

The Ark

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Date: 03 April 2022

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[0 : 00] Well, we're continuing to work through our series on the life of David tonight, and we're going to focus on the first story of this passage, and we'll come back to David and Jerusalem in a couple weeks' time, which means that we won't discuss tonight why we don't dance and worship.

That'll be in a couple weeks, so come back for that. This is actually as difficult as that conversation is. This is a strange passage, the first half.

It's a difficult passage for us as modern people to read. A couple reasons for that. One, is that the central character in 2 Samuel 6 is a 3 3 quarter by 2 1 quarter by 2 1 quarter foot box.

What to do with that is difficult for us as we look back at something so foreign, so old it seems like. The second reason that this is even more difficult passage, that's because when Uzzah touches the box, he dies.

We're talking about, of course, the ark, the ark of the Lord here. Let's focus on the ark. We'll look at the ark and we'll look at particularly David's relationship to it.

[1 : 16] There's three things to see. The first is the nature of the ark. Secondly, the danger of the ark and finally, the final ark.

Let's do that. First, the nature of the ark. The ark of the covenant is this box I'm talking about. It's plated in gold. It's got two cherubim, two angels with wings spread across the front of it.

Then inside is the Ten Commandments, some of the manna that God gave during the Israelite wanderings in the wilderness and also Aaron, the first high priest staff all inside the box.

One of the difficult things is that in the ancient Near East, the time of the Old Testament, every single culture often would have a religion where they would carry some type of image before them as they paraded, whether that was the army or a processional into a city.

This image would be the image of their God that they worshiped. Some people in the past have come to this and said, look, Israel is like the nations.

[2 : 28] They carry their God in a box and they parade their God around like the other nations do. That's exactly the opposite of what's happening here.

It's so important as modern people who don't have the familiarity of something like this to really understand the nature of the ark. What is the ark and what is it doing and what does it mean?

It's not an image of God. It is instead what we in the New Testament call a sacrament. In our Westminster Confession, the confession that your elders subscribe to here tells us what a sacrament is.

It says the sacrament is a sign and a seal of God's covenant. Two things, a sign and a seal. A sign means that it's a symbol of God's covenant.

The ark is first a symbol and what does it symbolize? Every time the ark is present, it tells Israel God is present. It is a symbol of God's present.

[3 : 27] God cannot be contained in a box and there is no image of God on the ark. The ark is the sacrament of God's presence. When it's there, God promises to be there.

Not because he has to be, but because he's willing to, because he's covenanted to be. It's a sacrament. So much so that in Numbers chapter 10, Moses lifts up the ark.

The priest do and Moses says, advance, oh Lord, and they march. That means that Moses thought that when the ark moves, God is moving with us.

That's how closely associated the ark was with God's presence. It's not only a sign, it's also a seal, not like the animal, but a seal is when a king would take wax and stamp his signet ring, his seal, onto a letter.

And when you get that letter, you know this is from the king. And that's what is meant by a sign. And so it's a symbol and also a very sure promise. It's certain.

[4 : 31] It's definitely from the king's hand. Meaning that God, when the ark is present, God has signed it and sealed it. He is going to be there. He's going to be among his people wherever the ark might be.

Now Ralph Davis, who's one American commentator, he says this further. He says that the ark can tell you then three things. There's three things that every Israelite saw when they looked at the ark.

The first, rulership. That's what they would think of. First Chronicles 28, 2 says the ark of the Lord is the footstool of God. In our passage in the first couple of verses, it talks about it as God's throne.

But the picture is that every king sits on a throne and has props his feet up. And the ark on earth is God in heaven propping his feet up with his people.

He's condescended. He's putting his, he's there. And so you see, when you see the ark, God's here and he's the king. He's the king. And so this reconciliation, once a year, the high priest would go into the holy of holies where the ark sat in the tabernacle and he would sprinkle the blood of a lamb onto the lid of the ark.

[5 : 40] And what that was saying is that nobody is fit to be in the presence of God, but God has come down anyway. And so every time an Israelite should see it, they should say, God is king and he has decided to be with us and we don't deserve it.

That's the first thing. And then the third thing is this, not only rulership, reconciliation, but revelation. Inside the ark, remember, stone tablets, the Ten Commandments, the manna that came down from heaven, Aaron's bud, the high priest bud, meaning you can get to God through the high priest, the staff that budded.

And that means that God has not only come down, he's come down and told you exactly how to live. So those are the three things that every Israelite would see. God's king, God's come to me when I didn't deserve it, and God's told me how to live life every time they look at the ark.

Now that's the immediate context, what the ark is, but there's a wider context you've got to have to understand what's happening here in this passage.

And that's really the whole biblical story, but part of it is that the ark has been in the house of Abinadab, we're told at the beginning, for more than 20 years. And Abinadab lived right on the border of Israel, of the Promised Land, in Kyriath Jareem, meaning that when Saul was king, Saul was totally okay with the presence of God being right on the border, not quite yet crossing the border.

[7 : 10] And it shows you Saul's ambivalent relationship to the Lord. He wouldn't bring the ark all the way through, even when Philistia didn't have it. But now they've taken it back, David has, and David longs, David, David, we read from the Psalms, David lusts for the presence of God to be in the city of God, in Jerusalem.

And he's gathered 30,000 people together, and this is not to go fight, the fighting is over, they've defeated Philistia. This is a party. This is a processional ancient party, a parade, that's going to go many, many, many miles, and they're going to sing, and they're going to hit cymbals together, dance the whole way, celebrating what almost, if you read the whole Old Testament, this almost feels like the climax of the Old Testament so far.

Like God is about to finish the Abrahamic covenant, everything that he's promised. In the Abrahamic covenant, God said, I'm going to give you a people, and a land, and I'm going to give you a king, and we've got David just made king the chapter before.

The Israelites have defeated all God's enemies, and now God's presence is about to go to the city of God's eye on. And so this feels like this is it, this is the moment where we're finally having every, the new creation could come down.

I mean, this could be it, and there's actually a hint about that. In fact, if you were reading carefully, maybe you started to notice this, there are seven references in this chapter to quote the Ark of God.

[8 : 50] And then there are seven references in this chapter to the Ark of the Lord. And when you take seven and you add seven, you get fourteen.

And you know that? And that's very important, because what is it said? Why? The writer here construct that so carefully, to where there are seven references to the Ark of God, seven references to the Ark of Yahweh, because it was trying to make you think about creation.

Seven days God created, and what is the final day? What is the seventh day? God's creation is very good, and he enters into Sabbath, eternal Sabbath. And now we've got double seven, and every time there's a double seven, you know where else there's a double seven?

The genealogy of Jesus, we're meant to think about new creation. Could this be the final Sabbath? The new creation being brought about all over again.

Okay, that's the image that the reader's being given. Could this be the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant? And secondly, the nature of the Ark, secondly, the danger of the Ark, immediately you find out, no, this is not it.

[10 : 02] This is not the new Sabbath. This is not the fulfillment of the Covenant. This is not the defeat of all that is bad. This is not everything sad becoming untrue. And because all of a sudden, when they reach the threshing floor of Nikon, the music stops, and there's no more clashing symbols, there's no more flutes or trumpets, the dancing ceases.

And that's because they look down and there's a Benadab son, the boy, the young man who had been a son of the household where the Ark had been kept for 20 plus years.

There he is. He's dead and he's lying on the floor. And instead of symbols, probably there were screams and there are 30,000 people in this parade and it just halts.

And Uzzah was his name, he was struck down. And David, we're told, at the end, is afraid. He was afraid.

And what had Uzzah done? Uzzah had touched the Ark of God. Now every single one of you, I think, looks at this and gets offended by it.

[11 : 20] Do you? Are you offended? I mean, is this offensive? Because you say, did God want the Ark to touch the ground?

Because what happened? The oxen stumbled and Uzzah reached out his hand at the back to catch the Ark, because the Ark was headed straight to the mud in the filth and the manure that the oxen had left behind.

And you say, Uzzah's heart was in the right place. And God immediately strikes him down.

One commentator says this. The first thing that you have to say about this is that this is the testimony, this story is a great testimony to the reality of the history of sacred Scripture.

You know, if you were the author of Second Samuel, why write this story? If you were writing a generation later and trying to convince the nations that Yahweh, the God of Israel is truly the God of love and mercy, and that all the nations should come to Him, why would you put a story like this into the Bible?

[12 : 35] And this is what he says. He says, why use this to persuade the nations? It's offensive. It's unsettling. Why? The only possible reason that you would ever, even an ancient writer, even an ancient writer, you know why? because we have tons of text, religious text from the ancient Near East.

And when you read about them, every single one of the gods comes out off easy and clean. And here this is unsettling. And why do you put it in?

Because it's true. And the truth here is stranger than fiction. And that's evidence of its reality. Now this is not just a modern problem because we know that David here doesn't know what to do with this.

David reacts and he's afraid and he sends the ark away. He says, I don't want to get near it. And it's proof that this is not just a modern person's response, but every single person was shocked.

They did not know what to do with this in this moment. Now I have to expect that if the real God, if God is real and the real God were to come down and confront me, that I would be shocked by his reality.

[13 : 57] You know, in other words, if we expect to open the Bible and find a God that a 21st century person really expects the God that you expect to be there, the God that's there in every single way you would think, then it's probably the case that we're chasing after an idol.

We want a God that looks like a 21st century Western person. And that's not what we have here. Instead we've got reality. We've got the fact that we can't create an image of God that we've got to listen to the God who's come down and confronted us.

Nevertheless, still, what do you do with this? What do you do with this scene? Now let me try to make some sense of it.

The procession, the party of the parade was doomed from the start. Something bad was going to happen. And that's because one key word, and that word is in verse three, it's the word cart.

Okay? The cart. Why? In Numbers chapter seven, God gives very specific instructions about how to handle the Ark of the Covenant.

[15 : 10] You were to take golden rings and attach them on the four corners of the Ark and then slide poles. And the poles were never to be removed.

And the Ark was never to be touched. And anytime the Ark didn't need to be moved, the Tabernacle did need to be moved from place to place. Very specific priests that came from Aaron himself, a group called the Coethites, were to carry the Ark upon their shoulders by way of the poles and set the poles down in the Holy of Holies and never touch.

The high priest who came into the Holy of Holies once a year does not touch the Ark of the Covenant. No one does. The Ark is never touched. And here we learn in verse three that they put the Ark first on a new cart.

Now they probably thought, this is a new cart. It's fresh. It's nice. But that still violated the basics. Do not put the Ark on a cart is to be carried, but it's not to touch anything that has touched anything else.

You see? It's not to touch anything that's rolling along the ground, anything. And then we learn that Uzza and Ahio were carrying, were driving, steering the cart.

[16 : 23] And Uzza and Ahio are not Coethites. They're not supposed to be doing this. Only Coethites could carry the Ark and only through the poles. And so already before Uzza ever touches the Ark, two of God's rules have been broken here.

Now I say, you say tonight, his heart was in the right place. And it was.

It really was. And so Uzza and the, this is what you have to see. It's not actually about the rules. Uzza does not die here because he broke a rule.

That is not the situation because you know what? He should have never started on this venture. He should have never put the Ark on a cart. It's not really about the rules at all.

Instead, you've got to actually see what the rules are about, what the rules are for. And here's the presupposition that every single one of us have got to have tonight to approach this passage.

[17 : 27] And it's this God is saying here, you are not fit to be in my presence. Period.

Nobody is fit to be in the presence of God. And the rules exist simply to try and teach the people that.

You know, your heart can be in the right place and you're not fit to be in the presence of God. Because of our sin and our rebellion and our corruption, no one is fit.

Exodus 33, no one can see God and live. No one can approach the holy God and live. And what we have here is 30,000 hearts turned to God, parading in God's name, celebrating what God has done.

All the hearts, all the hearts are in a good place. All of them, 30,000 of them. And Uzzah dies. And God is saying this, your parade can't save you from the holy presence of God.

[18 : 41] And your works cannot save you from the holy presence of God. And your heart being in the right place can't save you in the holy presence of God. You see, what this text says is we all have a justice problem.

All of us. Uzzah, David, everybody. And the problem is the justice of God in the presence of a sinner.

And that means that Uzzah missed premise number one of Christianity, of being a believer, Old Testament or New Testament. And premise one is this, you are utterly sinful and your sin is very serious.

And that's what Uzzah misses here. And let me say a little more about that, because when you look at the wider picture, it becomes even clearer.

If you go back, let's widen out all the way to the very beginning, like we did with the children, to Adam and Eve, Genesis one to three, the beginning of history. God said, Adam Eve, you disobey me and you shall surely die.

[19 : 49] And in the Hebrew text, it repeats the verb to die twice. You shall die, die. And in English, we say surely die, meaning you will die a whole lot, double die.

Meaning you're going to lose everything. If you disobey your unfit to be in my presence, and at the time God's presence occupied all of existence, His holiness had condescended into the garden.

And what happens? Adam and Eve sin against God and they do not die, die. Have you ever noticed that? They don't die, die. Instead, God says, I'm going to let you live.

And yes, your sin has corrupted the world, but I'm going to leave space in history. That one day, the son of this woman might crush the head of the serpent.

And you see, in the midst of every single judgment that you read in the Old Testament, every single one, Uzzah touches the ark. Adam and Eve, whatever it might be, you've got to understand that every single judgment is in the context of utter mercy.

[20 : 54] Utter mercy. No one has ever gotten what they deserved. Nobody. You know, if you've ever drawn a breath, you've not gotten what you deserved. If you've ever eaten a good meal, we've not gotten what we deserved.

And Uzzah broke the rules. He did two things wrong before the third thing. It's not about the rules, because the context was mercy from the get-go.

Uzzah, you say, where's the justice? Uzzah had never gotten justice until that day. He had never gotten, just like anybody, what we deserve in the face of the just and holy God.

Now, three lessons here. The parade is stopped. David wants nothing to do with the ark, I mean with the ark, I should say.

And so he gets rid of it. And there's three lessons. First, three lessons for us tonight. First, God's presence is deadly.

[21 : 53] And God is not being capricious here. God is holy. And no matter how good of a fellow you may be, you're unfit for the presence of the living God.

Our sin, my sin, your sin is more serious than we can imagine. That's what we learn here. Secondly, the second lesson. There's a little more to it than that. There's a bigger message.

There's a bigger context. And that's that in verse eight, when it describes how God actually takes Uzzah's life. You can see it.

David is angry because the Lord has broken out against Uzzah. And then David names the place Perez Uzzah, meaning the place where God broke out against Uzzah, the breaking out, literally, or the outbreaking.

Now this word comes up in the chapter just before this, actually. And so the writer wants us to see that and compare it. And in the chapter before this, David is going to war with the Philistines.

[22 : 54] In chapter five, verse 20, David came to the Lord of outbreakings, very literally. Meaning David came before the Lord who had broken out against Philistia and defeated Philistia.

Same word. And David struck them down and he said, Yahweh, God, the Lord has broken through my enemies before me like an outbreaking of great water, of the water, mighty waters.

And he called the name of that place, Perez, the Lord of outbreaking, Perez, the same name. And then we come to chapter six and now it's Perez Uzzah. The Lord broke out against Philistia.

Now the Lord has broken out against Uzzah. And what do we learn? What do we learn? We learn that before the face of God, Israelites and Philistines are the same.

This tension between Israel and Philistia, God's people, not God's people, before the Lord, Israel and the Philistines are the same.

[23 : 58] They're both sinners. They're both unfit for the presence of God. And one commentator says this, God's lethal holiness levels both pagans and churchmen.

Once again, God has broken loose with a numinous power and an unexpectedness which petrifies a human being. And this time, not in favor of David's undertaking, but to its detriment.

The level filled, the field is level, I should say. The playing field is level here. Thirdly and finally, before we go to our third point, we cannot, the third lesson, we cannot approach God on our own terms.

We cannot approach God on our own terms. And this is actually what David finally realizes in verse nine, because who's really to blame here? It's David, the king.

You know, who is it that got the ark on the new cart? Who was in charge? It's David. David missed all of this. And in verse nine, David is afraid.

[25 : 03] And this is what he says, how can the ark of the Lord come to me? And you see, David is realizing something in that sentence. He's realizing this could happen to me too.

Now thirdly and finally, the final arc. Now two things again, to just reemphasize here as we start to close, two keys to understand the whole of it.

This passage is calling us simply to be aware of what we deserve, what justice really is for our sin on the one hand. On the other hand, it's calling us to see at the same time how much God holds back his justice from Genesis three forward.

He stays his justice over and over again. He did it to Adam. He did it to Uzzi. Every point of Uzzi's existence and for every one of us, God stays his justice.

He doesn't give us what we deserve. He comes in mercy. He gives us so many gifts. He showed Uzzi mercy every hour, every minute, every day, and he does the same for everybody.

[26 : 15] And this is exactly again what David realized. Back to verse nine. How can I be in the... How can the ark come to me? He says, in other words, he's saying, how could I be David the king, God's man is saying, how could I be in the presence of the ark?

If this happened to Uzzi, what is going to happen to me? And he sends the ark away. And that means that David wakes up here to the great problem of the Old Testament.

And that's that he knew he's realizing, I think. And I don't know if this is the first time, but he makes this clear in the Psalms. He knows that his sins had not really been dealt with in the Tabernacle.

See that's what he's realizing. That all the blood of bulls and goats, the lambs that had been sacrificed, they were actually signs of God's mercy, of God saying, I'm holding back justice for now.

And David realizes here, none of it had actually really dealt with his sins. It hadn't actually met the justice of God.

[27 : 39] And Israel knew this too. We mentioned earlier Leviticus 16, the once a year moment where the high priest would come in to the Holy of Holies where the ark once a year and once a year only.

And the way that worked was they would take two lambs and the high priest would put his hand on the head of one of the lambs as a symbol of casting the unintentional sins of the whole nation onto the lamb to be slain.

And that lamb would be slain and the high priest would sprinkle the blood on the lid of the ark and it was a statement, it was a request, it was really God's pronouncement to them that I will stay my justice and I'll be present among you.

And that death is required because of your sin. But the reason Israel knew that that was not enough is because of the second lamb. God had built this lesson in that this was not enough.

The blood of a lamb is not enough. And what they would do is he would take his hand and he would put it on the second lamb. And he would send that lamb out into the wilderness and that lamb would wander, left to live.

[28 : 56] And that was the waiting lamb, the wandering lamb. And that second lamb represented Israel, Israel waiting and wandering, lost in the wilderness knowing that we need something more than this.

The lesson was built right there into the heart of the very sacrificial system. And Hebrews, Hebrews in the New Testament says it, tells you what David figured out in verse nine.

And this is what Hebrews says. It says, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins, therefore Christ came and he said, with burnt offering and sin offering, you are not pleased, O Lord, but a body you prepared for me.

And see, all you've got to do to understand this story is open John chapter one and come down to verse 29. And it says this, Jesus Christ is the lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world.

And he's no mere lamb, he is the lamb who takes on the sins of Israel, but does it with power. Meaning the day that Jesus Christ steps into the earth, there will be no more second lamb left to wander about in the wilderness, the waiting lamb.

[30 : 27] Because the lamb who can actually deal with David's sin and Uz's sin and anybody's sin has come. He's come to take away the sins of the world.

And you say, well, how does he have power to do that? How is it that this lamb can do it and the other lambs couldn't? Well John one again, John one 14.

Remember that the ark is the most important piece of furniture in the tabernacle. And what does it say about Jesus Christ when he's born?

He has tabernacled among us. Meaning he is the ark. Jesus Christ is the ark.

How can this lamb take away the sins of the world? Because he is also the ark, the divine presence itself. God, the ark, has become the lamb, the sacrifice.

[31 : 25] And so he has power to take on the sins of Israel. Remembering that that wandering lamb represented, he can do it. He can take it on. He can retrofit it.

He can be enough for Uz and David, even though they've already passed away. He can be enough for every person backwards in history and forwards in history. He has that power.

He is both the lamb and the ark at the very same time. And so it's not surprising. It's not surprising at all. That Noah passed us through the waters of God's judgment on an ark.

It's not surprising because the ark was there with Noah and the ark is there with Israel and the ark. But they were always waiting. They were always waiting for the ark, who would also be the powerful lamb that could take away the sins of the world.

Now, the last thing here, approaching God has not changed. We are unfit as sinners to, we've got a justice problem.

[32 : 28] What has changed are the terms of approach. In the early church, there was something often that happened in worship.

All the way, some churches still do it now called the Agnes Dei, the lamb of God saying, and they'd say, the lamb of God takes away the sins of the world and the people would respond and say, Lord, have mercy.

And that's it. That's the prayer in the face of Uzzi tonight. That's Uzzi. That's for Uzzi. That's for everybody. That's for anybody. The lamb of God has done what the lambs and the Old Testament could not do.

He has taken away the sins of the world because he is the ark. He is God. And so you can pray tonight. Anybody, Lord, have mercy and he will give it to you.

Let me say three things as I close. Very quick, don't worry. Jesus coming then for us, Jesus came into the world. When Jesus comes into the world, you know what it means?

[33 : 32] It means your sin is worse than you thought it was. The very fact that God showed up in history means the problem was bigger than you thought.

Your sin is worse than you thought. Uzzi says this, that, but Jesus, when Jesus came, that's what we're told to. Secondly, it tells us that God's mercy is greater than our sin.

One great theologian says Jesus Christ gives more than sin can take away. And the ark is a double entendre in that way.

It says you're not fit to be in the presence of God and God is at the same time saying, I want to be close to you. And so Jesus Christ gives you more than sin could ever take away from you.

And then thirdly and finally, it says this, you know, I would just imagine that everybody, all 30,000 of them, they're that night, they're that day. When they saw Uzzi there laying on the floor, had to be asking a question in their head, will I ever get to see God or more, could I ever touch God?

[34 : 47] Is there going to be a day where I can touch the sacrament of God? And you know, Jesus Easter's coming.

John 21, he turns to Thomas and says, touch me. You can touch me. You can touch God. You can touch the bread, the sacrament, every time you hold the bread and the wine in your hands, it says my body should have been broken, my blood should have been spilled, but his was and now this is a testimony to me to you.

Know that one day you will touch God, Jesus Christ, the ark. You will touch the ark. He will say to you, touch my hands when he comes again.

And that's an invitation tonight to faith. And so one more time, the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world and we say, Lord, have mercy.

That's our prayer. Let's pray. Father, we ask for mercy. We ask for mercy not in the powerless blood of the animals, but in the powerful blood of the ark himself, poured for us, Jesus Christ.

[36 : 02] And so we give thanks that we stand on this side of the gospel, Lord, and we can see what you were doing, what you were doing all along in the midst of hard stories like this.

We know that redemption was at work. And so we approach you tonight, God, humbled by this passage, fearful, knowing that we approach a God that we could never define.

And so we do ask, Lord, that you would give us that awareness, that consciousness. But then, Lord, we know that you are the God who's come close to us. And so we give thanks. And we ask, I ask for every one of these people tonight, for me, for them, that we would all cry out as we begin our Mondays, Lord, have mercy.

And we give thanks for that mercy. In Jesus' name, amen.