

Learning to Truly Worship

2 Samuel 6:1-23

A few years ago, on a lake near Bakersfield, CA, novice boaters found that no matter how much power they applied, their brand new 22-foot boat performed very sluggishly. After an hour of trying to make it go, they putted into a nearby marina, thinking someone there might be able to tell them what was wrong. A topside check revealed everything in perfect working condition. Finally, one of the marina guys jumped in the water to check underneath. He came up choking on water from laughing so hard. Under the boat, still strapped securely in place, was the trailer!

I could not help but to think of how the church undermines many of her own efforts to render true worship to God because of all the baggage of our humanness that her members bring to the table. That baggage may take the form of certain emotional expectations we attach to worship, personal preferences over styles of music and sermons, our own visions of what worship is supposed to look like as well as numerous other agendas that we want to accomplish that go beyond the mere exaltation of God by His people. All these things can render worship powerless.

As king, David had taken Jerusalem from the Jebusites. He had thinned out the Philistines from Israelite territory. Now, he set his sites on another important project. He would retrieve the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest artifact of the Hebrew faith, from a country village where it had rested for almost seven decades and bring it to Jerusalem, the new capital city. This would be significant religiously, politically and in terms of national morale.

David envisioned that this event would be accompanied by a remarkable day of worship, and it was ... eventually. But first, there would be a rather severe set-back to his attempt to transfer the Ark, because David had planned for every detail of the great event except for one. He had failed to safeguard that the rightful Audience of His worship would be properly obeyed and revered.

I. A Noble Aspiration (1, 2)

¹David again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all. ²He and all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark ...

A. David Decides to Bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem

Way back when a man named Eli was Israel's high priest, the Israelites took the Ark into battle, believing that it would secure a victory for them. They were treating it like a magical charm rather than seeking the will of the LORD whose presence it represented. The plan backfired. The Philistines captured the Ark. When Eli was told, he fell off his chair and broke his neck. His daughter-in-law gave birth to a son and named him Ichabod, which meant, "no glory." She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (1 Samuel 4:22).

The Philistines took the Ark to Ashdod, one of their cities, and placed it in the temple of Dagon, one of their gods. The first night that the statue of Dagon and the Ark shared quarters, the idol toppled over. “Freak occurrence,” the pagan priests figured, so they just set it back up. The following night, the idol fell again, but this time, his head and his hands had snapped off. Soon thereafter, the people of Ashdod were afflicted by a plague of painful tumors. The Ark was moved to Gath, another Philistine city, but the people there were afflicted with the same plague.

As the Ark was being moved to Ekron, another Philistine city, that town council came out and said, “We don’t think so!” The Philistines decided that their battle trophy was too much trouble, so they placed the Ark and some gold in a cow-drawn cart, and sent it back to Israel. The cows took the cart to Beth-Shemesh, but when some men from that town died when they peeked into the Ark, it was placed in the home of a priest named Abinadab in a town called Kiriath-Jearim.

When David became king, the Ark of the Covenant had not been an important part of Hebrew worship for somewhere between sixty and seventy years. But now that David had cleared the area of Philistines, and since Kiriath-Jearim was only eight miles from Jerusalem, it made perfect sense for him to bring the Ark to Jerusalem as a part of his national reunification project.

B. Great Fanfare Was Planned for a Great Event

David gave great attention to the security detail for the Ark. 1 Chronicles tells us that he consulted his military leaders before he did anything. Since the trip was only eight-miles, the 30,000 men may have been posted along the route. David made sure that all the features of a top-notch celebration were well-planned and in place, but he failed to cover one important base.

Last week I mentioned how David’s precise obedience to God, when he circled behind the Philistines rather than attacking them head-on, resulted in a great victory. He drove the enemy from the area and made this current plan to move the Ark feasible. But, I also said that a failure to be precisely obedient in another matter would result in disaster. David’s plan to bring into the new capital “the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty ...” pictured a return of Israel to covenant obedience. Yet, when it came to handling this important symbol of God’s presence, David should have authorized a little research into God’s Law.

II. A Numbing Realization (3-11)

A. Rejoicing without Proper Reverence Is Not Authentic Worship

Rather than read a bunch of names that I will inevitably mispronounce, let me summarize. Years earlier, the Philistines returned the Ark to Israel on a cart. That worked fine, so David prepared a new cart for this occasion. It was surely a very nice, top-of-the-line cart as carts go. Two of Abinadab’s sons or grandsons (the Hebrew word is the same) would guide the cart carrying the Ark. There was just one flaw in the plan. Carts were not allowed by Moses. “The Kohathites (a clan of Levites) are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting” (Numbers 4:15).

In the first place, there is no evidence that Abinadab or his descendants were Kohathite Levites. Secondly, the Ark was supposed to be transported by poles inserted through rings attached to it. This particular infraction would have deadly consequences. When the oxen stumbled, Uzzah, one of the men guiding the cart, grabbed the Ark so as to steady it and he died instantly.

Our first impulse when we hear this story is to be a little disturbed about the extreme nature of God's reaction. After all, Uzzah was trying to be helpful, not willfully rebellious or irreverently expedient. But, "his irreverent act" is precisely how the text describes Uzzah's gesture. He failed to fully appreciate what it means for a thing to be holy to God, and I have to suspect that we struggle with the story because we also fail to appreciate what it means for a thing to be holy to God.

B. And It's All about You, Lord ... Most of the Time ... I Think

That song's in our repertoire. "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You ..." but is it really? David had everything in place for top-notch religious celebration. New songs were written. The band was ready. Everything looked right but something was wrong.

Obedying God was the simplest of all ways for David to acknowledge the holiness of God's Person, His sacred temple furnishings and His Word. Is it possible that this worship service was a little too much about David's political agenda and David's vision of worship? These were not bad things. They were just not that elusive "heart of worship" about which we sing.

The *San Jose Mercury News*, in its "News of the Weird" column cites James Kelley, one of a small group at his local church who call themselves enthusiastic Episcopalians, but who do not believe in God. Said Kelley, "We all love the incense, the stained-glass windows, the organ music, the vestments and all of that. It's drama. It's aesthetics. It's the ritual. That's neat stuff. I don't want to give all that up just because I don't believe in God." That's taking man-centered worship over the edge, but our own un-surrendered worship is a step in that same odd direction.

Saul lost his kingdom because of an act of disobedience that he rationalized to be an act of worship. In a conflict with the Amalekites, Saul was commanded to destroy everything and spare no one. He did not kill the king and he kept some of the finer livestock. When he boasted to Samuel that he had obeyed God to the letter, Samuel asked, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?" (1 Samuel 15:14). Saul claimed that he had only kept the very best animals to sacrifice to *JEHOVAH*. Samuel did not buy it. He said:

²²... "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. - 1 Samuel 15:22

David reacted to Uzzah's death with anger - at who is not clear, but do not be surprised if David was mad at God Himself. The LORD had rained on his parade. But, after things sank in, David was frightened. He wasn't sure that he wanted this Ark in His citadel. He left it at the house of a man who just happened to be a Kohathite Levite, one of the legal guardians of the Ark. After that man's household knew nothing but blessing for three months, the king thought he might give bringing the Ark to the Citadel another shot. But, this time he realized that if his reign was truly to mark the beginning of a new era of covenant obedience, he had better do his homework.

III. A National Celebration (12-15, 17-19)

¹²Now 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 down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. ¹³When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. ¹⁴David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, ¹⁵while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets ...

¹⁷They 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. ¹⁸After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. ¹⁹Then 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.

A. A Proper Sense of God's Holiness Can Only Enhance Worship

After six steps, sacrifices were made. Sacrifices may have been offered every six paces. The house where the Ark was left may have been in Jerusalem and close to its final destination. This may just have been one sacrifice that was made as the Ark was removed, a way of asking for God's blessing on the endeavor in view of the previous disaster.

David dressed in an ephod, which is a priestly garment. He knew that he had a priestly role to fill in behalf of his people, but he was careful not to venture into doing those things that the Law reserved for authentic priests. The idea that he sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings means that he provided them. The priests were performing the actual rituals. David danced, sang, led singing, blessed the people and even provided them a sack lunch for the journey home.

B. This Attempt Was Memorable for the Right Reasons

David introduced a new dimension to the worship of God in Israel – audience participation. The various elements that we think of as worship had previously been fulfilled by whatever order of priests was assigned to fulfill that particular function. David, the great psalmist, introduced corporate hymn-singing. Psalm 24 is generally regarded as being written for this very occasion:

¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;

² for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

³ Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?

⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.

⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

Selah

⁷ Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸ Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.

⁹ Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty – he is the King of glory.

Selah

IV. A Necessary Humiliation (16, 20-23)

...¹⁶As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart ...

... ²⁰When 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, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"

²¹David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel - I will celebrate before the LORD. ²²I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor."

²³And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

A. Not Everyone Was Caught Up in the Moment

Religion has been known to create marital strife. One woman told her counselor: "My husband and I divorced over religious differences. He thought he was God and I didn't." But, there is more than meets the eye as we behold Michal watching David leap and dance before God. Was this the sole reason she despised Him, or was this just an occasion for her to confront him?

When Michal became David's wife (his first wife), she loved him. In fact, she once set herself against her father in order to protect David from Saul. When David was on the run, Saul gave her to another man. David took her back when Saul died and moved her in with all his other wives. At this point, she had been around for as many as twenty years, and had never bore David a son. This reduced her in the eyes of the royal harem from the wife with seniority to a lesser wife.

All Michal had left was her royal dignity. She was the wife of one king and the daughter of another. Now, her husband was dressed like a priest, which she thought was beneath him, and he was acting like a court jester. She scolded David for the sacrifice of his regal dignity. Don't read any gratuitous meanness into David's response. He simply reminded her that God had chosen him over her Dad and that he must rejoice before that God. Her barrenness was not punishment for her scolding David, but a continuation of God's judgment against the line of Saul.

B. Human Pretentiousness Has No Place before God

Michal had loved and despised David, but she never understood his love for God. She failed to see that he could not give God His rightful due in worship if he was worried about the cost, with onlookers or with his regal dignity. Michal was embarrassed at how the king was behaving in front of his people. David gave no thought to the people, for they were not his audience. People are NEVER the audience of worship, something we need to think about when we are exploring worship as a church-growth technique or we are dwelling on what we do and do not prefer personally.

Worship has no purpose but to glorify God. That means that it cannot be appropriated as a tool for fulfilling our own plans and dreams, for that injects a purpose into worship that does not fit. In subtle ways and in unsubtle ways, man-centeredness in modern worship is pervasive. In the final analysis: "... *it's all about me, Lord.*" True worship is not and can never be about entertaining or feeding people. That may occur as a side-effect, but these are not the reasons that God calls us into His presence. We approach God to give Him His due.