

1. Holiness: Terrifying and Exciting

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Date: 11 May 2008

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at 2 Samuel 6 on page 258. We'll ask the Lord's help before we turn to the Word. Let's pray.

God our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your Word, we pray that the sense of your holiness, the sense of the awesome power of your Word, which can penetrate right to our very hearts, that that Word may come to us in power.

It may come to us to do all the kind of things that we have sung that it may do. And above all, that we may be led through the preaching of the written Word to the living Word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And as Willie said, this is the first of an occasional series on the life of David. Which I'm giving the general title of Flawed But Faithful. Primary school child was reading a magazine, and it was quite a good magazine, because it told the children's stories, these kind of cartoon strips with stories in them.

And one of the stories surprising was this story we've read, the story of Uzzah, and how he was struck down by the Lord for the impiety of touching the sacred ark.

[1 : 30] Very excited by this story, she went and told her school teacher. And her school teacher was utterly indignant. God isn't like that, she said. I can't believe that about God.

And very far from being praised for reading the story, the child was rebuked and told this was a dreadful way to talk about God. I wonder if you felt that when this story was being read.

This God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who sold out the world that he gave his only Son. Do you think this was a strange way for him to behave?

And that's the very heart of what we're going to be looking at today. Let me just put the chapter into context in a few words. We've come to a point in King David's reign when he's secure.

He's had many, many years of struggle, many, many years of difficulty, but now the whole of Israel have hailed him as king, and he is reigning in Jerusalem, in Zion, the city that he had taken from its earlier inhabitants.

[2 : 36] But one thing is missing. The Ark of the Covenant is not there where it should be. Indeed, the most important thing is missing. The Ark of God, verse 2, who is called by the name of the Lord of hosts, who sits enthroned on the cherubim.

The Ark of the Covenant was last mentioned in 1 Samuel 7, 20 years before. So it's a long time it's been, as it were, at the back of people's minds and out of people's sight.

Now, what was the Ark? The Ark was essentially a gold-covered box. You can read about its making in Exodus 25, and it contained the tablets of the law.

It contained the word of God given to Moses. It also, later on, contained a pot of manna, reminding people that God had provided for them in the desert.

And it contains Aaron's rod, which had supernaturally budded and come to life. In other words, the Ark of the Covenant was a place where the word of God was central, where God's provision was honored and remembered, and where the fact that God provided life from death was celebrated.

[3 : 49] And on top of the Ark was a lid called the Mercy Seat, and on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice. Almost certainly, it was destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar's army set Jerusalem, burned the temple, and destroyed it at the time of the exile.

I know Steven Spielberg thinks it survived, and he keeps on producing films to tell us about it. But almost certainly, in spite of Steven Spielberg, the Ark was destroyed.

And it was destroyed for a very good reason. There was no longer any need for it, because that Ark came in human form. That Ark pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, and showed the glory of God.

In other words, the centrality of the Ark points to the centrality of Christ, and His Word. And the background of this is almost certainly the Psalm we sung, Psalm 24, who will ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who will stand in His holy place.

And as the Ark came up the hill of Zion, there was a great triumphant swelling chorus, Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of hosts. He is the King of Glory.

[5 : 07] So that's the background of the chapter, and it's a chapter about holiness. Holiness which is both terrifying and exciting. It's a chapter about how to approach God, how to worship Him.

Now worship has both a broad sense, sense of our lives, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable worship, a reasonable service, Paul says in Romans 12.

But it also specifically means meeting, to hear the Word of God. Exodus 19 is the classic passage, where people gather on the mountain, to hear the Word of God, and to praise Him.

So we're going to look at two wrong ways, of approaching God, and one right way. We're going to look first of all at the way of Uzzah, then at the way of Michael, and then at the way of David, to emphasize the centrality of David, and his response.

So first of all then, let's look at this story of Uzzah, the first, really the first seven or eight verses. Now this story rings true.

[6 : 16] No one would have invented a story like this, and put it in the scriptures. This is not the way to attract the crowds. This is not what would be called user-friendly nowadays.

This is not the kind of God, like that primary school teacher wanted, a cosy, cozy God, who never shows any anger. Incidentally, one of the reasons why people despise the love of God, so much today, is because they have no concept of His holiness.

If you simply have this idea of the love of God, which is sentimentalized, then of course you're not going to respect Him, and honor Him, and praise Him, and worship Him.

But that's just what He does, isn't it? He's there to love. And that's at the heart of so much wrong thinking about God. This is one of what Ralph Davis calls the Old Testament nasties.

Those stories which frighten us, and they should frighten us, those stories which embarrass us, and we would rather people didn't know they were in Scripture. I don't know if you invited anyone to church this morning, but if you did, I wonder if you would still have, if you had known what the passage was about.

[7 : 24] This is the kind of God of the Bible. What was wrong about poor Uzzah? Wasn't he just trying to help? That's the natural reaction.

You read a story like this. This poor guy, he's trying to help the oxen stumble. The ark is in danger of toppling over, so he simply puts his hand out and steadies it. What was wrong with that?

What was wrong with this approach to holiness? I'm going to suggest that Uzzah trifled with holiness. First of all, he ignored the word of God.

And so did David, as we'll see in a moment or two. The Old Testament set down detailed regulations about how this ark was to be carried. On the two longer sides of the ark, there were two rings, and through these two rings were to be put long poles, which meant the ark could be carried without it being touched.

And that was the way that God had set down. Now clearly here, those who were carrying the ark had decided they knew a better way to do it. They had put it in a cart, and inevitably, when the oxen stumbled, the ark was going to be in danger of tipping over.

[8 : 43] This always happens when people ignore the word of God. When Christ and his word are not at the center of our worship and our idea of God, then we do what we think is right, what seems decent to ordinary people.

Even take the word worship itself. So many people identify worship with what we do, especially what we do when we're singing. But surely biblical worship centers around hearing the word of God. That's why the tablets of the covenant were in the ark of the covenant. The voice from heaven is more important than the voices on earth.

What God says to us is far more important than what we say to him. Indeed, think about it. We'd have nothing whatever to say to God unless he first spoke to us.

We only know how to respond to him because he has given us his word. So that's the first thing. He's ignored the word of God. And the second thing is other thought he knew better.

[9 : 53] That will always happen if we ignore the word of God. We will do things according to what seems to work. We'll have pragmatic considerations.

We'll do things because we like them. We'll have certain types of music because we like it. We'll have certain types of services because we think they'll appeal to us. And the enormous damage done by people who think they know better is incalculable. As someone who wasn't being totally cynical, say do-gooders do far more damage in the world than those who set out to do ill.

Because if you set out convinced you're doing good, you're almost invincible in your idea that you are doing good. Now, the ark had already shown it could defend itself.

If you read the incident in 1 Samuel, chapter 4 and 5, the ark had been captured by the Philistines and taken by the Philistines to the temple of their god Dagon and put in front of Dagon's idol showing that Dagon was more powerful than Yahweh, god of Israel.

[11:03] And what did the priests of Dagon find? The next morning they found that Dagon had been turned into Humpty Dumpty before the ark. The image was simply smashed in pieces.

You see, there is a great mystery here about the holiness of God. We need to obey him even when we don't feel like it.

Even when we feel we know better. There's no accident that Paul says to Timothy, great is the mystery of our faith. God was manifest in flesh.

In other words, others' mistake was trifling with holiness. We can ignore the word of God and we do what we feel like.

We must remember that in our own lives and particularly in our church life. A gospel church is a church that is driven by the gospel, by the word of God.

[12:00] not just when the word is preached from the pulpit, but in everything it does, in all its activities, in all its ventures, driven by the word of God, the ark at the center.

So we have, first of all then, trifling with holiness. But we have a second wrong way of approaching God, which I want to call sullenly despising holiness.

That is Michael, verse 16. She saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord and she despised him in her heart and by implication despised the ark of the Lord.

She was so concerned with what her husband was doing that the wonder of the ark of the covenant, of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth, as it's called in the book of Joshua, coming into this city meant nothing to her.

If Uzzah was too casual, she is far too stiff and formal. Remember, taking God seriously and being serious about what we do doesn't mean being pompous.

[13:07] It doesn't mean being stayed. It means realizing that God is the great reality whose glory fills heaven and earth. So what does this mean then?

First of all, it means that she represents the past three times verse 16, verse 20, and verse 23.

She is called Michael, not the wife of David, but the daughter of Saul. She represents the past. She wanted to live in the past. So what David said, verse 21, it was before the Lord who chose me above your father and above all his house to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord.

Michael wanted to live in the past. She wanted the way of deadness, the way of traditionalism, the way it's always been done.

You know the way in which any work of God is attempt to be stopped. We've never done it before. Or else, the other one, we did it before and it didn't work.

[14:15] We're going to make sure it doesn't work now either. She's a traditionalist. Now, tradition has been defined as the living faith of the dead, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

There's a big difference. And many in the church are obsessed with traditionalism, with ritual, with ways of doing things, with the correct procedure.

communion service, so concerned about making mistakes that we never actually meet and greet the risen Lord around whose table we gather. Like the African Christian who visited a church in the highlands, he distinguished himself at the beginning by singing loudly and heartily among the rather morose grunting that was going on.

But still worse was to come. During the sermon, he started saying, Amen, brother. Preach it again. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. This was too much for one elder who sternly fixed him with a glare and says, We don't praise the Lord here.

There you are. A chilly, heavy, wet blanket. Now, in case you think I'm knocking a particular way of doing things, let's not forget that you can have a dead informality as well as the dead formality.

[15 : 41] You go to some churches and they appear to think that the Lord is more present if they make a lot of noise. That the sheer volume will actually convince people that the Spirit is there.

It's nothing to do with method. It's everything to do with authenticity. A number of years ago I preached at a free church in the centre of Scotland. I went along there trailing all kinds of prejudice. I think, I don't like unaccompanied Sam singing. It's going to be very dreary and very dull. Well, my first prejudice was knocked on the head. The presenter was a very attractive young woman in her twenties singing her heart out in praise to the Lord, joined in that singing by the twenty or so teenagers who were there.

You see, it's being authentic. It's not ancient or modern. It's not style. It's all about being open to the Lord, loving the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, Michael represents the past and she has no love for the Lord. Not only is she no love for David, if she ever did, she's no love for the Lord. There's no excitement in the sense the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is coming into the city.

[16 : 58] And so often, now temperaments and circumstances differ. People express their love for the Lord in different ways. People express their faith in different ways.

As I've said, there's no one right way of doing it. But so often, in our Christian living, we have enthusiasm for everything except the Lord. An appetite for everything except his word.

And that is Michael, daughter of Saul. And it leads to barrenness. Verse 23, Michael, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death.

Physically, in Michael's case, spiritually, in the case of churches, who turn their back on the source of life and the source of the fullness of God. So we've got these two wrong ways.

Trifling with holiness, sullenly despising holiness, and thirdly, the way of David himself, which I'll call joyfully embracing holiness.

[17 : 58] Now, David is not perfect. As I've said, he is flawed. But, the thing about David, and this is a characteristic of David, over and over again, especially in the incident with Bathsheba, when he realizes what he's done wrong, he immediately admits he's done wrong and puts it right.

Now, David, presumably, was at least partly responsible for the way the ark had been carried the first time. David, presumably, had at least connived and perhaps actually orchestrated the ignoring of the word of God that led to the incident.

And if you look at verse 13, he'll show that he had come to his senses. When those who carried the ark of the Lord, notice, it's no longer being bumped along in a cart driven by oxen, it's being carried as the word of God had said it should have been.

And surely, David must have been, as he was responsible for the error, he must now have been responsible for putting it right. And you'll notice he sacrifices, he's wearing a linen effort, that's the priestly garment, and he dances before the Lord.

Please notice two things about how David responds to the coming of the ark, which is the coming of the Lord himself. First of all, there is fear before there is joy.

[19 : 28] Verse 9, David was afraid of the Lord that day, and he said, how can the ark of the Lord come to me? This is always a sign of the true presence of God.

We read this, we read how Isaiah saw the Lord in the temple, and it made him tremble, it made him confess his sins. That always will happen.

That's why when you hear people praying about a vision of God, you often wonder if they've really thought about what that would mean. A number of years ago, there was the so-called Toronto blessing, which caused us enormous problems down in Durham, which was marked by a so-called revival, whose features were raucous laughter, animal noises, and silly behavior.

fear. Now that is no sense of the presence of God. When Isaiah saw the Lord, he didn't start laughing about it. He didn't start barking like a dog.

He didn't even go and say, I'll have to video this and take it round the churches and tell of my wonderful experience. He said, woe is me, for I am sinful, for my eyes have seen the Lord, the King, the Lord of hosts.

[20 : 48] The fear of the Lord, says Solomon, is the beginning of wisdom. And here he offers the sacrifices, the burnt offering, which represents the whole giving of God, first of all, and then our whole giving back to him, the peace offering, representing being reconciled with God.

Way back in Leviticus, Moses had said there is only one way to approach this holy God, and that's through sacrifice, that is through offering, that is through repentance.

And Psalm 96 tells us to tremble before the Lord. So there is fear before joy, but there's also celebration.

Psalm 96 tells us to tremble, Psalm 98 tells us clap your hands. Once again, these things are not necessarily prescribing models for behaviour.

David, we are told, danced before the Lord with all his might. Probably a congregation in Africa would respond to this more warmly than one in Scotland.

[21 : 58] But the important thing is not that David danced, but that he danced before the Lord. That is the important thing. He danced before the Lord with all his might.

And notice that's repeated in verse 16. It doesn't just say she saw King David leaping and dancing. She saw him leaping and dancing before the Lord.

That is the important thing. So I've said already, it's not the style of things, it's not the way we do things, it's the heart, it's the attitude. I'm not saying for one moment that every way of doing things is as good as any other.

The way we do things has to be driven by the gospel as well. But the New Testament as you know lays down no detailed regulations for what happens when we come together. And similarly in Old Testament narrative, this is not saying David danced before the Lord, therefore we must dance before the Lord.

That's not what it's saying at all. Any more than chapter 17 of 1 Samuel is saying we are David and we have giants to fight in our lives. That's not what these stories are about.

[23 : 04] These stories are about God's great intervention to rescue his people, to call them to be his people, and to help see them grow in holiness.

And this chapter is telling us about how we are to approach him. And we are to approach him as David did, with all our hearts. And there's a little clue in 1 Kings 11 at the end of the story of Solomon that helps us to understand this.

Solomon went dreadfully astray, sinning on a vast scale in technicolor. And we are told in 1 Kings 11 verse 4, Solomon's heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God as the heart of his father David had been.

He would trivialize it to say David's heart was in the right place. But we know what the author is saying. The author is saying in spite of all his flaws, in spite of all his failures, in spite of his great mistakes, mistakes, and his terrifying blunders, this man loved the Lord.

His heart was open to him. He was a man after God's own heart and David's heart responded to that. And this is ultimately what Michal is despising.

[24 : 21] She's not ultimately despising his dancing. That's just simply the excuse. You see, David's not worried about his image. There's no sense of self-importance or pomposity about this man.

David, I always find one of the most attractive characters in the whole of biblical history. There is nothing self-centered, nothing self-satisfied about this man. The key is not leaping and dancing. The key is before the Lord. Heart, heart to fire for the Lord. And just one other point. The importance of attending, as David does, to planning and preparation.

These early verses gathered all the chosen men of Israel and so on. There is excitement, but there are also practicalities. Many a work of God begun in exuberance fizzles out when the early enthusiasm wanes.

In chapter five, the previous chapter, the city had been captured from the Jebusites, but there needed now to be steady progress in the work of God.

[25 : 29] As Rolf Davis says in his commentary on this chapter, crises may stimulate us to action, but they do not sustain life. And life needs two things to be sustained, doesn't it?

First of all, the open heart. It shows itself on this occasion by dancing before the Lord. And in our own situation, it will show itself in different ways. But also, the sheer hard work that goes into building up the kingdom of God, building up the church of God, indeed building up our own spiritual lives.

The holiness of God, a terrifying and yet exciting prospect. And it tells us, doesn't it, as we finish, that if God and his word are at the centre of our lives, at the centre of our church lives, at the centre of our worship, and worship meaning every part of what we do, as well as when we meet together, then, with all our flaws, with all our failures, with all our inadequacies, then, like David, we can please God, never serving him perfectly, but by his grace, serving him acceptably.

Amen. Let's pray. God, our Father, we recognise in ourselves all the flaws and inadequacies of this passage.

we recognise so often like Ozzo, we trifle with your word and with your holiness. Often like Michael, we are sullen and despising, and often like David, we get it wrong.

[27 : 12] We thank you also for the message of grace that calls us back when we have fallen, that calls us to continue when we have stumbled, and trusting in that grace and honouring that holiness, we pray that you will bless us as we leave this place, and as we continue our worship of you in different circumstances, in different situations.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.