



## **Do You Really Know the King?**

### **A Study in Samuel**

*David and the Ark*

*2 Samuel 6:1-23*

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### **Previously in 2 Samuel...**

Over the previous six chapters, David has ascended to the throne and united the rest of the tribes of Israel. Saul's influence has diminished, and David has captured Jerusalem and transformed the city into a political force by driving the Philistines back to their traditional borders.

### **The Promise the Ark Presents**

David raises 30,000 men. He is not going into battle nor is he setting defenses around significant locations. David is planning an enormous parade, a nation-wide procession of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of God was the most important symbol of God's approval among the unified tribes of Israel.<sup>1</sup> It was the most powerful sign of God's support for David and his new capital city.

The ark itself was a fairly large wooden box with gold overlaid and on the top were two angels facing each other. Back in the Exodus account, God had expressly commanded Moses to make the ark. It normally resides in the temporary tent of worship called the tabernacle. There in a back room – all the important deals happen in the back room – the ark was the only thing in that space, designated as the most holy of holy places or the holy of holies. The ark signified the presence of the holy, transcendent God.

When the Ark crossed the Jordan River, the river parted around it. When Joshua led the battle against the city of Jericho, the Lord commanded that the Israelites march the Ark around Jericho. And if you remember earlier in 1 Samuel, Eli's two wicked sons took the Ark into battle against the Philistines. Israel lost the battle. Eli's two sons died. The Ark was taken by the Philistines. When news reached Eli that the Ark had been taken, Eli died.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Meyers, "David as Temple Builder," *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*. Ed. Patrick Miller, P.D. Hanson, and S.D. McBride. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). P.362

In Philistia, the Ark caused them so much trouble, that they returned it to just inside Israel's border to a place called Kiriath Jearim. It remained there for the entirety of Saul's reign, a reflection of Saul's indifference to the Lord. After David becomes king, unites Israel and sends the Philistines packing, he wants to move the Ark to Jerusalem. David wanted to show Israel that God was truly their king. It is a reminder for us that our real safety is in God's presence, not in any person or group of people.

The Ark also serves as a reminder to us that you can come into God's presence, you can know God, you can have fellowship and strength in his presence. David understands the need for the Ark in Israel. He has the entire nation, 30,000 soldiers, join him in a victory celebration in bringing the Ark to the new capital. It is a celebration of God's presence in their lives once again.

### **The Problem The Ark Presents**

David has two young men, sons of Abinidab named Uzzah and Ahio, oversee the movement of the Ark. They were in charge of the ox cart. For those of you who grew up in the ox cart region of West Virginia, you know full well that one does not steer an ox cart. You don't sit up on the cart and hold reins and move them around like a team of horses for the Pony Express. No, with an ox cart, you have to walk alongside it and direct it.

At some point, an ox stumbled. Uzzah put his hand up to steady the ark. And in that moment, God struck Uzzah dead. This is one of those troubling passages for those who struggle to believe in God. If this is a God of love and grace, why kill a guy for breaking a simple rule? For many who don't understand, God sounds cranky, not loving. Let's consider this a bit more.

Understand that when God commanded them to build the ark, He gave clear instruction for its construction. As Moses was to have the gold overlaid on the wood, he was to install big golden loops. God also gave clear and specific instructions on transporting the Ark. Levites were to use two long poles and carry the Ark on their shoulders. Before they were to lift the poles, they were to all be consecrated and ceremonially clean. The Ark was intended to be carried by the poles, not on an ox cart.

That ox cart was an update from the Philistines. And since nobody took any time to glance once again at the owner's manual, the parade stopped, and everyone looked at Uzzah.

And I can even hear some of you in hear this morning saying, “Now, wait a minute. Isn’t it bad enough to believe in a God who judges people and sends them to hell. What kind of God strikes someone down for breaking a rule?” This perspective is based on a misunderstanding.

Admittedly, the tabernacle rules can seem strange. Eat this, but not that. Be sure to clean this or you can’t go in. Those rules exist because God has a fundamental message. And sometimes the best way to communicate to slow learners is through visual aids. God is making it clear to us all with this Uzzah situation. Our sin is serious. Our sin separates us from God. God is holy, we are sinful. Our sin has created a chasm between us and God. And we cannot bridge this chasm. There is nothing that we can do.

We have read and often recall Ephesians 2, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourself.” But that teaching is not unique to the New Testament. The Ark reminds us of God’s grace in the Old Testament. We are unable to bridge that gap. Try as we might, we cannot. Not even the biggest parade can bridge the gap.

God won’t overlook sin. God won’t dismiss sin. Our best actions, our largest celebration, our liveliest worship, none of that will work. We cannot bridge that gap through our moral efforts.

You cannot be saved through your works because your sin is too serious. That is what we see here in 2 Samuel 6. When David and Uzzah loaded the Ark on an ox cart and not the poles, when they neglected to use Levites, they dismissed the serious nature of sin. Sadly, Uzzah does not appear to have a clear understanding of the serious nature of the situation.

Perhaps he assumed that when the Ark tipped over, the dirt would defile the Ark but NOT himself. It isn’t just that Uzzah broke the rules. This reminds us that the reasons for which we break rules matter. God desperately wants to show us that we are broken, that we are sinners. God wants you to know that you cannot go into God’s presence based on your good works. There must be a sacrifice. Hebrews tells us that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. David and the Ark reminds us that we don’t get to blend or create our own religion. In adopting the Philistine model of moving the Ark, David had distorted what God commanded in His word, and David had rejected those commands.

God is not cranky, He is holy. You cannot bridge the gap that your sin caused from God's holiness. This is revealed to us in a tragic visual aid here with Uzzah and the Ark and the ox cart.

### **The Eternal Hope of the Ark**

In verse 8 we read that David was angry. He names that place "outbreak against Uzzah" because the glory of God had broken out upon Uzzah. Looking closely at the text, we can see that David is learning on the job. David doesn't start his complaint with a back to the drawing board approach. He didn't say, "Well, phooey, gang. We broke the rules, so we better locate those long pole-thingies and then scuttle the ox cart here, grab some Levites and try again." We do that a lot. Things don't work out the way we wanted and so we go into problem solving mode. "Okay, God didn't do that for me the first time, so, let me try again by tweaking this and changing this. That ought to get God back on my side." No, we have to step back and consider more deeply than simply the rule following.

Life in the church isn't simply adhering to rules, following the rules, enforcing the rules. There was a group of rule followers and rule enforcers in the Bible. They are called Pharisees and Jesus rebuked them. A lot. This isn't about following the rules to the letter. This is about understanding yourself more completely. David doesn't say, "Okay, second verse but not quite the same as the first."

He asks, "How can the Ark of the Lord ever come to me?" David sees how sinful and flawed he truly is. How can the visual symbol of God's holiness ever come to David, the sinful rule breaker? He gets it.

The Gospel is the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. However, the first step in receiving the good news is to understand the bad news. The first step is understanding that it is getting worse before it is getting better. You must first understand your need for God.

This is how God moves you from some superficial religion of therapeutic moral deism into the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has to show you the bad news. You are broken and you cannot get to God alone.

There for all to see was an unmistakable visual aid. Smack in the middle of that massive parade, God brought David's sin front and center. David is broken to the point where, devastated, he asks, "How can it come to me?"

Some of you have been there before, haven't you? Some are there right now. You don't understand how in the world this salvation will work. You cannot comprehend how what James writes can be true – that where sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more. You see yourself and your life and in the middle of this horrible situation, you just don't understand how God's goodness and mercy should follow you all the days of your life. Because up to now, there have been a lot of rotten, nasty, awful days.

For others, you have found yourselves in some horrible personal catastrophe. You find yourself in a place similar to where David finds himself here in 2 Samuel 6. But this is where the bad news dissolves into the good news of the gospel. God will use catastrophes to show you that you are worse than you realized you were. He uses these terrible experiences as visual aid, to remind you that you are actually weaker than you thought you were.

So many people are not convinced that their sin is bad. They have justified it away so easily; it is as if the sin never existed in the first place. It can sometimes take something in your life to teach you of what John Newton once wrote: "Nobody ever learned they were a sinner by being told."

You have to be shown. You have to get to that point where you realize that you could never come into the presence of God. This is a great first step. However, it is not entirely accurate. Because you can come into the presence of God. The Ark is a reminder of that truth. The Ark means that we can absolutely come into the presence of God.

David ends the parade and ships the Ark off to be in the nearby home of Obed Edom. He won the pony. I'm sure he was really excited to get that distinction. But David leaves it there and they all go home. But David never forgets that the Ark means the possibility of fellowship with a holy God. In a corresponding account in 1 Chronicles 13, David admits that Saul never consulted the Lord. And then David gets the owner's manual out and figures out what he is to do next. He finds the Levites, gets the poles and returns to Obed Edom's home, after Obed Edom has been blessed by God with the presence of the Ark. He understands what has to happen to move forward into the presence of the Lord. He reads up on the tabernacle and the Ark and gets it all clear.

You see, when you went into the tabernacle there before you went inside standing between you and that place was an altar. An altar was a place where they made sacrifices. David understands now. He enlists Levites to carry the Ark with the poles. They take six steps and then, before making any real progress, he sacrifices burnt offerings.

The burnt offering was significant. You were to take the sacrifice and place your hand on the offering, then kill it and burn it completely. This meant that the person making the sacrifice understood that they themselves should be utterly destroyed because of their sins if they were to enter this place to enter this place but instead, something will be destroyed for me.

David generally understands that the only way possible to come into the presence of God is to come through the sacrifice of another. One cannot come through because of their good deeds. Something must be destroyed because of the sinner.

For you and for me, that sacrifice between us, and the presence of God was Jesus Christ. "He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God." By the grace and love and will of God, we can be made holy through the sacrifice of Jesus once for all.

When David finally gets home after the Ark is in Jerusalem, his wife chastises him for acting like a fool. You see, David's joy in being in the presence of God made him sort of forget himself. That is a by-product of genuine faith in God. Becoming a Christian is not thinking more of yourself or less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less. David's response is simple. "The Lord chose me." With the death of Uzzah and then the blessing of Obed Edom, David understands that his kingship was only by the grace of God.

Salvation is experienced through faith by grace. In most other religions, the thing that keeps you from God is your failure. In Christianity the thing that keeps you from God is your refusal to admit your failure. Admit your failure, your sin. Repent from your sins. Believe in Christ as Savior. Confess Jesus is Lord. Follow Christ and be changed. Experience the joy of forgetting yourself in the presence of the holy, transcendent God of heaven.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:**

Okay, home mechanics – what devices have you had to refer to an owner's manual before to learn how to work? When you referred to the manual, how did that effect operating said machine?

How does that apply to your life in Christ? How important is God's word in helping you live your life?

Have you gone long stretches, like Israel, when you didn't approach God and inquire or ask Him for help, guidance? Explain how that affected your life?

David followed the Philistine method of moving the Ark with the ox cart. What happens when we mix or blend our Christianity with the moral, therapeutic deism that exists around us? We add a touch of "tolerance," or a dash of self-sufficiency to it. What happens to our faith? What happens to our testimony and our message?

Has God ever used a catastrophe in your life to bring you to obedience?

How did God reveal to you that you were in desperate need of His saving grace?

How did you feel when you truly, genuinely, identified with your sacrifice – Jesus? He took your place because God's holiness would have consumed your sin and cost you your life. Except the cross stood between your sin and God's holiness.