

## **The Presence of God in our Midst**

### **2 Samuel 6**

I grew up watching football on television – a LOT of football on television. This was one of the main things my brothers and I did with my dad. Since he grew up in Amarillo, Texas, the Dallas Cowboys were our favorite professional team. Since we lived 40 miles from Knoxville, Tennessee for six years, the Tennessee Volunteers were our favorite college team. When those teams were on television, we all sat there and watched. On New Years' Day dad would set up two televisions side by side so we could watch two games at the same time (this was before cable tv and remote controls and “a screen within a screen”). So we watched a lot of football.

And over time we learned all the rules. Dad didn't have to sit us down and give us hour-long lectures on first downs, kick-offs, punts, penalties, touchdowns, extra points, and field goals. We just watched thousands of hours of football, listening to the announcers talk about what was happening, and we learned all the rules. Over time we learned hundreds of rules (Answers.com claims that nobody knows how many rules American football has; someone made a post on YahooAnswers saying he counted 367 rules in the NFL rulebook). If you didn't grow up watching American football, it seems like it has a bewildering hodgepodge of rules. You might even think, “How can anybody possibly enjoy watching football? Remembering all those rules seems overwhelming!”

I mention this because that's how we tend to think about the Law, the old covenant. When we read Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy it seems like a bewildering hodgepodge of rules about festivals, sacrifices, and dietary restrictions. We think, “How could anybody possibly enjoy God in that system? How could you ever remember all those rules? How do you remember whether to sacrifice a goat or a bull?” But just like someone who grows up watching thousands of hours of football, an Israelite who grew up immersed in the old covenant would have an intuitive understanding of what you were supposed to do and what you were supposed to avoid doing. All the regulations fit together as a coherent whole. You learned the regulations of the old covenant through years of watching and hearing and experience.

Today's passage in our study of the life of David is 2 Samuel 6. This passage describes how David and the Levites violated one of the regulations about “how to carry the ark of the covenant.” Just like every football fan knows that you have to kick a field goal (you can't throw the ball through the goal), every Levite knew that you have to carry the ark using wooden poles (you can't load it on a wagon pulled by oxen). My point is that the regulations about how to carry the ark of the covenant may seem obscure and remote to us; but to the Levites, this was obvious, second-nature stuff.

Before we look at 2 Samuel 6, I want to make a few comments about the theological significance of the ark of the covenant. The “ark of the covenant” was a wooden box approximately 3 ½ feet long by 2 ½ feet wide by 2 ½ feet deep; it was covered with gold inside and out. Rings were attached on either side of the ark; poles were inserted through the rings so that four Levites (one on each corner) could carry the ark using the poles without actually touching the ark.

The lid of the ark (the lid was also called the mercy seat) was made of pure gold and had two cherubim/angels facing each other with outstretched wings. Inside the ark was placed the tablets of the Ten Commandments (which stood for the entire old covenant – hence the name “ark of the covenant”), Aaron’s rod/staff (which was either really short or perhaps broken into pieces), and a jar of manna saved from their journey through the wilderness.

The ark of the covenant was significant because God localized His presence above the ark of the covenant. God is omnipresent, but He manifested His presence and met with the Israelites above the cherubim on the ark of the covenant. Consequently, how you treated the ark of the covenant was how you treated God. If you are irreverent toward the ark of the covenant you are irreverent toward God. The implications for us will involve how we think about and treat the presence of God in our lives and in our midst.

***David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6)***

We know from various chronologies given in 1 and 2 Samuel that the ark had been stored in a tent in the city of Kiriath Jearim for approximately [60 years]. But now the nation was united under David, and he wanted the ark to take center stage in the nation’s worship. Here’s what happened:

1 Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim.

[Baale-judah is another name for Kiriath Jearim – 1 Chron. 13:6.] Verse 2 stresses that the ark belonged to God. His very Name (character, identity, etc.) was associated with the ark – so much so that “the very name of the Lord of hosts” was “enthroned above the cherubim” that were depicted on the lid of the ark. The ark wasn’t merely a relic that they needed to transport without getting dinged up; it was basically the throne of the Lord of hosts. In a sense, they were bringing the presence of God into Jerusalem. Notice how they transported the ark:

3 They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart.

This is how the Philistines had transported the ark when it was in their possession – on a new cart (see 1 Samuel 6). They got away with transporting the ark in that manner (perhaps because there were no Levites among the Philistines?). But in light of the original instructions given to the children of Israel in Exodus and Numbers, sirens should be going off in our heads because the ark is supposed to be carried by four Levites using two poles.

4 So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. 5 Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals.

Bringing the ark to Jerusalem was obviously the will of God and cause for great celebration. They employed every kind of instrument they could find – woodwinds, strings, percussion. But

6 But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it.

This must have been an instinctive response when the cart jerked and the ark began to topple. But the priests had specifically been commanded not to touch the ark (Numbers 4:15).

7 And the anger of the LORD burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. 8 David became angry because of the LORD'S outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day.

[“Perez” means “outburst” – hence the name “Outburst against Uzzah”.] It seems incredibly harsh for God to strike down Uzzah for touching the ark. We might even half expect God to be pleased that Uzzah kept the ark from crashing to the ground. But apparently, lines had already been crossed by Uzzah and the other Levites; when you load the ark on a cart pulled by oxen, it's liable to hit a pothole and all bets are off. Who knows what would have happened if Uzzah hadn't steadied the ark. I think we need to see Uzzah touching the ark as only his final act of “irreverence” (only occurrence of this term in the OT).

The celebration came to a screeching halt. You can't really celebrate with Uzzah lying there dead on the ground. David's immediate response was anger against God. People who love God and who know God have the freedom to be angry at something He does (or doesn't) do. You don't stay there the rest of your life, but people who take God seriously sometimes become angry at Him.

9 So David was afraid of the LORD that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" 10 And David was unwilling to move the ark of the LORD into the city of David with him; but David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11 Thus the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

We need to think carefully about how to apply a passage like 2 Samuel 6. If you aren't clued in to how obvious it was that the Levites should have carried the ark by hand, you might think that this passage suggests that if you somehow violate the smallest principle found in the Bible He'll probably strike you dead. I don't at all think that that's the take-away point here. I think that this passage warns us against drifting to the place where we are blind to things that should be obvious to us. Uzzah serves as a warning to us about the need to remember how we should revere and honor the presence of God in our lives and in our midst as a church.

There could be numerous valid ways to apply a passage like this. When I think about applying this passage, I am drawn to think about the implications of the presence of God in our midst through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Just as Uzzah (and everybody else in his day) drifted to the place where he became careless with the ark of the covenant, we can become careless in how we think about the presence of God in our midst. We can lose sight of some basic, foundational

truths that should be obvious. The New Testament makes some astounding claims about how we are in the presence of God and how God is present within us. I'll mention three passages.

**1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10.** In 1 Peter 2 Peter is challenging believers to understand and live out their identity. One of the things he emphasizes is that in Christ every believer is now part of a spiritual priesthood.

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Here Peter depicts the church – the body of Christ – as a spiritual house (i.e., a temple) in which we all serve as priests. Every single believer is part of a holy priesthood. We all dwell in the presence of God, and we all offer Him spiritual sacrifices. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a priest before God every bit as much as Uzzah was when he was given the assignment of bringing the ark into Jerusalem.

We get careless in our priestly duties when we forget that we're supposed to offer spiritual sacrifices. Instead of mindlessly living our lives, we should intentionally offer what we do to God as a spiritual sacrifice. When a friend asks for prayer, you say, "God, I offer up these prayers as a sacrifice to You." When you serve, instead of going through the motions, you put your heart into it because you're a priest and God sees what you're offering. That attitude honors the presence of God in our midst.

**1 Corinthians 3:16-17.** In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul calls the church the "temple" – the place where God localizes His presence through the person of the Holy Spirit.

16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

The church is imperfect and flawed because it is made up of humans. But the church is still the temple of God. He is challenging the Corinthians to build up the church by saying, "You are a temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you!" If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, how you treat other believers in this fellowship is every bit as important as how Uzzah treated the ark of the covenant.

We get careless when we aren't intentional about building up others in the body of Christ. It suggests that we aren't that impressed with the presence of God in our midst and that we don't really buy the idea that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

**1 Corinthians 6:18-20.** In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul writes to the Corinthians telling them that as individual believers they are each a "temple of the Holy Spirit" since the Spirit dwells within each of them.

18 Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

Our bodies being a temple of the Holy Spirit is one of those obvious truths that we sometimes forget. Like Uzzah who got careless with how he handled the ark, we can get careless in how we handle our bodies – in which the presence of God dwells. We honor the presence of God by remembering that our bodies are not our own; we have been bought with a price – the blood of Christ.

Uzzah warns us against getting careless and sloppy in relation to the presence of God in our lives and in our midst. Ultimately ***God wants us to love the fact that He is in our midst – individually and corporately.*** The conviction that God is in our midst through the Holy Spirit should fuel our desire to honor Him in everything we do. And sometimes our joy will overflow into celebration. Sometimes we will be so full-to-overflowing that we lose ourselves in praise. That's what happened to David when he finally brought the ark into Jerusalem.

It took David three months to recover from the death of Uzzah. But after three months he was ready to try again to bring the ark to Jerusalem. This time he follows the procedure specifically prescribed in the Law. In the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 15, David explicitly acknowledges that they had violated an ordinance by not having the Levites carry the ark. He is talking to the Levites when he says:

13 "Because you did not carry it at the first, the LORD our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance." 14 So the priests and the Levites consecrated themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. 15 And the sons of the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders, with the poles thereon as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD.

Let's pick up the account in 2 Samuel 6 in verse 13.

13 And so it was, that when the bearers of the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling.

This time they were carrying the ark as prescribed. Notice David's exuberance:

14 And David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouting and the sound of the trumpet. 16 Then it happened as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David that Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

David's first wife, Michal, despised David. Later in the chapter we learn that she thought it was shameful that he didn't act and dress more like a king should act in front of his subjects.

“Undignified” is a word that’s been used to describe David’s exuberance at bringing the ark into Jerusalem.

Alexander Whyte’s comment (c. 1900) on Michal is that “Those who are deaf always despise those who dance.” If you love the presence God in our midst and if you put Him front and center, there will be times when it overflows into exuberance. This exuberance may overflow in corporate worship or in private devotions or in an act of extravagant devotion to God (as the woman who poured the expensive perfume over Jesus’ head). And there may well be people like Michal in your life; they will call you unbalanced and undignified. “Those who are deaf always despise those who dance.” But take courage because you’ll be in good company – the company of people like David and Peter and the angels of God.