

15. Immanuel in judgement and blessing

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Date: 11 December 2011

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now we're going to turn to our reading for this morning in the Bibles. You'll find it in the Old Testament in 2 Samuel chapter 6, that's page 258 if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles.

And continuing the story of the rise of the house of David. And following on from the great defeat of the Philistines that we read about last week, we now read the story of David restoring the ark of God to its rightful place in Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 6 then at verse 1. David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, 30,000. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baal Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim.

And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God.

And Ahio went before the ark. And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

[1 : 3 0] When they came to the threshing floor of Nason, Azar put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of God was kindled against Azar.

And God struck him down there because of his error. And he died there beside the ark of God. David was angry because the Lord had burst forth against Azar.

And that place is called Perez-Azar to this day. You'll see from the footnote that means the bursting forth upon Azar. And David was afraid of the Lord that day.

And he said, How can the ark of the Lord come to me? So David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.

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. And it was told King David, The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and all that belongs to him because of the ark of God.

[2 : 3 9] So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the city of David with rejoicing. When those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal.

And David danced before the Lord with all his might. He was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the horn.

As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michael, 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.

They brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it. And David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts and distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, a cake of bread, a portion of meat.

[3 : 46] And a cake of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed, each to his house. And David returned to bless his household. But Michael, the daughter of Saul, came out to meet David and said, How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants, female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself.

And David said to Michael, 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.

And I will make Mary before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this. And I will be abased in your eyes. But by the female servants of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor.

And Michael, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at 2 Samuel 6, which is on page 258. We'll have a moment of prayer as we ask the Lord's help. God, our Father, as we come to these written words that you spoke to your people once and are speaking to your people now, we ask indeed that the living word, Emmanuel, Christ Jesus himself, may be revealed to us by your Holy Spirit as we study these words together, as we open our hearts to hear what you have to say to us.

[5 : 38] And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Many of you will have seen the film Raiders of the Lost Ark, which is one of the, a number of such films and novels, a kind of genre, which centered around the rediscovery of the ancient Ark of the Covenant or some manuscript which was always going to change the history of the world.

And essential to these books is the fact that this box, the Ark of the Covenant, was magic. It destroyed your enemies and it protected you.

Now, that clearly is hocus pocus. That clearly is nonsense that whatever it may be as entertainment, as sense, as history, as gospel, it has no standing at all.

And yet, the Ark of the Covenant is a powerful, indeed the symbol of the presence of God. King David, although he had captured Jerusalem, although the Davidic throne was now there, the place needed above everything else, the presence of the Lord God, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant.

And that's what this story is telling us about. The Ark of the Covenant comes to Jerusalem, the city of David, which is also the city of the great king. Now, what was the Ark of the Covenant exactly?

[7 : 11] Essentially, it was a box covered with gold, which contained powerful reminders of who God is and what he does. The Lord was enthroned on the Ark of the Covenant, in the words of Chronicles, the passage that Willie read earlier on.

It's described as the footstool of our God, where Yahweh, God of Israel, was enthroned above the cherubim. So it's the place from which God reigns, symbol of his power, symbol of his reign, symbol of his authority.

It was also the place of revelation. It contained the tablets of the law, the words that God had spoken, the words in which he revealed himself, we call the Ten Commandments.

So it was a place from which God spoke. He reigned there. He spoke from there. It was also a place which contained the pot of manna, reminder that God was the provider.

In the desert, as the people traveled to the promised land, they were fed the manna, and they were told to preserve a pot of manna in the Ark of the Covenant to remind them of God's provision.

[8 : 22] We also contained the rod of Aaron, the brother of Moses, a rod which had budded, a reminder that God brings life out of death. So the very heart of Israel's faith symbolized there, and also above it, the lid, the atonement cover, which I think it was Coverdale originally gave it the beautiful and evocative translation, the mercy seat.

That was where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the great day of atonement. So it was a place where God, in his grace and mercy, came down to meet the people.

Now, we don't have an Ark of the Covenant, do we? Because it was almost certainly destroyed at the exile. Nebuchadnezzar's armies probably burned it or destroyed it in some other way.

Because in the book of Ezra, when we read about the furnisher of the temple that was returned, there is no mention of the Ark. But all during that time, they did have the presence of God.

They had it among the blazing fires. They had it in the lion's dens. And they had it as they were in exile. We don't have an Ark of the Covenant, but we do have the true Ark of the Covenant, Emmanuel, to whom that Ark points.

[9 : 44] John says in his gospel, the word became flesh and pitched his tent, tabernacled among us, and we saw his glory. So, as we come today, in the presence of Emmanuel, God with us.

That's what this story is saying to us. God is with us. Oh, come. Oh, come, Emmanuel. We sang a moment or two ago. So, this is a story about how to approach Emmanuel in his holiness and in his mercy.

When Emmanuel comes, he comes in judgment and he comes in blessing. He brings judgment and he brings joy. 19th century poet Mary Coleridge, in her poem, I Saw a Stable, talks of the child lying in the manger.

This is what she says, the safety of the world was lying there and the world's danger. That's what old Simeon said as he held the child in his arms.

This child is set for the fall and the rising again of many. Emmanuel comes in judgment. Emmanuel comes in joy.

[11 : 00] That's our subject today as we look at this story. So, first of all, he brings judgment. You may have thought this is a strange story for Advent, what Ralph Davis calls one of the Old Testament nasties.

But this, of course, illustrates the truth of this story. No one would have invented a story like this. No one would have put it in if it weren't true.

Emmanuel brings judgment. And I think there are two wrong ways in which to approach Emmanuel illustrated in this chapter.

Let's look at these first. How do we approach the Ark of the Covenant? How do we meet Emmanuel, God, with us? What is the appropriate way to behave in his presence?

Well, there's one wrong way and it's represented by this man, Uzzah. Verse 3, they carried the Ark of God and a new cart brought it out of the house of Abinadab.

[12 : 00] And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart. This is what I would call trifling with holiness. Verse 6, when they came to the threshing floor of Nessun, Uzzah put out his hand to the Ark of God and took hold of it for the oxen stumbled.

Now, the natural reaction when we read this is to say, this is very harsh. Uzzah was only trying to help. So what's so wrong with what he did?

Well, first of all, it ignored the Word of God. There was a procedure for carrying this Ark. Exodus 25 sets down clear instructions.

This Ark had rings, two rings on each side, through which long poles were inserted. And those who carried the Ark were supposed to carry it on these poles.

And thus it did not need to be touched. Now, we must remember that the holiness of God is a terrifying thing. We become so cozy with God.

[13 : 06] So accustomed to treating him in a trivial and trifling manner that this kind of story makes a bad impression on us, doesn't it?

We feel Uzzah trying to help, Uzzah thinking he knew better, because on the whole we don't tremble in the presence of Emmanuel, do we? To this one will I look, said the prophet Isaiah, to the one who trembles at my word.

This Ark was not to be touched. This Ark was to be carried on these poles. This will always, if we ignore the Word, we will think we know better.

Remember last Sunday evening we looked at Psalm 95, where we saw very clearly that God's instructions need to be evaded, that the voice from heaven is more important than the voices on earth, and the total failure to realize that the Ark was the symbol of the presence of God, and not to be treated if it was simply a piece of luggage, a piece of furniture.

This is a very careful language of verse 2. David arose, went with all the people who were with him from Baal Judah, to bring up from there the Ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts, who sits enthroned on the cherubim.

[14 : 30] The Lord is not confined to the Ark. The Lord is not localized in the Ark, but this is a powerful symbol, indeed the powerful symbol of his presence.

He's not confined to it. As I said in the exile, they learned that. They learned that the true Ark was still to come, the Word made flesh, God's presence, and his very self.

The other thing is, if Uzzah had known the story of this Ark, he would have known that this Ark was perfectly capable of defending itself. Way back in 1 Samuel 4 and 5, when the Philistines captured the sacred Ark, they put it in the temple of their god Dagon to show the superiority of Dagon to Yahweh.

And what did they find? They found that the Ark was smashed in front of the idol, because the presence of God was there. And it is a mystery, isn't it?

As Paul is to say to Timothy, great is the mystery of our faith. God revealed in flesh and living among us. So the first wrong way to treat Emmanuel is to trifle with him, to behave as if this was simply something routine, to treat, in fact, the whole season of Advent and Christmas as if it was a season for simply trifling around, as if it were a season simply for toy services and nativity plays, rather than listening to the living Word of God.

[16 : 05] But there's another wrong way represented by Saul's daughter, Michal. You notice the structure of the chapter. You've got these two wrong ways.

The way of Uzzah, which is the way of trifling with holiness. Then in the middle, you have the right way to approach it. And then at the end, verses 16 and following, another wrong way to approach Emmanuel.

This is what I would call sullenly despising holiness. Verse 16. She despised him in her heart, and by implication despising the arch.

She saw King David leaping and dancing. No significant phrase. It doesn't say she saw King David leaping and dancing and despised him. She saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him.

And we'll come back to that phrase before the Lord. It's enormously significant. If Uzzah was too casual, Uzzah was too flippant, Michal was too stiff and formal.

[17 : 12] This is not appropriate behavior in front of the arch. That's what she's saying. And not particularly caring about the arch or about its significance. Caring for dignity and formality.

Caring for red tape and formalism. This is Michal. And these are still ways in which the gospel is treated today, isn't it?

A kind of flippant approach to the gospel, which trivializes it, and a kind of solemn, pompous approach to the gospel, which makes it into simply another tradition.

You notice that she represents the past three times. Verse 16, verse 20, and verse 23. She's called not the wife of David, but the daughter of Saul.

And in particular, in verse, notice verse 21, David said, 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.

[18 : 20] She wants to live in the past. She wants to live in a system that God has rejected, that God has set aside. She is essentially a traditionalist.

It's been said that tradition is the living faith of the dead, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And many in the church are obsessed with this sort of thing, with ritual, with form, with correct procedure, a chilly, heavy, wet blanket, which strangles the gospel with red tape.

And we know so much about this in our own day as well. Never mind about the ark of the Lord. Never mind about the life-changing power of the gospel. Let's get the procedures right.

Let's make sure we do it in the authorized way. Not the authorized way from the word of God, but the authorized way from church courts and decrees and so on.

She represents the past. Secondly, she shows no love for the Lord in her heart. She saw him dance before the Lord.

[19 : 31] She didn't say something like, I'm so thrilled to see that David is rejoicing in his salvation. I rejoice with him. Did she? Of course she didn't. She despised not only what David was doing, but why David was doing it before the Lord.

And notice this leads to barrenness. Verse 23, Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death. Now in Michal's case, that was physical, that was a judgment of God.

But doesn't this so often happen in spiritually dead churches, dying churches? There are no children. There are no young people. There is no living growth of the next generation.

So you see these two ways of despising Emmanuel when he comes. One is treating it just simply as an excuse for a celebration and having good fun.

The other is treating Emmanuel with this sullen, this sullen, despising behavior. Holiness is terrifying.

[20 : 48] Holiness is alive. Holiness is dynamic. Michal's approach is dead, dead, dead. There is no possibility of life coming from it.

So Emmanuel brings judgment. And we must realize that at Christmas. The safety of the world was lying here and the world's danger.

But secondly, in the passage in the middle of the chapter, is Emmanuel brings blessing. Emmanuel brings joy. Now, verse 11.

This is a hugely important verse. 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.

Obed-Edom, the Gittite. Obed-Edom from Gath, in other words. Obed-Edom from the Philistine city. You see what had happened? The blessing of Yahweh, God of Israel, the Lord of heaven and earth, had flowed out to the old enemies, the Philistines.

[21 : 48] Joy to the world. The Lord has come. Let earth receive her king. So we'll sing at the end of the service. When Emmanuel comes, blessing flows out to the whole world.

Isn't it significant at the very beginning of our New Testament, those who first come to pay homage to the Jewish Messiah are the Gentile kings from the east. As we sang last week, I cannot tell how all the lands will worship, what at his bidding every storm is still.

He will be praised among the nations. And Paul says that again in that passage in Timothy. I mentioned, Great is the mystery God is manifest in the flesh, seen of angels, believed on in the world.

So the blessing comes to the ancient enemy. Now the Philistines, of course, have been the great opponents, the great enemies. But the blessing even for them.

And you'll notice as well, another little detail, verse 13, those who bore, those who carried, the ark of the Lord. Now there is no doubt that at the beginning of the chapter, David had been to blame as well, because David gave permission for the ark to be carried in the cart, in the illegitimate way.

[23 : 09] Now, he has come to his senses. He's realized there is a right way to carry this ark. These ovulies have given instructions. One of the most attractive features of David is his willingness to change, his willingness to repent, the generosity of his heart.

One of the most attractive passions, features about him. His huge passion for the Lord. That's what lies at the heart of this, shown in his response to the ark.

He is rejoicing at Emmanuel, not some vague, generalized goodwill, but rejoicing that the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, the maker of the ends of the earth, has come into his city and into Jerusalem.

But you'll notice that this joy, this blessing, is not a superficial one. Verse 9. David was afraid of the Lord.

Now, neither Uzzah nor Michael were afraid of the Lord. David was afraid of the Lord. A number of years ago, there was a phenomenon called the Toronto blessing, which was alleged to be a special manifestation of the Spirit of God.

[24 : 28] That was marked by laughter, silliness, animal noises, and no sense of God's holiness. That was not true joy in the Lord.

True joy is based, comes from the deep wells of the fear of the Lord. Notice how David, later on, he offers the sacrifices.

Verse 18. The burnt offering and the peace offering. The burnt offering, the sacrifice, wholly consumed, which shows, the points forward to the day, when Emmanuel would die for the sins of the world.

The peace offering, the offering showing that we are reconciled with God through Emmanuel. David wears the ephod, showing he is a priest as well as a king.

This is one of the richest chapters, really, in the whole of the books of Samuel, pointing to the new covenant, with the coming of Emmanuel, with the king priest, who is David here as well.

[25 : 28] The joy, the blessing that comes, flowing out to the Philistines, flowing out to the world. The joy that's based on David's deep, deep sense of the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom.

And then the celebration, which points to the new creation, as he dances, leaping and dancing before the Lord. Now, I've often said, we are not David.

This is not a model. We do not show our reverence for the Ark of the Covenant, for the presence of Emmanuel, by leaping and dancing about. That's not what this is saying.

The important phrase is not that David leaped and danced, but that David leaped and danced before the Lord. Now, God's people, individually and collectively, come from different kinds of cultures, of different kinds of temperaments.

And we're not talking here about a particular style. of praising the Lord. What we are talking about is a heart that is occupied with the Lord, rather than with, I mean, you notice how Michal is concerned, only with David, only with David looking respectable, only with David not demeaning himself.

[26 : 42] The point is, that David's heart is once again expanding in gratitude. Think of what this Lord has done for him. He's rescued him from all his enemies. He's brought him safely to this day.

He's brought him to the city of the great king. And now, in the presence of the great king, there is the Ark of the Covenant. You'll see when we come to chapter 7, how David wants to build a house for the Ark.

And that, of course, is going to go forward into the reign of his son. The whole sense of joy, of celebration that runs through this, reminding us of the celebration when the heavens were opened and the angels sang, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards humans.

That's what's happening here, a picture of that. And then pointing forward to the new creation, when the heavens and earth rejoice. Now, you'll notice as well, in this chapter, that in verses 17 and 19, there's a fairly low-key passage about the necessary planning and preparation.

Now, that's there for a very good reason. David is concerned that this early enthusiasm doesn't just fizzle out. And, of course, the great problem about Christmas celebrations, if they're not truly celebrations of the coming of Emmanuel among us, they simply fizzle out.

[28 : 12] The anticlimax on Christmas Day and the sense that it's all over for another year. Emmanuel, however, has come to stay. Emmanuel has not come simply for a visit.

He has come to be with us. God is with us. That is true in the whole history of salvation. The question this passage leaves each one of us is this.

Is that true in our lives? Do we, like David, rejoice in the presence and in the coming of Emmanuel, God, with us?

Amen. Let's pray. Almighty God, give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light here in the time of this mortal life when our Savior came to visit us in great humility so that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead we may be made like him in his eternal kingdom where he lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.