deity. The repeated phrase “the hand of the LORD” (vv. 6, 7, 9, 11) is the chapter's theological engine: the LORD acts by His own hand, without human instrument, without favoring circumstances, without requiring the cooperation of any external power. Dagon's dismemberment is not merely embarrassing to the Philistines — it is the text's way of saying that Dagon was never a god at all, and that all rival claimants to divine status are in the same condition. The chapter also teaches God's sovereign freedom: He is not bound by the covenant structures He established with Israel, does not need Israel's faithfulness to act, and vindicates His own name on His own terms. This is not a god who can be used, housed, managed, or defeated.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is a critical pillar in the biblical theology of divine sovereignty that lies at the heart of Reformed theology. The God of 1 Samuel 5 acts *monergistically* — alone, by His own power, according to His own purposes — and this principle is not confined to the chapter but governs the entirety of the Reformed understanding of salvation, history, and providence. The Philistines did not invite this judgment, cooperate with it, or have any role in its execution. The LORD acted, and it was done. This is the same theological logic that governs the Reformed understanding of regeneration (God alone, by His Spirit, quickening the dead), of election (God's sovereign choice, not contingent on human response), and of providence (God working all things after the counsel of His own will, Eph. 1:11). The chapter also anticipates the gospel in this sense: God's greatest act of self-vindication came through what appeared to be His greatest defeat — the cross. Just as the ark in enemy hands became the theater of the LORD's victory, so the crucified Christ became the instrument of God's definitive triumph

over sin, death, and the devil (Col. 2:15). The reader of 1 Samuel 5 who has eyes trained by the New Testament will see Calvary in seed form here.

Main Takeaway

The God who was apparently captured by the Philistines dismembered their god in his own house, struck three cities with His own hand, and sent His enemies fleeing in terror — without a single Israelite agent involved. This God is not diminished by the circumstances that appear to defeat Him. Whatever you are looking at right now that seems to announce His absence, His defeat, or His impotence — look again. The hand of the LORD is heavy on it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the ark as a magical object rather than a covenant symbol.** The text attributes every judgment to “the hand of the LORD,” not to the ark’s intrinsic power. A preacher who implies that the ark itself carried the power will confuse the congregation about the nature of God’s presence and may inadvertently encourage a quasi-sacramental or superstitious relationship to religious objects, practices, or formulas. The ark matters because of *who* appointed it and *who* acts through it — not because of what it is in itself.
- **Moralizing the Philistines’ response without applying it to the congregation.** It is easy to preach the Philistines’ idolatry as something distant and exotic — *those people with their fish-god*. This misses the text’s bite entirely. The Philistines’ fundamental error was placing a rival in the presence of the LORD and discovering it could not stand. The congregation is full of people who have done exactly this — not with a stone idol but with career, family, health, comfort, or approval. The exposition must make Dagon concrete and contemporary.
- **Leaving the passage in the Old Testament without tracing it to the cross.** The pattern of God winning through apparent defeat is not complete until the resurrection. A congregation that leaves chapter 5 seeing only a historical curiosity about Philistine religion has not been fed. The preacher who traces the chapter’s logic — the LORD’s apparent defeat becomes the theater of His victory — through to Colossians 2:15 (“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him”) has preached a complete sermon. The one who stops at Ashdod has not.
- **Avoiding the doctrine of judgment.** The “hand of the LORD” in this chapter is heavy, deadly, and terrifying. Preachers who soften this — reducing it to “God was just showing He was in control” without pressing the reality that God strikes with

judgment — have emptied the passage of half its claim. The awe this chapter produces depends on the severity of what the text actually describes. Preach the heaviness of the hand before you preach the grace of being on the right side of it.

- **Over-reading the Israel-corrective into chapter 5.** Chapter 4 is the chapter that indicts Israel for treating the ark as a magic talisman. Chapter 5 does not develop that theme — it pivots entirely to what the LORD does among the Philistines. A preacher who spends significant exposition in chapter 5 correcting Israel's theology of the ark has migrated to a different passage. Let chapter 5 make its own claim about divine sovereignty and incomparability; let chapter 4 make its own claim about misusing God's presence. Each text deserves to be heard on its own terms.
- **Flattening the escalation.** The chapter builds deliberately: one city, then another, then another; the language of judgment grows heavier ("deadly destruction," "very heavy hand," the city's cry going up to heaven). A flat expositional reading that does not honor the escalation misses the rhetorical and theological point — God is not merely acting, He is pressing, insisting, refusing to be ignored. The structure of the passage itself is an argument, and that argument must be preached, not just reported.