David and the Ark
1 Samuel 4-5; 2 Samuel 6

Now when you buy something big, like a house, what do you do? You and the other party make a contract together, don't you. And there are two copies. And you keep one copy and they keep the other. Well, when God entered into a covenant with the people of Israel, God engraved two copies of that covenant onto two tablets of stone, which were placed in the ark of the covenant. And the ark was a wooden box overlaid with gold. And on its lid were two golden cherubim. And the ark became the symbol of God's presence in Israel. It was like his royal throne at the centre of the people.

Now, what has that got to do with us? Well, we're looking at the life of David, and after years on the run, David finally becomes king. And up until now the ark, which had once been at the centre of Israel's life, had been relegated to the side-lines. But as one of his first acts as king, David decided to bring the ark back to the centre of Israel's life, and install it in his new capital, Jerusalem.

But, as we're going to see, things don't quite go to plan, and the reason they don't has masses to teach us. But before we get there, we're going to look at an event from decades before David. Because in 1 and 2 Samuel, that tell the story of David becoming king, there are two separate narratives about the ark - one years before David, and the other his attempt to bring it to Jerusalem. And there are so many parallels between the two narratives that the writer clearly wants us to see what it is that links them.

Reading: 1 Samuel 4:1-11; 5:1-5

The Philistines then put the ark on a new cart and send it back to Israel. It arrives in a place called Beth-shemesh where some people look inside the ark and die as a result. In response the people ask, 1 Sam 6:20, "who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" And they hand it on to the men of Kiriath-jearim who look after it until David comes for it decades later.

2 Sam 6:1-23

Now, the parallels between these two narratives are striking. The Israelites take the ark into battle, and 30,000 men die. David wants to bring the ark to Jerusalem and assembles 30,000 men to do so. In both it's described as 'the ark of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim'. In the first, an idol, the god Dagon - the god of grain and harvest, falls down dead; in the second, a man, Uzzah, falls down dead at a threshing floor for grain. In both the ark is transported on a new cart; and in both a very similar question is asked: 1 Sam 6:20, "who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?"; 2 Sam 6:9, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?"

So, we're going to look at three things: firstly, when you want God in your life; secondly, the impossibility of having God in your life; and thirdly, the sacrifice that makes it all possible.

When You Want God in Your Life
So the Israelites, back before David was ever on the scene, have been defeated in battle. And the elders ask the million dollar question: 1 Sam 4:3, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" So, they know enough to know there's a spiritual dimension to this, but they don't ponder their question long enough to come to any meaningful conclusions. Instead they decide they need more firepower. And the ark will give it to them: v4, 'that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.'

Now, can you see what they're thinking? It's not so much God that they want as his power. It's not so much him that they're interested in as his enemy-crushing capabilities. And they see the ark as a way to get it. It's like a magic charm. And God has become a 'thing' - something that will give them the outcome that they want. He, and his throne, the ark, are a means to an end, not an end in itself.

And the outcome wasn't good. The ark is taken captive, and if 4000 men fell in the first battle, 30,000 fell in the second.

But think about it, have you caught yourself thinking like they think? Now, sure, you're not fighting the Philistines, but what about when life feels like a struggle or a battle? And maybe you're not yet a Christian, but like these Israelites you have some some religious memory, maybe a religious upbringing, and so when things go bad, you think 'I need to reconnect with God; I need to get back to church. I need God to sort this out for me.'

Or maybe life isn't a battle, but you recognise how crazy and unbalanced your life has become and you feel the need to connect with the spiritual side just to find some peace, or bring some balance back.

Or maybe you're a Christian, but your relationship with God is pretty distant, until a crisis comes along, and then you need him and want him to act and bring some firepower to your side.

And the problem is that when we think like this, just like the Israelites, it's his power, or his guidance, or his provision that we want, rather than God himself. And God becomes a thing, or a means to an end, a cosmic benzodiazepine, or a spiritual lift me upper, or a Mr Fixit.

Now, don't get me wrong, God wants us to turn to him, especially when life is hard, and we need him most. But never just as an add on.

Ok, but if that was how the Israelites treated God, what about David? Because he sees things very differently, doesn't he? He's had years of personal experience of God being his defender And whereas many a king or president would want political or military power, or wealth, or popularity as the hallmark and centre of his reign, David wants God.

So he gathers his 30,000 men, and they put the ark on a new cart and Uzzah and Ahio take charge of the ark and start the journey to Jerusalem. But disaster strikes. 2 Sam 6:6, 'When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled… and God struck him down… and he died there beside the ark.'

Now, if you had to do a critical incident review, what's just gone wrong, what's happened? Well, what's interesting about this whole incident is less what happened and more what didn't happen. You see, right before this, in chapter 5 we're told how David defeated the Philistines in two battles, and in both the writer says 'David inquired of the Lord' (2 Sam 5:19, 23) before he went into battle. But when it comes to bringing up the ark, and organising this great celebration, there is zero mention of David consulting the Lord. Instead, 1 Chronicles 13, which gives us a parallel account tells us that David did seek advice - from his military advisors, not the Lord.

But put yourself in his shoes! I mean he has 30,000 men to organise. This is a logistical nightmare - so what does he need? He needs some managers; he needs HR and logistics. And in all the busyness

of the pageant David forgets the small, minor, unimportant detail of how God says his ark should be carried. He has forgotten that when he brings up the ark, he's bringing up the throne of the One who sits enthroned above the ark. That it's God, not David, who is the ultimate king. And in his law, God had made it crystal clear that the ark was never to be touched, and when moved it was to be carried on poles, by Levites set apart for the service. And so when the writer tells us in v3 that 'they carried the ark of God on a new cart' if you've read the first ark narrative in 1 Samuel you've got these alarm bells ringing: David is behaving more like the pagan Philistines who put the ark on a new cart, than a man who knew and obeyed God's word. And when Uzzah falls down dead at the place for threshing grain, we're supposed to see him meeting the same fate as the Philistines' god of grain.

Now, David clearly, genuinely loves God. He's a man after God's own heart. And he genuinely wants God at the centre, but in all the busyness he, and Uzzah, have become complacent. They've become familiar. They've forgotten that God is much more than a protector, he's the king; he, and not David, is the one who gives the orders.

Now, just think how like David you and I can be. You want God in your life, and not just as an add-on, but in the centre. But life's busy, and there are 30,000 other things to do, there's your work, or studies, there's your family and friends, there are the mountains, and they're all good, and those disciplines that help keep you focused on God, like prayer and Bible and church, dwindle, and you become just a bit complacent, just a bit casual, and you want God, but rather than God being the King at the centre, your life is increasingly conducted on your terms not his. And as David behaves more like a Philistine than someone shaped by God's word, so we can become increasingly more shaped by the world.

And David's complacency sets up a scenario in which a man loses his life. And the writer tells us that in response, v8, 'David was angry.' But who's David angry with? With himself for messing up? With Uzzah for touching the ark? Well, maybe. But the implication is that at least a large part of David's anger is directed at God.

And think how that can happen. David has planned this celebration and it ends up a funeral. And when you feel like God isn't giving you what you want, or think you deserve; or you feel like God has spoilt your party, you can get angry with him, can't you? Or you've prayed and asked him to do something, and it doesn't happen, you can resent it: 'what's the point?' Or when life, or God, seem unfair, or unjust, or unintelligible - like here, when a man gets slammed just because he touches a box - then we can take offence at God. Or if we are caught out in our sin, in our embarrassment, or humiliation, God becomes our target.

But whilst in his planning David may not have been a great example, in the way he handles this anger he is. Because whilst anger is the first emotion he feels it's not the last. Verses 8-9: 'And David was angry *because* the Lord… And David was afraid *of* the Lord.' And the reason David fears God is encapsulated in his question: verse 9, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?"

You see, in the disaster of Uzzah's death, something has been seared on David's mind.

The Impossibility of Having God in Your Life

You see, whilst David knew that God was his shepherd, and shield, and deliverer, and fortress, in this moment, in all the busyness, or before, David has forgotten that God is awesomely, dangerously holy.

David has forgotten that when he wants to bring the ark into the city, he's bringing the throne of the One enthroned above, the One who is more different, more 'other', more holy, more set-apart, than we can ever fully understand.

And so David, and Uzzah's, sin was not so much a failure to read the ark's user manual, as a failure to fully understand who God is. And in all David's intimacy and friendship with God that minor detail of God's absolute holiness, a holiness that consumes anything unholy that approaches it, was forgotten. And when God's holiness becomes a minor detail, so does our sin.

You see, think of this man Uzzah. Don't you feel sympathy towards him? Don't you feel like God has totally over-reacted and treated him way too severely? I mean the guy is trying to stop the ark from falling off the cart. He's trying to protect the ark. And even if he shouldn't have touched the ark, he's only doing what any of us would do. He sees the ark slipping and instinctively he reaches out to save it. It's just a reflex action.

But that's the point, isn't it? It's precisely because this was a reflex action that it tells us so much. You see, in that split second it never occurs to Uzzah that he shouldn't touch the ark. Just like our reflex actions, his tells us what he really thinks, what he really believes, deep down. And the thought that God might be holy, that this box should never be touched, simply doesn't cross his mind. He and his family have been looking after this ark for years, and any fear of the One enthroned above has faded, or never was. And, instinctively, he thinks God, the ark, needs saving, because he's forgotten, or never understood, that God needs nothing. Instinctively, he thinks that his hand is less dirty than the ground the ark might land on, but God's judgment tells us that God sees it very differently.

And that's why David's afraid. That's why he asks his question, it's why the men of Beth-shemesh back in 1 Samuel ask theirs. Because David sees with greater clarity, probably than he ever has, that no one can stand before this God and live. And if he is this holy, how can his presence ever come to us? If he is this holy, how can we ever have God in our lives?

Now, you might think, well, if that's what God is like, I don't want anything to do with him! Well, maybe you don't, but look at Obed-edom, at whose house the ark is parked after Uzzah's death, because that's who David looks at. Verse 11, 'And 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.'

Do you know where a Gittite comes from? From the Philistine city of Gath. Which just happens to be Goliath the giant's home town. So the irony is that Obed-edom is probably a Philistine, who has become a worshipper of God and come across to Israel's side. And the ark lodges in the house of this God-fearing foreigner and God blesses him. And not just him, but his whole household. And David looks at him and sees the blessing of God that comes when God is in your life and your house and he knows again that's what he wants.

You see, if God were just the moral equivalent of an exposed, unprotected nuclear core, killing all who came near, there's no way you'd want him in the middle of your city or the centre of your life.

But what if God is not just awesomely, dangerously holy, but also awesomely, dangerously, infinitely good and kind and loving and merciful? What if the King enthroned above the ark is not just a king who will not tolerate sin, but a king who pours out blessings on the house of a foreigner like Obed-edom who has become one of his people?

And that's what David sees, and he knows he wants that God at the centre. So he brings up the ark a second time. And this time things are different.

The Sacrifice That Makes it Possible

And this time, in v13, the writer talks about 'those who bore the ark'. And any mention of new carts, and the latest Philistine technology has gone. And 1 Chronicles tells us that David commanded that only the Levites should carry it. So David has reflected and learnt. And then the writer tells us in v14, that 'David was wearing a linen ephod'. So he's removed his royal robes, and instead he wears the kind of simple linen garment a priest might wear. Because David understands, better than ever, who the ultimate king is, and whose word goes, and it's not him.

But the real difference is in v13: 'And when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal.' After 6 steps, almost like a sabbath pause, a sacrifice was made. So on each journey something dies, doesn't it? On the first journey it's Uzzah, a sinner like us; but on the second, a sacrificial animal dies in place of all the sinners surrounding the ark.

And it's that substitutionary sacrifice that makes it possible for God's presence to come to David. And the same is true for us.

You see, if here, David sacrifices animals to bring home the presence of God, Jesus sacrificed himself. Here David brings the ark into Jerusalem, but one day his greatest son, the Lord Jesus, the one now enthroned above the ark, will be taken out of Jerusalem - and crucified. And at the cross, just like Uzzah, Jesus was struck down by God's wrath, but not for his sins, for ours. And he stepped into our place, the place of every Uzzah. And he took upon himself all those times we've used God as a thing, all those times we've been complacent about God, all those times when we've thought we're the king or queen, and all our sin that makes our hands more dirty than the ground, was put on him, and he was struck down for it - because he loves us. Because instead of shrinking back in terror, he wants us to know the blessing of those who can approach God's throne boldly, trusting in his righteousness, not our own. To be able to stand in his presence, not as one guilty, but as one loved and accepted and forgiven and chosen.

And when you know, like David, that God is absolutely holy, and absolutely good, you'll know the fear and the joy David knew. You'll fear God with the fear that's the beginning of wisdom as Proverbs puts it. Because you'll see God as he really is, and yourself as you really are. And you'll realise your sinfulness and his holiness; your brokenness and his wholeness; your weakness and his strength; and your dependence and his provision, and how everything you have is his gracious gift to you and how you're a steward, not a king. And that will deeply humble you and lead to wise living. [as it dethrones the idols in your life as it does with Dagon.]

But you'll also know a joy that dances. Because you'll know that this holy God loves you and has done everything you need that you can come to him and him to you. And with that joy you'll know a deep security. You see, if there is joy in the humility of David, there's also a misery in the pride of Michal, his wife, isn't there. Verse 20, "How the king of Israel honoured himself today!" You see,

Michal thinks a king shouldn't dance with joy like this. Sadly, like her father Saul, what other people think of her, or her husband, matters too much. But David knows that his honour is nothing in comparison to God's. And he can humble himself and know dancing joy because he's secure in the fact that, v21, the Lord, 'Chose me' even when he was nothing. Even when he had no honour. So he doesn't need to maintain an image. Instead, he can humble himself, and dance and bless others as he has been blessed.

And having Christ at the centre can do the same for you. You see, as we finish, think back to the god Dagon falling before the ark in his own temple. He ends up lying prostrate, in the position of total subservience and worship. And the next morning they find him decapitated - effectively executed before the Lord. And there are all these other things that we can try and get our identity and security from, like success or wealth, or sport, or relationships. And like Dagon, they become idols in our lives, and we end up serving them. But when Christ takes your throne, when he enters the idol centre of our hearts, when you know the fear and the joy of God like David knew, it will dethrone these idols in your life, just as he did Dagon. And these other things - money, relationships, success, sport will fall into their right, worship-full place.

And that fear and joy will bring real freedom. The kind of freedom that makes your heart dance like David. Because it's only a God of absolute holiness who is worthy of our worship; but it's only a God of limitless love who can bring us joy. And God, in Christ, is both.