

2 Samuel 6, Underestimating God

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[0 : 00] And Neva is going to come and read God's word for us. So over to you, Neva, 2 Samuel, chapter 6, page 309. Amen. David again brought together all the able young men of Israel, 30,000.

He and all his men went to Bala and Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enfronted between the cherubim on the ark.

They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahiah, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahiah was walking in front of it.

David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord with castanets, harps, lyres, tambourines, rattles, and cymbals.

When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act.

[1 : 05] Therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.

David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me? He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the city of David. Instead he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.

The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household. Now King David was told, The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has because of the ark of God.

So David went to bring the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the city of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf.

Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sounds of trumpets. As the ark of the Lord was entering the city of David, Michal, daughter of Saul, watched from a window.

[2 : 19] And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart. They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it.

And David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord. After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty.

Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates, and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women, and all the people went to their homes. When David returned home to bless his household, Michal, daughter of Saul, came out to meet him and said, How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would.

David said to Michal, It was before the Lord who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me rule over the Lord's people Israel. I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more indignified than this, and I will be humiliated in his own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour.

[3 : 33] And Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children to the day of her death. Amen. Thanks so much, Neva. That's great. I don't know what you thought or felt as the passage was read.

You might have got a lot of questions about the story. It's rather an extraordinary story, isn't it? But I hope what is super clear to you, even before we have any of those questions answered, or even discuss any of them in any kind of detail, I hope it's really clear to you that the God of 2 Samuel chapter 6 is not safe.

What I mean by that is that the God of 2 Samuel chapter 6, the God of the Bible, is not a cuddly friend in the sky for you.

It is not God Almighty, as they say. It is not Father Christmas in the sky or the Easter bunny, just looking to do nice things for us when we ask. No, the God of 2 Samuel 6 is not safe like that.

And as we were thinking with the children, that means that he is serious. I think we're to think more of God like a lion than we are like a domestic cat. And our story this morning, David finds that fact out in brutal fashion, doesn't he, as he tries to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

[4 : 50] Now, let me try and explain what's going on here in a bit of the background to it. The ark, or the ark of the covenant, to give it its full name, is the box that's made by Moses to hold, amongst other things, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Here's a little cartoon picture of it. It was kept in the holiest part of the tabernacle, behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies. On top of the ark, between the wings of the cherubim, was the mercy seat from where God spoke to the high priest as he went into the Holy of Holies.

Really, the ark and its presence with the people was to be symbolic of the fact that Israel were God's people. God was with them and they belonged to him. Now, the backstory to our passage this morning is that just over 20 years before 2 Samuel chapter 6, the ark had been foolishly taken by the Israelites into battle.

Without asking God, really, I guess it's something like a lucky charm. They'd taken it into battle with them in the hope that by taking the ark with them, they'd then win the battle with the Philistines in a place called Aflech.

Turns out to have been a stupid mistake. They lost the battle. The Philistines took the ark away as a trophy of war, transported it back to a place called Ashdod. Now, that was a national catastrophe for the Israelites.

[6 : 09] Okay, so they'd taken the ark into battle, thinking this is a lucky charm. It's going to make us win. They lose. As they came back and told the high priest that the ark had been captured, he fell backwards off his chair, broke his neck and died.

That's how serious the situation was. Now, as it happened, and perhaps unsurprisingly, God was more than able to look after the ark himself. So the Philistines put the ark in the temple of their God, a God called Dagon.

But when they came back the next day, Dagon, the idol, had fallen over in front of the ark of the Lord. It was like he was bowing down to him. So they quickly and hurriedly put Dagon back on his feet.

But then the same thing had happened the next day, and this time his head and his hands were chopped off as well. Now, if that wasn't clear enough for the Philistines, also the residents of Ashdod started coming out with tumors.

It got so bad in the end that they ended up voluntarily sending the ark back to Israel. They put it on a cart and they let it wander back on its own, which it did.

[7 : 13] But all that was 20 years ago. And for all of that time, the ark had been in the house of a guy called Abinadab in a place called Kareth-Jerim in 1 Samuel chapter 7, but now called Bala in Judah in 2 Samuel chapter 6.

It's the same place, just two different names. And our passage begins, doesn't it, with David heading there with 30,000 people from Israel, the brothers Uzzah and Ayo, to bring a brand new cart to collect the ark and bring it back east to Jerusalem.

You're with me so far tracking the story. I don't think it's hard for us to imagine, is it, what David is thinking at this point in the story. He's living in the fortress city of Jerusalem, as we found out last week.

He's captured the idols of the Philistines and destroyed them. So he wants to bring, doesn't he, the ark of the covenant, God's presence with him into the fortress city of Jerusalem.

And the whole thing takes on a kind of victory carnival type atmosphere, singing and dancing with all kinds of instruments being played in verse 5, including a rattle, which is the world's least complicated instrument.

[8 : 18] They're making merry and having a great time together until disaster strikes. Somewhere along the way at the threshing floor of Nacon, which we're not exactly sure where that is or who that was, the oxen stumble, the cart wobbles, Uzzah puts out his hand to steady the ark and is killed.

On first reading, it seems like a sort of reasonable thing for Uzzah to do, doesn't it? Just a sort of reflex reaction. But to our shock, he dies, instantly dies. In case you're tempted to think, oh, maybe that was just a horrible coincidence.

If you look down at verse 7, it tells you exactly why he dies. Take a look at the explanation. God struck him down. There you go. God killed him.

God is a lion, not a pet cat. Now keep looking down at your Bibles and you'll see in the next verse that David is angry. He's angry because of the Lord's wrath. He pretty much sulks off in verse 10, leaving the ark in the house of a guy called Obed-Edom.

Now here's the challenge, I think, for us this morning as we come and look at the passages. Why did God do that? Why would God strike Uzzah dead? Uzzah is doing a good thing.

[9 : 28] They are bringing the ark of the covenant of the Lord because they are serious about the Lord. They want to bring that ark to the city. And they are dancing and worshipping and praising God.

And Uzzah dies. Why would God kill him for doing that? What does God have to gain from making David afraid of him in verse 9? Well, I think the truth is that Uzzah should have known better than what he did.

Way back in Numbers 4 and in Numbers 7, parts of the Bible that Uzzah should have known, especially given his father had been looking after the ark for 20 years, that there are some instructions on how to move the ark that he should have known about.

There really are two clear instructions in the book of Numbers about the ark. The one is, don't touch it. Don't touch it. And the second is, don't put it on a cart. You need to carry it using the poles. Interestingly, the only people who put the ark of the covenant on a cart are Philistines, and they do it because they're clueless. And so Uzzah, Io, and David here are essentially behaving like Philistines, like ignorant Philistines.

[10 : 35] And so Uzzah dies, just like those who'd done before him, who treated God's presence as a light thing. And David learns, and we learn, don't we? God is not safe.

He's not a piece of property that you can move around at will. He's not a magic charm that you can use to support your cause. You cannot come close to God. There must be distance between a holy God and sinful people like you and I, because God is not safe.

Instead, he's holy, holy, holy. It's worth thinking some more about what the Bible means by God's holiness. Holiness is a church word, isn't it, that we band around.

What exactly does it mean? I want to show you that holiness means two things, okay? And I want you to imagine, because this will illustrate it for you, I want you to imagine that you've just bought yourself a shiny new pair of trainers, okay?

You've just bought yourself a pair of trainers. They're not like your old trainers, okay? They're not like your old trainers for two reasons. One, they're not dirty, okay? Your new trainers are clean.

[11 : 37] Not like your old trainers. Those trainers are dirty and mucky. They've been in the mud. They are no longer, they're no longer clean. They're dirty and soiled. But the second thing about your new trainers is that you keep them separate.

You keep them aside from all your other shoes. I mean, you put them back in the box at night, don't you? And you keep them specially on the top shelf so that your siblings don't have anything to do with them.

Anything like the kids on Friday night. When you play the games, they say, don't tread on my air forces. I mean, we play the games, that's what they're interested in. Don't tread on my new trainers, yeah?

Because I want to keep these separate. They're not dirty and they are separate. And that's what the Bible means by holiness or being holy.

It means about God that he is clean. He is morally clean. God is perfect. He is without sin. He's pure.

[12 : 34] You know, you and I do wrong things, don't we? God does not. Not ever. You know, we think wrong thoughts. God does not. We lie. We cheat. We can be unkind to other people in what we say.

But God is unflinchingly faithful to his word. Totally consistent. Absolutely trustworthy. You and I are full of selfish desires, aren't we? God is full of self-giving love.

God is pure. In fact, God is so pure that to be moral is defined by God. Morality doesn't exist outside of God.

Being moral is God. God is pure. Perfect. But his holiness also means that he is set apart from us. He is separate to us. Not only because his moral perfection cannot be near us in our sinfulness, but also because God is of a different order to us. He is from eternity past.

[13:34] God has always existed. There was never a time when God was not. God has been there in eternity. You and I have been here since, I don't know, 1956 or 76 or 2010 or whenever it was.

God has been there from the beginning. God created everything that we see, feel and touch. He created it from nothing by speaking.

God is not made up of anything that we can see or touch. We are made of flesh and bones and we make nothing from nothing. We make things with other things that God has already made.

God is present everywhere by his spirit ruling and reigning over every centimeter of the planet. We are only here. And we're only now. And some of us are not even fully here and fully now, are we?

We're half asleep. God holds everything in his hands. From planets to electrons, he sustains the universe by the word of his power. We sustain absolutely nothing.

[14:34] God can raise the dead. He can make the blind see. He can calm the storm. He can heal the sick. We get sick. We die. We're blind. We're thrown around by the sea. We are helpless in the face of it all. God is separate to us.

It's not only that he's morally pure, but he's of a completely different category, different type altogether. Now bring that back to 2 Samuel chapter 6. And the wonder in 2 Samuel 6 is not that other died.

The wonder in 2 Samuel 6 is that anybody lived. Because God is not being picky. He's not setting arbitrary rules and zapping people who fail to keep them.

This isn't like the school uniform rules, right? You know, the school uniform rules are just, they're just there to keep you in your place, right? These rules are not like that. These are like safety barriers.

The rules here are like the bars on the lion's cage at London Zoo. They're there to keep you safe from the lion. Don't touch.

[15:33] Carry with poles. They're there for your protection. Because God is holy, holy, holy. It means his presence is not safe. Now, I wonder if I can ask you this morning whether you've thought about God like that before.

Is your God like this God? My hunch is that as we read 2 Samuel 6, and as Neva read it for us so well, that our instinct is just to think, you know, poor Azar.

Oh, poor Azar. What a rough deal. But is that because we've forgotten what God is really like? You know, actually, the truth is that 2 Samuel 6 is not an isolated incident in the Bible. You know, Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament drop dead in Acts 5 for daring to lie to the Spirit.

Paul prays in 1 Timothy chapter 6 and calls God the one who dwells in unapproachable light, who no one has ever seen or can see. Mary is told by the angel that her child will be called Holy, the Son of God.

The soldiers who come to arrest Jesus fall down on their faces just when they hear him utter the words, I am he. The church in Corinth is losing church members.

[16:45] Church members are getting sick and dying in Corinth because they're treating the Lord's table without the seriousness that it deserves. Listen, my friends, the truth is that God is no less holy today than he was in 2 Samuel chapter 6.

Unless we understand that, unless we read 2 Samuel chapter 6 and say, do you know what? Azar, for all the tragedy of it, it was going to happen. Again, and I can suggest that we've never really met the God of the Bible and we stand in grave danger.

God Almighty is not the God of 2 Samuel 6. He's a God you've made up. A domesticated God is not the real God. The God who is there is not safe and not to be messed with.

Let me try and say this gently. There's a quietness in the room and I do want you just to think about this some more. My concern for us as Christians this morning, for me, as much as it is for anybody else in this room, is that we just don't take our Christian life seriously enough.

It's possible, isn't it, for us to be Sunday Christians. Even just if we're Sunday morning Christians, right? Or even occasional Sunday Christians.

[17:57] We treat God like a lucky charm that we bring out when we feel we need him. Oh Lord, please help me now, will you? Bless my plans. Do what I want you to do. You know, we treat Christian discipleships like our friends treat the lottery, don't they?

You know, they play just in the hope that it might come out when they need it at one stage. And we hope that God might come through for us one day in a dramatic way when we need him. But listen, if God is like the God of 2 Samuel 6, and he is, then being a Christian is the most serious thing in your life.

There is nothing that you are doing or engaged with that is more serious than the matters to which we're talking about this morning. Knowing God, loving him, living for him is the most serious thing. And to treat it lightly, to treat God as if he's a pussycat and not a lion, is a terrible tragedy. So for some of us, and maybe all of us, we just need to take the Lord more seriously.

[19:07] It brings us to the other big idea in the story, which is this. God is rich in mercy. God is rich in mercy. I think the surprise in the middle of 2 Samuel 6 is that Obed-Edom is not destroyed by having the ark in his house.

I mean, given what we've seen, that's what you'd expect, isn't it? But instead, we find that he is blessed. Obed-Edom is blessed. So blessed, we're told, in 1 Chronicles 26, verse 8, with 62 sons. That might not be the kind of blessing that you would like, but he is blessed with 62 sons. And so David takes notice of that, as I guess you would. It'd be hard to ignore that many boys. Although, I guess not all of them are born by the time the three months are up, mentioned in verse 11. Anyway, as a result of seeing the blessing, David resurrects his mission to get the ark into Jerusalem. But this time, things are different. So instead of the noisy carnival, there is a sacrificial feast, isn't there?

David kills a bull and a calf every six steps, distributes the food for the people to eat in verses 18 and 19. And notice, too, that in verse 13, the ark is now carried. It's not on a cart any longer, as they bring it into the city and into a tent that is especially prepared for it.

[20:18] And David, in verse 14, is no longer in his kingly robes, no longer dressed like a king. He is dressed like a priest, wearing a linen ephod, dancing with all his might.

Now, this upsets Saul's daughter, David's wife, Michael. She's looking out of the window, all of this going on, and is embarrassed, I think, because David looks like a fool and he's dancing. I've got a Lego picture of looking out the window and watching David dancing.

In her disgust, she accuses him of showing off to the young women, shockingly comparing him essentially to a perverted flasher in verse 20, in words which are really shocking. But David is having none of this.

In fact, he doesn't really seem to care what Michael thinks. He tells her in verse 22 that he is prepared to become even more undignified, even more contemptible. I don't really care what you think, says David to Michael, because I'm dancing before the Lord and not you.

I will be honoured by others, if not by you, he says, pointing out to her as if she didn't know it, that it's the Lord, verse 21, who chose him over and above Saul, who had never shown even a passing interest in the ark the whole time he ruled Israel.

[21:27] And now, in the end, Michael is cursed by God for her attitude and is unable to have children, meaning again, significantly, that no heir of Saul will ever be on the throne of Israel.

Now, piece this together and see what's happening. Notice again how David is dressed. He's wearing, like I said, not the robes of a king, but the linen ephod of a priest.

And instead of bringing the ark into his fortified city in a show of power and strength like a king would, he's performing sacrifices and worshipping on behalf of the people like a priest would, an undignified, weak priest.

You know, God is the show of power. And now he is throwing himself on God's mercy. And what happens? Well, amazingly, David finds out that the God who is holy is also rich in mercy.

The unapproachable, untouchable God welcomes David as he comes with him into the city. So at the end of our chapter, the God who is not safe has drawn near to his people, not to destroy them, but to bless them through the actions of a weak-looking priest who is despised by onlookers.

[22:36] Now, I suggest to you that it's not hard in that way to see David as a picture for us of Jesus. You know, jump forward about a thousand years and there's another man in Jerusalem,

another king who's also a priest, who has set aside his kingly robes, not to dance in a one-piece ephod through the streets of Jerusalem, but to walk in a one-piece smock through the same streets on his way to the cross, sacrificing not the blood of animals along the way, but shedding his own blood in his own death on the cross, paying in his own flesh the price that Uzzah paid, but not for his own sin, but rather for the sins of all those who will trust in him.

Now, if that's right, and I think it is, it means, doesn't it, that the application of the story, the point for you and me is not only, let's not make Uzzah's mistake and not take God seriously enough, but also let's not make Michael's mistake and be embarrassed by this priestly king.

See, the easiest thing in the world is to look at the cross and at what Jesus has done and just be slightly embarrassed about it, slightly ashamed. I mean, just think about it for a moment.

Sounds so foolish, doesn't it? If I tell you my only hope in life and death is a naked man hanging on a cross, bleeding out.

That's my only hope in life and death. Sounds foolish, doesn't it? Imagine believing that the death of a man in the first century could atone for my sins today. How ridiculous.

[24 : 12] How crazy. But the truth is it's not ridiculous at all, is it? Because it's in the moment of great human weakness in the streets of Jerusalem and the cross outside that we find the mercy of the holy God.

The eternal son in weak human flesh dies for our sin. Yet in the power of God becomes the means by which we can draw near to the holy God who is not safe. You can put this application in a slightly different way too, just to see it more clearly.

You can see as we finish, you can compare these two parts of the story. The surprising holiness of God is that the Uzzah reaches out in strength to help God along the way, doesn't he?

You notice that? God needs some help, says Uzzah. So I will steady the Ark of the Covenant on that card. God needs my help, so I'll help him. How kind of me.

And he dies for his trouble. But at the end of the story, we see what? A king stripped of robes, in great weakness and shame, dancing in the streets of Jerusalem, sacrificing for sins.

[25 : 16] And he is rescued and saved. Because here's the truth of it. God's holiness, approaching God in his holiness, we cannot trust in our strength, but need to come to him, finding his mercy in human weakness of his kingly priest.

See, what is it that makes us Christians? What is it that means that we can have such confidence that God is with us, working every detail of our lives for our good and his glory? What gives us confidence in his promise to bring us safely home?

What is it? Is it because we've given God a hand? Oh, you'll be very grateful, God, that I prayed to you, won't you, God? Yes, of course you will. You'll be very grateful that I came to church.

You'll be very grateful that I put more money in the offering box than anybody else in church, I think. How dare we think like that? That's us as thoughts, and it ends in death.

Instead, our confidence is in the mercy of God, meeting us in the weakness of the cross, that bowing down there, not pretending any strength of our own, not claiming any goodness of our own, not faking any gift or power or moral goodness, but looking to the cross of Jesus Christ and honouring him, there we find God to be rich in mercy.

[26 : 36] See, here's the odd thing about the Christian life. The greatest danger for you as a Christian this morning, if you are a Christian, or your greatest barrier to becoming a Christian, if you're not a Christian this morning, is not your weakness, but your strength.

You know that? The problem is that you might be conned into thinking that you're too strong to need God's mercy, like Michael was. But the truth is, is God is not disturbed by our need for mercy.

He has mercy in abundance, but God is hostile to our self-reliance, to our arrogance, to our, I've got this, I can do this, I don't need anyone. That's the hand of us, and it ends in a terrible place.

The truth is, God is holy, holy, holy, and we can only approach him trusting in the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Who else commands all the hosts of heaven?

Who else could make every king bow down? Who else could whisper and darkness trembles? Only a holy God. What other beauty demands such praises?

[27 : 40] What other splendour outshines the sun? What other majesty rules with justice? Only a holy God. What other glory consumes like fire?

What other power can raise the dead? And what other name remains undefeated? Only a holy God. Come and behold him. The one and the only.

Cry out, sing holy. Forever a holy God.