

God's Holiness: From Fear to Joy 2 Samuel 6

"God's holiness is more than just separateness. His holiness is also transcendent."

R.C Sproul from "The Holiness of God"

Introduction: We can handle things that are powerful yet consistent, or weak but capricious, but when someone is both powerful and unstable, it leads to the wrong kind of fear. A chainsaw is powerful, but put in the right hands and used responsibly can aid in beautifying and cleaning up. A big dog that is trained and treated properly can be loyal and gentle. A police officer who can subdue someone with their hands can also hold a baby with tenderness and care. Power is good if used consistently. Or when someone or something is fickle, it may be annoying but is only dangerous if there is power attached. You can have an inconsistent starter on your car, unstable handle as you flush your toilet, or a moody teenager, but the most damage done is being late, a little water expenditure, or emotional meltdown, none of which is life threatening (though it could FEEL like life is over to the teenager).

We come to a story in 2 Samuel 6 that always bothered me, even as a kid, when it comes to **God's seeming fickle, unstable nature**. It's a story that was heard in Sunday school, or at bedtime, or at family devotions, and always struck wrong. The Ark of the Covenant was coming to Jerusalem, they symbol of God's presence becoming central once again, with people rejoicing, David celebrating, and an overall joyous occasion. Then the scene turns on a dime and on its head. The oxen stumbles, the Ark becomes unsteady, and a poor guy named **Uzzah** reaches out to steady it, keeping it from clanging onto the ground, and for this gesture, his reward is kindling the anger of the Lord who decides to kill him on the spot. Let that reality sink in. This seems like it is all kinds of wrong. At least in **Acts 5** with **Ananias and Sapphira** we are told why they were struck down, since they lied openly about their offering (which is still hard to handle, but at least there was a reason). The answer given was the **holiness of God**, which is true, but it does not seem very comforting, inspiring, or motivating to worship! If God's holiness is such that we have to walk around on egg shells waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop, there are a lot of other things we'll find to do with our time.

This, I believe, is what David had to wrestle with in 2 Samuel 6. He had successfully waited on the LORD, and God delivered the kingdom to him, including a new, central position of worship in Jerusalem. God gave him victory over his enemies, the Philistines, and was going to usher in a time of strength and eventually peace so that Israel could worship God fully, being God's people and He being their God. But there was another lesson that David needed to learn, a lesson stemming from the same lesson of humility that he would learn a few chapters later, but one that had to do with his view of God and **His Word**. Far from a whimsical exchange between God and David, this was David coming to grips with the **holiness** of God, His clear requirements, and the joy that comes from worshipping in Spirit and Truth.

From Dancing to Mourning: An Unexpected Tragedy

*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 from Baale-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. ³ 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, ⁴ with the **ark of God**, and Ahio went before **the ark**.*

⁵ And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. ⁶ And 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. ⁷ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. ⁹ And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" ¹⁰ 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.*

A Scene That Seemed Oh So Right:

Have you ever had one of those days that everything was going right for you, and then all of a sudden one incident changed all of that, turning it into something terrible. This was David's day. After gathering 30,000 chosen men of Israel together (a staggering number!), he decided to do what had been lacking the entire reign of Saul: **bring the Ark back to a prominent position in the kingdom:**

1 Chronicles 13:3-4, *"Then let us bring again the **ark of our God to us**, for we did not seek it in the days of Saul." ⁴ All the assembly agreed to do so, for the thing **was right in the eyes of all the people**"*

Remember, the Ark of God or the Ark of the LORD (mentioned 14 times in this chapter) represented the **holiness and presence of God.**

By HOLINESS, we mean that God is wholly above his creatures. We often think of holiness as merely moral purity, but at its most basic definition, holiness means *set apart*. God is wholly other, transcendent above all things He created. That is why God's character and nature has to be understood in contrast to ours, not simply in similarity. **R.C Sproul** in his book *"The Holiness of God"* described God's holiness this way:

*"God's holiness is more than just separateness. His holiness is also transcendent. The word transcendence means literally "to climb across." It is defined as "exceeding usual limits." To transcend is to rise above something, to go above and beyond a certain limit. When we speak of the transcendence of God, we are talking about that sense in which God is above and beyond us. Transcendence describes His supreme and absolute greatness. The word is used to describe God's relationship to the world. He is higher than the world. He has absolute power over the world. The world has no power over Him. **Transcendence describes God in His consuming majesty, His exalted loftiness.** It points to the infinite distance that separates Him from every creature. He is an infinite cut above everything else."*

God's holiness is far too often lost by a humanity that tries to make himself LIKE God, bringing God down to his level instead of understanding the vast nature of the true God. A proper understanding of God's holiness is the ultimate motivator for worship, drives us to the cross, and causes us to magnify Jesus Christ.

The Ark was also a reminder of God's presence. The description of the Ark in verse 2 is vivid, *"called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim."* This was a vital theological statement that describes how the holy, transcendent God **reveals himself and dwells among His people.** In Numbers 10:35-36, during the Exodus, when the Ark set out, Moses would say "Arise, O LORD", and when it would rest, he would cry out, "Return, O LORD". There was such a close relationship between the Ark and the holy glory of God that when the Ark was there, the people knew God was for them. This is why we have **sacraments** today to remind us of His presence, as we take communion and remember Christ's work in baptism, and each time we remind ourselves of the promise that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us.

So far, so good in the story. David goes to the house of Abinidab at a place called Baale-judah, or better known as Kiriath-jearim, where the Ark rested since 1 Samuel 7. He put it on a new, shiny cart, and set out with Abinadab's sons, **Uzzah and Ahio** driving. As they left the hill, David and all the people were **celebrating** with singing and the playing of instruments. It was a good day! Until they came to the threshing floor and the clumsy ox stumbled over the uneven ground. Then all terror broke loose.

When God struck Uzzah down out of anger, David responded with a two-fold, strong reaction: **fear and anger**. He was angry that the LORD had literally "broken out" against Uzzah, and his fear caused him to send the Ark away, to the house of Obed-Edom, the Gittite, for three months because he was '**afraid of the LORD**'. *Can we blame David? This was a great day with the right motives, and God seemingly put a heavy hand on Israel, for no good reason! Who can stand before that??!!?* **However, if we look a little deeper, this was not overreach at all, but a clear error in judgment and knowledge on David's part, and God was more than justified (as He always is) to act according to His nature and His decrees. Here is what we have to know.**

- 1) **David was supposed to know the Law** – And not just know the Law, but rather each king of Israel was supposed to write for himself in a book a copy of the Law (Deut. 17:18), a personalized tome, including his gold leaf stamped name on the outside! He was to know the Law so well so he could keep the entirety of it, learning to fear the Lord. But the kings of Israel treated the Law like so many treat the treasure of their Bibles today: *they look good, but stay on the shelf, or nightstand, or on APPs behind the latest Words with Friends game.*
- 2) **The Law was CLEAR** – Numbers 4 laid it out succinctly, without equivocation. Only the **sons of Koathath** could move the Ark, they could not touch or look into it, so they would have to cover it with goatskin, carry it on poles, not a cart. No lookie. No touchie. No cartie. Abundantly clear and precise. *Where did David get the idea to move it on a new cart?* None other than the last time it had been moved, by the Philistines out of their land. 1 Samuel 6 records that they sent it out of their land on a cart pulled by two milk cows.

Did Uzzah die because of the whims of an unstable God who changed His mind for no apparent reason? By no means. He died because though David and the people were **passionate, zealous, and desirous** to worship God, they did NOT do so in the way God prescribed! Since the Garden mankind has wanted to have a relationship with God, but do so on their OWN TERMS. But God delights in **obedience, rather than man centered sacrifice**. He would rather we believe by faith that He knows what He's talking about rather than making excuses for Him, particularly when it comes to worship. God is concerned for both the *what* and the *how* of worship. We believe that if God has said to do, we should do it. This is why we do **public reading of Scripture** (Acts 15:21; 1 Tim. 4:13), the **faithful preaching of God's Word** (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2); **public praying** (1 Tim. 2:1), the **singing of Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs** (Col. 3:16), and the **regular remembrance of sacraments** (1 Cor. 11:23-27). This is all overseen by qualified elders (1 Tim. 3:1-8) who ensure these elements of worship are done with biblical fidelity.

None of this is to lay a restraint on our passions (as we will see), but to focus them on what is truly pleasing to the LORD. We know that there can be a kind of **vain worship** that is heartless and offers only tradition learned by rote (Matt. 15:8-9), but should approach God with **reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire** (Heb. 12:28-29). We want to make sure we are not turning worship into an empty ritualism that disengages our mind and heart, called legalism, but at the same time avoiding the error of

going above and beyond Scripture to find something that appeals to our culture, emotions, or desires alone. *But how do these things mesh together?* That is what David discovered in the recovery of the Ark.

From Fear to Delight: An Unhindered Joy

2 Samuel 6:11-16 *“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.*

¹² *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.” So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. ¹³ And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. ¹⁴ And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁵ So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn.”*

Being in the presence of true power, or being made aware of that power can leave us fearful. I remember one member of my family who shot a handgun for the first (and only) time (and shall remain nameless, but I also have not let my daughters shoot yet, so...). As the rounds were squeezed off, tears began to well up, and fear set in. Why? It was the sheer force and power that caused her to recoil and refuse to try again. But put into a true marksman’s hands, and that power can be harnessed to hit targets with precise accuracy.

David wanted nothing to do with the Ark after the demise of Uzzah, but that was not the end of the story. A strange but consistent thing happened in the house of Obed-Edom: *the LORD blessed him and all of his house because of the Ark.* When this news got to David’s ears after **three months’ time**, David had a change of heart and mind, and sent for the Ark to once again come up to Jerusalem. Now, at first blush this seems that David’s change was strictly motivated by the **blessing** that came from God’s presence, which is only partially true. The text is clear in verse 12 that blessing WAS a factor. But there were two other reasons that come out when we understand the text.

- 1) **David used the three months to study the Law regarding the Ark** – How do we know this? **1 Chronicles 15** looks back on this event from a positive perspective, and explains that this time, David followed God’s Word:

1 Chronicles 15:1-2 *“David built houses for himself in the city of David. And he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. 2 Then David said that **no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord had chosen them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him forever.**”*

With this, he gathered the sons of Kohath, as Numbers 4 told, and made sure that they *consecrated themselves* in preparation to lifting and transporting the Ark (1 Chron. 15:12). Instead of taking the cue from culture around him, David turned to Scripture to inform worship and in so doing, offered up proper praise for himself and the people

- 2) **David worshipped with the people in humility** – Some have seen this as a declaration of priestly function, since the ephod, as we’ve seen throughout 1 Samuel, was a piece of clothing worn by the priest of Israel. If this is the case, we see David functioning as shepherd, king, and priest, which preaches really well in pointing to Christ. But I do not believe this was the point of including it in the text. First off, it would seem like a presumptuous leap that Saul had once made to assume the priestly role. But secondly, a “linen ephod consisted not of the full priestly

outfit, but rather of the Levites' sacred undergarments, so that David humbled himself in dress as just one of all the people gathered before the Lord's Ark."¹ This not only disgusted his wife (as we'll soon see), but showed the humility that is required to worship God completely. God does not share His glory with anyone, and we cannot exalt Him and ourselves at the same time. David was the king, but worshipped alongside the people simply as a servant of the King. This is a great reminder to leader, pastor, and elder in any church. We worship NOT out of a POSITION of leadership but in a POSTURE as a sinner saved by grace alone, and we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

So David worshipped in **TRUTH** – *according to the principles and prescriptions in the law* – and **HUMILITY** – *as a servant of the King*. One may think that this would become an ordinary, heavily mindful, boring type of worship. But notice how this enlivened David's worship: **David danced before the Lord with all his might**. Though this does not rise to the level of prescription, it does reveal that a heart inclined to the truth of God's Word and a humility of heart will engage the affections fully in worship. For us, this is less about the **form** of expression – though we are NOT opposed to humble interactions of worship – it does speak to our level of heartfelt engagement. John Piper said it this way:

*"I think of it something like this: the **fuel** of worship is the **truth** of a gracious, sovereign God; the **furnace** of worship is your **spirit**; and the **heat** of worship is the vital affections of reverence, fear, adoration, contrition, trust, joy, gratitude, and hope."*

David engaged his **mind** AND **heart** in worship, out of the truth and humility, which not only lead his people in corporate worship but enraged those who did NOT know the truth or walk in humility.

From Delight to Disdain: An Unconverted Heart

But not everyone was pleased with David's brand of worship. Sometimes, even when God is moving and working in amazing ways in your life or this church, there will be those who not only misunderstand, but **despise what is going on**. As David came back to Jerusalem riding the high of heart-filled worship, he met such a nay-sayer from his own family (2 Sam. 6:16-23) in the form of **Michal**, his wife and the daughter of Saul. As she looked out her window and saw David leaping and dancing, she began (or continued to) **despise him in her heart**. This revealed everything we needed to know about her heart, as opposed to a mistake David had made. She made her case against David this way:

- 1) You have honored YOURSELF today by making a fool of yourself
- 2) You uncovered yourself – meaning you dressed like a commoner rather than the king you are
- 3) You acted vulgarly and *shamefully* in front of the female servants – accusing David of activities inappropriate for a Godly man and king.

These are serious accusations, and every wise husband should listen to the wise counsel of his wife (for she often sees with different eyes and has a wisdom radar that husbands lack). But David was clear about the **motivations** by which she spoke: she was still upset/jealous that God chose David over her father's house to be king of Israel. Saul's house viewed the kingdom as something **external** and enjoyed the outward facing things: dress, status, position, etc. David did not lead nor live that way. His response was straightforward:

¹ Richard Phillips, "Reformed Expository Commentary: 2 Samuel", p. 116

- 1) I was worshipping **BEFORE THE LORD**, not honoring myself – the same God that chose me and not your father
- 2) If this is your measure of worship or disdain, you haven't seen anything yet! – David was unwilling to back down from worshipping the LORD with a whole heart to accommodate the selfish insecurities of his wife
- 3) And in terms of the women you speak of, not only will they not see me shamefully, but they will hold me in HONOR for leading in worship this way.

Now, I'm not sure this is a playbook for marital communication, but it was clear that David was not willing to concede the ground of truth to his frustrated wife (which is always a good principle), and discerned the hardness of heart in Michal's life. *Who was right?* It is clear that Michal was wrong in her criticism, since the consequence was barrenness for the rest of her life.

It is a reminder that whole-hearted worship, both in corporate settings and everyday living, WILL NOT BE UNDERSTOOD OR WELCOMED BY SOME, even those closest to us or those who say they believe the same this we do. David was willing to be despised by men to be pleasing to the LORD...we so often flip these two to our detriment.

So what do we learn? A clear, full, and Biblical view of the holiness of God is essential for whole-hearted, fully engaged, and affection filled worship. This means worship should never be flippant, should seek to engage our mind and heart, and should include planning ahead of time. If corporate worship has become dull for you, if singing has become rote or listening to God's Word has become boring, the solution is NOT to pump up the volume or shorten the service. The solution is to come into the presence of the consuming fire of **God's Holiness, His transcendence**, and cling to the person and work of our Savior Jesus Christ, in all His splendor, majesty, and glory, which leaves us **humble and desperate for grace. This is the essence of Biblical worship, and this is the source of our greatest joy.**

"The engagement of the heart in worship is the coming alive of the feelings and emotions and affections of the heart. Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead."²

² John Piper, "Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist", p. 86.