

Devastation in the Midst of Celebration

2 Samuel 6



Read 2 Samuel 6:1-11.

King David just celebrated a great victory over the Philistines and was finally publicly recognized King of all Israel. Knowing that these two victories were blessings from the Lord, David desired to do something wonderful for his God. Scripture tells us David realized "...that the Lord had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel." (2 Samuel 5:12). David decided it was time to bring the Ark of God back into Israel, centrally locating it in the heart of the country. David's capital, Jerusalem, was strategically located between Judah and the northern territories. Neither "side" could claim privilege or decay preference.

As we saw last week Jerusalem was highly defensible with impregnable walls. It was also located on a high ridge which would make it difficult for enemies to attack by surprise or even approach without plenty of warning for the inhabitants of the city. Recall the Jebusites said to David, with what turned out to be a false sense of security: "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off" (2 Samuel 5:6). David and his men climbed in through a water shaft and defeated the Jebusites taking control of the city.

Its central location and its defensible situation are reasons why David chose Jerusalem as his capital. Going back to its central location, David desired that the Lord also be brought back not only to the physical center of the nation but also to the spiritual center. 1 Samuel 4 tells of the sons of Eli, the high priest before the time of Samuel, taking the ark into battle with them against the Philistines and the devastating loss of not only the battle but of the ark. The next chapter dealt with the ark in Philistine territory and the devastation it caused there with plagues coming upon each city to which it entered. The ark finally ended up in Kiriath Jearim. With great celebration David and 30,000 men set out to bring the ark back from Baalah of Judah (also known as Kiriath Jearim) back to the heart (figuratively as well as physically) of Israel. There was great celebrating going on, with music, praise and worship the whole way along. David is at a new height in his life, he is King of all Israel, he has a renewed relationship with the Lord, and out of gratitude he has decided it is time to do this wonderful act for the Lord his God. But it suddenly goes so very wrong.

"The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down." (v.7)

In the midst of great celebration for the return of the presence of the Lord, the Lord's anger strikes out. It seems cruel and harsh upon reading the account. It is difficult to understand why

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the Lord would do such a thing at such a time. But on what terms are we making our judgment against the Lord? That is what we are doing, after all. We need to adjust our perspective and remember a few indisputable facts about the Lord. We must remember *who God is* and not ground our faith in *what God does*. His ways are beyond our comprehension. He sees and acts according to what is true, just and right for not only the present, but the future, for me, for you, for all of his beloved children. He acts and judges based on his view of our hearts, our motives and our actions. We are not privy to the heart and mind of Uzzah. If we can remember that the Lord is faithful and compassionate, we must also remember that he is holy and righteous. So let's take a closer look at this passage remembering that the Lord is above all things holy and just. Look back at 2 Samuel 6:2.

“...the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the L_{ORD} Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark.”

First let us consider what the Ark of God represents to David and Israel. In Exodus 25:8 God tells Moses, *“Then have them make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them.”* Up until this time God's presence or glory would come in power to accomplish specific tasks. He made his presence visible to Israel to lead them through the desert. His presence was visible as a thundercloud on Mount Sinai. The Lord's presence would come and go as the Lord pleased. Exodus 25 is the first mention of the Lord's presence coming to dwell in the midst of his people.

When God commanded Israel to build his ark he did so according to specific instructions. The Lord was very particular about how it was to be built, who would build it, who would serve before him and how it would be transported. The Lord provided specific instructions because it was important to him that the ark be treated as the sacred object it was, and treated with reverence and respect. In Exodus 25:22 the Lord says, *“There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you.”* The ark was the sacred meeting place between God's glorious presence and man. Treating the ark with disrespect, or anything less than the prescribed reverent instructions, would be to treat the Lord with not only lack of respect but also the same disrespect shown to the object signifying the Lord's presence and glory.

Based on a better idea of *who God is*, let's apply that understanding to his actions in this passage. I think the Lord was using this opportunity to teach the nation of Israel a few lessons in their approach to him and their role as a nation set apart by God. God was preparing the people of Israel for a new regime. The old regime, under Saul, was one of irreverence, disobedience, and contempt for the Lord and the ways of the Lord. The Ark was lost to the Philistines in the time of Eli and his sons, before Saul became king. Saul never sought to return it back to a central position, spiritual or physical throughout his reign. During Saul's reign Saul refused to obey the Lord's command regarding the Amalekites. He had all the Priests of Nob (and its town) slaughtered. And he built an altar to himself rather than to the Lord. Saul was not interested in allowing Israel's God to reign supreme in Israel over his own position which bring the ark back to Israel would require. The Philistines eventually sent it back, but it was left along the Philistine- Israeli border. Turn to 1 Samuel 7: 1 *“So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took the ark of the Lord. They took it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the Lord.”*

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The Lord's action against Uzzah is a reminder that God's people- his nation called to be a nation of priests – is to be different from the world. The Lord set a higher standard for his people. They had the benefit of knowing him and his expectations throughout their history. Through Moses and Joshua, various judges and high priests, the Lord made known to Israel his expectations of them. The Torah is a detailed outline of his expectations of Israel under the Mosaic covenant.

They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. (v3-4)

When the Philistines transported the Ark, to return it to Israel they did so in the following manner, according to 1 Samuel 6:7-8: *"Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. Take the ark of the LORD and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way."*

Now when David had the ark moved, the holiest object in all Israel, representing the Lord God Almighty, his throne, footstool and mercy seat, they handled it and regarded it in the same manner as the Philistines. They should have known better. The Lord was very particular in its design, assembly and transport since the time of Moses. The way they handled the ark was with a casual attitude at best, and with utmost disrespect for the Lord, at worst. Just because the world treats and approaches God one way does not mean that the people of God can follow the same standard. Both David and Israel in his time, as well as us in our time, should never let the world set the standard of how we approach and view the Lord.

While viewing Uzzah's death from our perspective it sounds harsh, but from God's perspective it must have been justified. Remember, the Lord judges according to one's heart. All we can know and understand about a person is what we see on the outside. I imagine that the Lord struck Uzzah down with good reason. Uzzah's name means "strength"¹. Perhaps that was indicative of his attitude. Maybe he relied on his own strength and understanding rather than on obedience to the Lord. Ahio means "God is my brother"². The idea that God is one's brother can foster an attitude of equality, of being equal to the Lord rather than subservient to him. Ahio and Uzzah are the sons of Abinadab. Abinadab and his sons are Levitical priests of the clan of Kohath, who from the time of Moses were consecrated to the care of the most holy things (Numbers 4:4-20). Back in 1 Sam 7, it says that Abinadab's son Eleazar was consecrated to care for the Ark. Somewhere

¹ Holman Bible Dictionary

² Holman Bible Dictionary

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in the years between the Ark arriving at Abinadab's house, and the day Ahio and Uzzah moved the ark, there was a lapse in reverence and training in caring for the ark.

The Lord's action also points to the idea that the Lord wanted to establish His Kingdom on His Word. David had access to the Books of Moses. In fact, he was supposed to make a copy of them for himself. Deuteronomy 17: 18 instructs the king when he takes the throne to make a copy for himself. V19 says, *"he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of the law...It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees..."* The Torah gives very specific instructions on how to properly transport the ark.

Exodus 25:14 says, *"Insert the poles into the rings on the sides of the chest to carry it."* The weight or burden of the Ark was designed to be carried on the shoulders of his priests, not transferred to the backs of animals. Numbers 4: 5 says, *"When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it.* And later in Numbers 4:15 it says, *"After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting.* The Kohathites are of the tribe of Levites. Despite being Levites they were not to touch or even see the holy things of the Lord. Only the high priests, descendants of Aaron, could do so in great reverence and as specified by the Law for preparation to transport the ark, or for the sacrifice of atonement.

David and the Levites had failed to seek the Lord's guidance in transporting the Ark. David who had been so faithful in seeking the Lord before so many of his most crucial decisions knew the importance of seeking and obeying the Lord. His success, the success of the nation as a whole depends upon that obedience. I think this lesson was driven home to him during his sojourn in Zicklag, but for some reason his exuberant and zealous desire to bring the ark home clouded his judgment. He jumped in without giving thought to what was the right thing to do. And, it was the right thing, but the approach was all wrong.

God was teaching Israel that day the spiritual truth that blessing comes through reverence. 2 Samuel 6:9-10 says, *"David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, 'How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?' He was not willing to take the ark of the LORD to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite."* David had some issues to work through. In the midst of great celebration the Lord came down in force to remind David and Israel who He is, and to give them something of a "time-out" to think through what they were doing, and their attitude and actions towards Him. A bit of fear was what David needed to gain the right perspective and attitude.

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The final verse of our scripture passage says, "*The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the LORD blessed him and his entire household.*" It took some time for David to adjust his perspective and attitude. It took time for him to get beyond the devastating events surrounding his desire to honor the Lord by moving the Ark back to a central location in the heart of Israel, both physically and spiritually. I imagine David's faith and trust in the Lord were quite shaken by this event. He had to move beyond that point to a place of trust and obedience.

And while that time was passing something was happening at the home of Obed-Edom. Obed-Edom's household was being blessed. I am guessing that Obed-Edom was a Levite, and after the events of Uzzah's death, his family would have a renewed sense of fear and reverence for the Ark of the Lord.

Hearing that the household of Obed -Edom was being blessed by the presence of the Ark helped David figure out what he should do to get the Ark back to the heart of Israel. Remembered that God is good and his love endures forever! In Psalm 136 that refrain is repeated 26 times. David needed a reminder of God's goodness to move him beyond his paralyzing fear of God's righteousness. Still desiring to bring the Ark home where it belonged, David sought a way to bring the Ark back. He consulted the word of God and found out how and where he went wrong. This will be covered in your homework this week. Our scripture lesson today is a valuable reminder that the Lord desires his presence to be a blessing to us, but that can only be the case through our reverence for him.

Note: Beth Moore's study *A Heart Like His* was invaluable in the writing of this lesson.