

Devotion, Danger and Delight in Worship

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Preacher: Iver Martin

[0 : 00] I suppose it's happened to most of us. You're in a city or a town that you don't know very well, perhaps on holiday, and you become aware as you're walking the streets that there's a crowd gathering.

And there are two instinctive reactions to that site. First of all, you want to know what the crowd is all about.

Why are they gathering? Why are all these people going in the same direction? And the second instinctive reaction is, I want to be there. I want to be where the action is.

I don't want to miss out on whatever it is. I remember this happened to us quite a number of years ago when we were in holiday in Paris. We happened to be out on the streets one night just going for a walk.

And like I say, you can become aware of large numbers of people all going in the one direction. So we went in the same direction as the crowd. We had no idea what was happening.

[1 : 02] And we discovered that it was the 14th of July. We should have known that anyway. And we should have known the significance of the 14th of July, which is Bastille Day.

And to my great embarrassment, I had no idea what Bastille Day was. I had to go and look it up afterwards. It was a lesson in French history. Nonetheless, we didn't want to miss out on the action. We wanted to know what the crowd was all about. There had to be something which attracted such a large number of people. We are now going back 3,000 years, 1,000 BC, and we're going to a little city in Israel called Kiryath Jiram.

And there's a large crowd of people gathering. Two instinctive reactions. What is this all about? It's not just a small... I mean, this must have been the greatest crowd there ever was in Kiryath Jiram because it was only a small village.

There were 30,000 people and not only the 30,000, but the King, the newly installed, newly appointed King David, was there leading them.

[2 : 13] And so you ask somebody, what is this all about? And you find out that at the heart of this great celebration, because there's a huge amount of noise taking place, there is a box.

A box stands at the heart. It rests at the heart of this celebration. I want to concentrate this evening on this procession, which was probably the only...

It was quite unique in the history of Israel. Nothing ever happened, nothing ever like it happened before, and nothing ever like it happened since that time.

And it all revolved around this box. The rejoicing because of the box, and because of what the box means to them all.

I want to ask what kind of rejoicing there is. What kind of celebration is it? Is it a historical event? Is it someone's birthday? Is it a royal event?

[3 : 16] What kind of event is it? And what is it within that event that interrupts it so badly halfway through? In actual fact, we're going to see that there are two disappointments, two things that spoil this great momentous occasion.

But I want us to look at it by way of three contrasts, three contrasts. I want us to look at it, first of all, and this may not be apparently obvious at first sight, but first of all, there is the difference between Saul's reign, Saul was the previous king to David, and David's reign.

This is what brings this contrast to the four. There is a massive difference between Saul's reign and David's reign, and it all centers around this great box.

And then I want us to look at the difference between David's anger and his joy, the anger that takes place halfway through the chapter, and the joy that David takes part in as he both begins the chapter, but particularly as he brings this great occasion to a conclusion.

So there's the contrast between Saul's reign and David's reign, that's number one. Similarly, there's the contrast between David's anger at God, by the way, his anger is directed at God, there's no question about it, and his joy in the Lord as he finishes this great procession.

[4 : 54] And then at the third contrast is the contrast between what I'm going to call true worship from our hearts and being a mere spectator, true worship which takes place, first of all, in our hearts, and which is again directed in the Lord and being a mere spectator to that worship, and as Mikal discovered, or as Mikal felt in her heart, a bitterness, a severe bitterness towards everything that was going on.

So there's three contrasts then. What was going on was simply this, that David was taken, what symbolized the presence of Yahweh, or the presence of the living and true God, the God of Israel, he was taking that symbol and he was putting it in its rightful place at the heart of the community of Israel.

Now that's the opposite to what Saul had done before him. Remember that Saul was installed as the first king of Israel, but he turned out to be a massive disappointment.

We saw this with Derrick last week. He turned out to be a massive disappointment, and the reason for that was because, and of course Derrick asked this question last week, was Saul a real believer or not going to leave that aside as he did, but nonetheless he was a great disappointment because as far as you could tell, God was not at the heart of his kingship, of his reign.

And one of the ways in which you know that is attitude to this great box. Well, look at this in a few moments. This, he dismissed it. He laid it to one side.

[6 : 44] He marginalized the ark of the covenant. He was content to have it sitting for many, many years. The entirety of his reign in fact, in one house away from the heart and the center of Israel.

Now that told us a lot. That tells us a lot about the kingship of Saul and particularly where his heart lay.

This box was the size of an ottoman. It was precisely 1.1 meter long, what was 0.7 meters wide and 0.7 meters high, and it had been constructed at the time of Moses during the journey of the children of Israel in the wilderness.

And it was part of the structure that God had ordained so that he could dwell among his people and so that his people could gather and worship him in the way that he had chosen.

And right at the heart of this great structure, the tabernacle, we don't have time to go into this in great detail, was a place called the Holy of Holies. This was the most sacred location of the tabernacle.

[7 : 54] And the most sacred item within the Holy of Holies was this box, this chest, this chest, the size of an ottoman. Let me just say two things about it.

It was called the Ark of the Covenant. And it was one of the most intriguing items in the Old Testament for two reasons.

First of all, because of what lay within it, it was a box that was made with wood, it was overlaid with gold, and inside that box, inside the Ark, there were three things. There were the Ten Commandments, the Tables of Stone that Moses had collected from God on Mount Zinai.

Then there was the rod that miraculously blossomed and budded that belonged to Aaron. God had made it bud and blossom on one occasion, and that was to be kept as a momenter to remind the people of Israel of the power and the life-giving power of God.

The commandments, of course, were there to remind the people of the permanence of God's law, the Ten Commandments. And then thirdly, there was the pot of manna that was collected in the wilderness that reminded the people of God's provision for the people.

[9 : 10] All of these, of course, they point to God. The Ark of the Covenant was an emblem, it was a symbol, it was a location that drew the attention of the people of Israel to the nature and the character of God, but it was more than that.

Because the most important, if I can say this, the most important feature of the box was not the fact that it was a box, it was the cover, the lid, the top of the box.

This wasn't made out of wood covered in gold. This was made out of solid gold. It was a massive slab of solid gold, and it was shaped, it was fashioned in the form of two cherubim or angels, and they were shaped in the form, first of all, of the angels looking or covering the box itself, the ark itself.

But they were also shaped in the form of a throne, the Ark of the Covenant was the location where God chose to enthrone Himself, to locate Himself at the very heart of Israel as their present glorious, awesome King.

So the Ark was God's throne, and it was identified with God, it was identified with the presence of God, and God chose to sanctify or consecrate this item of furniture, if you like, as the place where He Himself would descend and where He would rule in His glory at the very heart of His people, Israel.

[10 : 56] We'll come back onto that in a few moments' time. David understood its significance, and David understood that as part of his newly installed or newly inaugurated kingship, that he was going to put God at the very heart of everything he was and everything he intended to do as king.

So David, by doing this, he's gathering all the leaders of Israel, all the important figures of Israel, the government, and he's saying to them, my kingship is going to be God at the very heart of our nation.

And in order to do that, I'm going to take the Ark of the Covenant out of obscurity, and we're going to publicly and solemnly and yet joyfully elevate God to His rightful position on the throne of Israel.

So this you can understand, the nature, how solemn and yet how joyful and how unique this occasion was. It wasn't about David, although David had just newly been appointed as king.

This was about God and who David and the nature of how David wanted to reign. He wanted to see himself, first of all, as a servant of God. He never lost sight of the fact that he was only a shepherd boy that God had taken and had placed on the throne of Israel.

[12 : 30] He never lost sight of who he was. A great lesson there for all of us, isn't there, that all we are are sinful, ordinary human beings, and whatever we are today, it's what God has made us.

Whatever abilities and gifts and place and status God has given us, it's there. He's given us for a purpose so that we can serve Him. This was David's way of saying, my kingship is going to be in service, first and foremost, to the God of Israel.

So there was a massive difference between leaving God on the margins, as Saul had done, and placing God at the very heart of everything that David represented.

Is God at the heart of everything you are tonight? That's the great challenge. That's the great example that David brings us this evening in worship and in joy and at a time of honouring God and giving Him the glory and the honour that He deserved.

And yet there was a tragedy, an interruption. All did not go well on that occasion.

[13 : 55] All of a sudden the noise stops, the celebration stops, the joy turns into dread and panic and fear, because what happened was that they had been transporting the ark of the covenant on a cart.

And that cart was led. It was pulled by two oxen, and at one point the oxen stumbled. And it looked as if the ark was about to fall off the cart.

So Yusah, the ordinary man, Yusah, he happened to be right there. He put his hand out to stop the ark falling off the cart.

And the moment he touched the ark, what we read is that the anger of God was kindled and Yusah was put to death, because he had put his hand out to stabilize the cart and to stop the ark of God falling off it.

Now at first sight, unless, admit, we're reading the Bible, we don't want to avoid it, we don't want to minimise this. We don't want to dismiss a chapter like this, because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

[15 : 13] Believe me, I feel just as uncomfortable reading this as you do, as many people have done. We want to face up to it. We want to ask, well, what does it mean? What can we learn from this?

At first sight, let's be honest, it appears as if God is acting somewhat unfairly. Severely, He's overreacting, if you like, to what was well meant.

After all, what's wrong with putting your hand out and just to make right what appears to be going wrong?

And when God put Yusah to death because of that, you can understand both David's anger and his fear. I can well imagine what David would have thought.

Here I am, I'm trying to give God His rightful place in Israel. I'm trying to show an example to all these people. These people have ignored the Ark of the Covenant for all these years during the reign of Saul, and I'm trying to write that.

[16:16] I'm trying to redress the balance. Saul has got it wrong. He's marginalised God all these years, and here I am, I'm publicly trying to restore these people back to a right relationship with God, and this is how He repays me.

This is what He does. All Yisah did was to put His hand out to do what He thought was best, and God reacts like this.

I can also understand the fear that David felt, because if God is going to do something just, just because Yisah simply, as a matter of instinctive reaction, He puts His hand out to stabilise the Ark. If God is going to act like this, then what hope do I have? Who knows who's going to make the next mistake, and who knows what's going to happen? I might be the next one.

Who knows what disaster God's going to bring about just for an ordinary action like this one? We can understand that, can't we? We can understand that.

[17:21] Well, that's David's anger at God. He's honest. What I love about the Bible is its honesty. You'd never expect a man who God calls a man after his own heart to be angry with God, and yet he was.

That's just how he honestly felt, just like I suppose we read a chapter like this, and we feel really unsettled. We really feel unhinged. That's okay.

We have to be honest with ourselves and honest with God, but don't stop there. Don't come to your own conclusion. Don't write God off just because something happens to make us feel uncomfortable.

Let's try and understand what is happening, because notice the transformation between David's anger and his joy at the end of the chapter.

What takes place in the middle of the chapter is not how the chapter ends. David's reaction was to run away from God, and his way of showing that was just to put the ark in the nearest house I can find.

[18:29] It belonged to a man called Obend Edom, and we'll just forget about this. I'll go back to Jerusalem and we'll think no more about it. I'm just going to call a halt to this whole process.

But then sometime afterwards he discovered that God had actually blessed the household of Obend Edom from the moment that the ark had entered it.

I don't know what that meant. I don't know whether it meant that all of a sudden his crops blossomed, or he had 10 times more crops than more of a harvest than anyone else, or something to do with his family, or something to do with his wealth.

I don't know how God blessed him, but from the moment that the ark of the covenant entered into the household of Obend Edom, things changed for the better, dramatically and spectacularly.

So obvious that it was clear that God had blessed. God had done something great for the household of Obend Edom. You see, what David had discovered all of a sudden was this, that the God who punishes is the God who blesses at the same time.

[19:41] The God who punishes is the God who blesses. And he discovered also the reason why God does act in this way.

Just let's remember two things very briefly. First of all, God has to act according to his nature, and his nature is one of holiness.

His is, you see, we talk about an awesome God. We sing it, don't we? Our God is an awesome God.

Do we have any idea of what we're singing? We sing about the holiness of God. We sing sometimes of Him that goes, He burns with holy fire.

Do we know what we're singing? This is what we're singing about. His otherness, His awesomeness means danger.

[20:41] It means that you cannot come too close, a bit like Moses. Remember when God appeared to Moses in the flames of the burning bush, and Moses was just going to sidle up to the burning bush, and God said, Stop where you are, because the ground you're on, take your shoes off, because the ground you're standing on is holy ground.

You see, that's the nature and the character of God, and God has to be consistent with that nature and that character, which means that God's awesomeness is dangerous.

There's so much of, even in the world, actually where this is true. There's so much of what we think is awesome. It's actually quite dangerous.

Thinking of electricity, what could we do without electricity? It lights our buildings. It gives us a power. It heats our homes. What would we do without it in a modern world? And yet you can't get too close to it. You can't touch a live wire. You touch a live wire and you're dead. And we know that. We don't complain about it. We know it.
[21 : 47] We just don't touch it, and that's it. Much of what draws a crowd is also awesomely dangerous.

New Zealand has been in the news recently for all the wrong reasons, I know. And our hearts go out as we were praying earlier on to those who have suffered in that terrible tragedy. And you'll know that New Zealand is a very remarkable place. Thousands of tourists go there. One of the places where tourists go is a place called Rotarua. I don't know if any of you have been there. I'm sure that many of you have. It's a place that draws thousands upon thousands of tourists. If you go to New Zealand, you have to go to this place because of, because if you go to some of the parks nearby, the parks have walkways where there's lakes. And the lakes are all boiling. And that's what draws the crowd, because they're boiling. It's volcanic, and it's incredible to stand there and watch these lakes bubbling away.
[22 : 54] Fascinating. Yeah, you can't get too close. You take the wrong step, and if you fall in, you're finished. And that's why there are warnings all over the place.

Do not cross the line. Do not cross the fence. And God had said this in the book of Numbers. Do not touch the ark. Why did He say that?

Because He loved His people. He didn't want this to happen. So He gave warning after warning after warning. Do not on any occasion, I don't care who you are. I don't care what status you have. I don't care how old you are. Do not touch the ark, because it is the most sacred, because it's identified with me. And touching the ark is tantamount to coming too close. So how can you blame God for just being true to His Word? For bringing about what He had warned them about in the first place. Use un-you. God is true to His Word.

[23 : 53] And yet the same God who punishes is the God who blesses. And this is what David came to discover when he saw not only the holiness of God breaking out against us, but the kindness of God, the generosity and the love of God.

And that's where the gospel comes in. See, we don't have the ark of the covenant anymore. Don't have any items that symbolize God that are sacred anymore.

We live at a different time. And yet we worship and serve and love the same God.

And what makes the gospel so remarkable this evening is that God hasn't changed. He's the same God as David worshipped, as Moses worshipped, as Abraham worshipped, the God of holiness and the God of glory.

But the reason we can come close to Him tonight is because something truly remarkable has taken place. But you know what that is, that God Himself has taken the punishment that we are reading about here that you deserve.

[25 : 06] He has Himself taken the punishment on Himself at the cross. He has become guilty for our sinfulness and our transgression.

And because Jesus has taken our place and has become the sacrifice for our sin, we can confidently and joyfully come into His presence this evening, knowing that we have an awesome and a God, a God who loves us and a God who has called us into fellowship with Himself. And that is what I believe transformed David's anger into David's joy in this chapter, because he saw these two elements in God coming together. His kindness and His holiness coming together. You and I can gaze on the kindness of God and the holiness of God coming together in the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

And that is what ought to generate so much unique joy in our hearts this evening as we worship Him. Very quickly the third difference, the third contrast is between what constitutes true worship where David actually in moments of unfettered, unrestricted joy, he dances before God.

[26 : 44] There seems to be a crescendo in this chapter towards the end where as he discovers more and more about the nature and the character of God in its fullness and in His glory, he just wants to rejoice in God because he knows that He is safe.

The only safe place with God is that faith relationship in which true worship is the consequence. Here is a picture of a man whose heart understands who God is and who has been drawn by the Lord into fellowship with Himself.

And we tonight are in exactly the same position. What a privilege it is to rejoice in God because of who He is and because of what He has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And our worship, like Derek said last week, ought to be characterized, and our lives ought to be characterized by a unique sense of joy, a joy that goes beyond Sunday and goes into the week, a joy in the security that we know in the Lord Jesus Christ, a joy that knows that nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But it wasn't a joy that was shared by His wife. The second tragedy that appears in this chapter was the very person who was closest to Him, Mikal or Michael, I don't know how you pronounce it, Mikal was Saul's daughter.

[28 : 24] And I'm guessing part of the reason why she hated what was going on was because she compared it with what her father was, her father's negligence. Her father never gave the place to the Ark of the Covenant that David did, and she knew that David was doing the right thing.

But instead of joining with him in his celebration of all God's goodness, she despised him because Chronicles tells us that she was looking from an upstairs window, and that's what happens when you're only a spectator.

David was part of the crowd, leading by example with enthusiasm that was infectious, leading from the front. But Mikal, on the other hand, was up there in the upstairs window looking down.

She was where she thought the king's wife should have been, away from, aloof, detached from all these ordinary common people. And David, she thought, should have been with her, detached in his own kingly place.

But David knew he was only an ordinary mortal like everyone else, saved by grace. And he was going to express his love for the Lord in a way that gave honor to him because what mattered to David was God's place at the very heart of the kingdom.

[29 : 48] And sometimes the people who are observers are the most critical. The people who know nothing of that inward faith that David had, and I hope you have tonight.

Sometimes the mere observers can be the most traditional. They can criticize what goes on in the church. This shouldn't be right. This is not right. The modern church today is not like the church I grew up in.

And really what they're saying is, I actually don't know the Lord. I don't know the truth and reality of the gospel.

I hope you're not in that position tonight, because if you are, come down. Come down and discover this great gospel for yourself by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and what He's done for you on the cross.

Only then will you discover the joy of a new life, a life that is transformed, a life that God has raised from the dead, and a life that lives for Him, and in His service, and a life that extends forevermore.

[31 : 07] Mikal knew that David had something that she didn't have. And I think there are many people, and when they look at Christians, they see something that they don't have.

Now there's two things you can do. You can either say, well, what is it you have? And I want that. I want to know this God from us, or you can despise the gospel, which is it to be?

I hope it's the former. I hope so much tonight that if you're in that position, if you're tonight, you're an observer, that you come down and join with the rest of God's people in knowing Him and loving Him and serving Him and discovering that forgiveness that only He can give.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for that the God who is holy is the God who blesses and the God who forgives and the God who reconciles.

We pray tonight that as we examine this Old Testament chapter in the light of the New Testament, we pray that we will see Jesus and that we will see Him more clearly and that we will, by the power of your Spirit, experience that newness of life that you can give in Jesus' name.

[32 : 31] Amen.