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## LETTING GOD BE GOD

### ***SERIES: "DAVID, A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART"***

The opening scene of the movie *Gladiator* is surreal, as I remember it. The movie begins with a man walking slowly through a field of tall yellow wheat. At first, all you can see is his weathered hand brushing over the tops of the tall grass, and a child's laughter can be heard in the distance. Then his wife and young son come into view, and you can see he is a Roman soldier. The scene then quickly changes to a battlefield in Germania, and we learn that the man is General Maximus, he is currently on the battlefield, and the scene I just described must be a flashback to a previous time in his life. Then begins one of the most realistic and violent ancient battle scenes film has ever portrayed. The film ends with Maximus again walking through a wheat-field toward his wife and son. This time, we know he is dead, and so are they. They have been reunited in the after-life. I read that the filmmakers didn't have this scene in the initial scripts of the movie. It wasn't until the third script that this scene entered the movie because they realized that without it, the film didn't work.<sup>1</sup> Without the hope of an afterlife, the film didn't have any point because (I imagine) the hero, Maximus, would die in vain.

David was a man of such battle scenes, but he was also a man whose soul was filled with the hope of heaven. David's faith in God was the most alive thing about David and the truth that has made David's prayer life an inspiration for generations. David held nothing back from God in prayer—not his anger, fear, joy, or sorrow—and as he cried out to God, he found God there. Listen to Psalm 28:7, a psalm of David: "The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him" (NRSV).

### **David was in continual conversation with God**

In 2 Samuel 1-5 is a phrase which is constantly associated with David's lifestyle: He "inquired of the LORD." David's seeking out the Lord for direction demonstrates his dependence on God and revealed a heart fully yielded to Him, and this is what God was looking for in his King. However, "inquiring of the Lord" alone, without obeying what God answers, would not be enough. So when this scripture says David "inquired of the Lord," it means that he also obeyed Him. One scene from 2 Samuel that particularly illustrates David's great dependence on God and God's answering him is found at the end of 2 Samuel 5. It tells the story of David defeating the Philistines, Israel's relentless enemies. It is particularly pertinent to what happens in 2 Samuel 6, so let's look at what happens. 2 Samuel 5:22-25:

Once more the Philistines came up and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim; so David inquired of the LORD, and he (the Lord) answered, "Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army." So David did as the LORD commanded him, and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer.

God answers David's inquiry very specifically in this passage. God makes David wait on him to know when to move out against the Philistines, and he gives David and us, through His word, a rare glimpse into the heavenly realities all around us. For David has to wait until he hears the marching of God's angel army in the treetops before going out against his enemies. I imagine the giant trees rustling quietly at first and then

beginning to shake much more violently as the sounds of footsteps become ever more distinct, until David's army and God's army become an indistinguishable cacophony of sound. God's part was to go out before David and fight on his behalf. David's part was to call on God, listen for God's response, and do what God told him to do. This is a beautiful passage to reflect on. When you call on the Lord, he will come and save you. God gives us this special passage as a picture of that salvation. I commend it to you for further reflection and prayer. Where do you need the Lord's angel army to fight on your behalf?

This was the final victory David needed to establish enough order and peace in the land that he could go back to retrieve the ark of God from the obscure place it had been waiting for over thirty years. What was this ark of God? It was given to Israel through Moses during their exodus years. It was a place where God promised that his presence could be found on earth with his specially chosen people, Israel (Exodus 25:10-22). It was a rectangular box, made of acacia wood, that measured four by two and a half feet. It was covered with gold, and on top was the mercy seat, which was a plate of gold with two cherubim facing each other with their wings outstretched.<sup>2</sup> It contained Moses's tablets of stone, manna, and Aaron's rod. The Israelites carried it before them into battle to acknowledge the presence of God, who went out before them with his armies of angels to fight on their behalf. God sometimes gives his people symbols, or glimpses of heavenly reality, and this is what the ark was. Israel did not believe God was contained in the box, or confined to the box – that would be for Indiana Jones fans, not Israel.

The Philistines captured the ark during Saul's reign, but it proved too much for the Philistines to handle after it rained plagues of all kinds on them until they sent it back to the house of Abinadab, a priest. Saul had no interest in retrieving it, but David was consumed with the idea that the ark of God belonged in the center of Israel's life as a nation. Having established Jerusalem as his new capital, and with a heart to make worship of YAHWEH the foremost concern of the people of God, David seeks to retrieve the ark from its place of obscurity, the house of Abinadab the priest. It is a noble pursuit.

### **David's first attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem**

**David again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all. He 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. 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 Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart<sup>4</sup> with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals. (2 Samuel 6:1-5)**

What an energetic and enthusiastic celebration this was for David and Israel. With 30,000 chosen men to celebrate the bringing of the ark into Jerusalem, David had planned an awesome celebration. But then God stepped in and stopped the festivities.

**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; therefore, God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. (2 Samuel 6:6-7)**

Yikes! What happened? It seems that David was well motivated. It seems that Uzzah was only trying to steady the ark so it did not fall.

There is not much for us to go on except that God says Uzzah was irreverent. But how was he irreverent? In verse 2, the ark is referred to as belonging to God three times. It is called the ark of God (meaning it belongs to him), it is called by his name (which means it carries his authority and power with it), and that name is the Lord of Hosts or God Almighty, who fights on behalf of Israel and wins her victories.

Beyond verse 2, in this chapter the ark is referred to as the ark of God or the ark of the Lord seven times each – the number of completion and/or perfection.<sup>3</sup> The narrator is making a point that the ark is God's property, and because it is God's possession set apart for his purposes, it is holy. Based on this, we can observe two immediate problems in this text:

1. The ark is being carried on a cart pulled by oxen. This was how the Philistines sent it back to Israel, but it was not how God said it should be transported. God gave careful instructions concerning how to carry the ark (Numbers 7:9) on human shoulders. (Numbers 4:5,15) by priests who lifted and carried it by poles fitted into rings on the side of ark.

2. God also warned that to touch the ark meant certain death. Uzzah touched the holy ark, and he instantly died, just as God said he would. Scripture says that God's judgments are perfect. Only God can know what is in a person's heart. We must rest in faith in this.

I also see a kingly problem behind all of this: David did not inquire of the Lord. In contrast to all that went before, David has not once inquired of God in this passage as to whether he should bring up the ark of God to Jerusalem, or how he should do it. This is huge. His idea might seem to be good, but if it isn't performed in God's timing or way, it will fail. Saul's kingship was marked by failing to inquire of the Lord and taking the things of God (i.e. worship) into his own hands (1 Samuel 13:8-12). Saul's attempts to worship God in his own way and disobedience to the prescribed way of God proved his downfall. Uzzah dies for irreverence (which is his own heart problem), but David is also responsible for the disobedience because as the king, he should have asked God about his plans. Here, one man dies because David didn't inquire of the Lord, but many more will die if David continues to lead as king without God's direction.

Isn't it interesting that David always consulted God about battle but forgets here to do so in the matter of the ark? Do you think David thinks he can handle worship on his own? Do you think that the things of God are easier to handle in his mind than battles or problems? Perhaps there is a lesson in this for us. How do we come this morning to worship the Lord?

But isn't striking Uzzah down too extreme, you might ask? How can we apply this to ourselves? Are we going to be zapped as well?

I want to consider two things here. First, David's new kingdom was laying its foundation. If his kingdom was marked by disobedience, as Saul's had been, Israel would fail in its commission to represent God on earth. Thus, I think Uzzah's death served as a warning to listen to the voice of the Lord. Remember that there were 30,000 witnesses to this event. Word gets around.

Secondly, many commentators over the centuries have seen Uzzah's sin as one of managing God. Having lived with the ark in his home for so many years, perhaps he thought of himself as a keeper of the ark rather than understanding that in reality, God was the keeper of him. The notes in one of my study Bibles say of this passage, "It is not wise to be in 'control' of God. He will not be managed, manipulated or controlled."<sup>4</sup> So perhaps Uzzah represents in some way those of us who think too little of God. We try to manage how we respond to him and come to worship him with our own agendas and not with a spirit of openness to hearing from him and obeying what he says.

Uzzah, then would be a manager, the man who thinks too little of God. Kathleen Norris, one of my favorite authors, writes, "One so often hears people say, 'I just can't handle it,' when they reject a biblical image of God as Father...as Lord or Judge: God as lover, as angry or jealous, God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing. However real the pain they reflect; if we see a God we can 'handle,' that will be exactly what we get, a God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we've cut down to size."<sup>5</sup>

I wanted to soften this Uzzah story, to make it more palatable, but while it is not normative in the Christian context, it does sound a warning that should not be softened. "A God we can 'handle' ...will be suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we've cut down to size."<sup>6</sup>

I need a big God, with wide mercy, and certainly not cut down to human size. A human-sized God is a truly scary idea.

## David's time out

**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 aside 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. (2 Samuel 6:8-11)**

David gets angry with God for spoiling the day, and he is angry that God did not withhold his wrath from Uzzah. I think David sees this episode as God going a little out of control. David names the place Perez-Uzzah, which means the outbreak against Uzzah. This is the word for God's wrath breaking out against an enemy. The same word was used for God's outburst against the Philistine enemy. David is mad and then afraid that God's wrath would go out against one of his people. He refuses to carry the ark further out of fear, but of course his anger does not at all affect the ark of God. The ark continues to be a blessing to those who receive its presence. Obed-edom the Gittite is a Levite priest, and the ark seems content in his home.

### **A spiritual pattern**

Sometimes God is scary to us. Like David, we do not understand why bad things happen when they do and why God allows it. A woman looking forward to having a baby miscarries, a man engaged finds his fiancé unfaithful, this week 58-year-old Tim Russert died in the prime of his life. Life has many occasions for this cycle to repeat itself. We have faith, then our hopes are dashed, and we ask, "Where is God now?" We get angry, sad, we cling to faith, we reject our faith, we seek the scriptures for hope, we pray, and somehow through this struggle God draws us deeper into his goodness if we yield to his Spirit in our lives and let God be God.

Sandra Sharp shared from last week that she was in the last stages of wedding preparation when her father died suddenly. Her wedding preparations came to a screeching halt as she had to prepare for a funeral. She had to resolve in her heart over time what this meant. Was God indeed good as she thought? Why would he take her dad, who had already had so much suffering in his life? That period in her life was a real struggle. Sandra was angry and confused, but she also sought God and his community, and over time, she was able to heal. Just as the presence of the ark blessed Obed-Edom's home, Sandra found the presence of God a blessing in her life – but not without a struggle to understand God's ways, which are certainly not like our ways. Faith is calling God good when circumstances might not readily demonstrate that reality.

It seems that we don't find God a safe haven for our souls without struggle. Faith needs to be tested to be strengthened, and we cannot resolve the hard issues of life with platitudes and easy answers as we often want to do.

After David's three-month time out, where I believe he wrestled through the questions here presented, he came back with a renewed vigor and a very changed attitude. God had also used the blessing in Obed-Edom's house to woo David back.

### **David's second attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem**

**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 down and brought up 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. David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. (2 Samuel 6:12-13)**

David has made some changes since his first attempt to bring the ark into Jerusalem. This time the ark is being carried by human beings (actually priests, we learn from I Chronicles 15). It is being carried on poles as it should be, and every six paces seven bulls and seven rams are being sacrificed (1 Chronicles 15:26).<sup>7</sup> What do the sacrifices mean? They acknowledged the holiness of God and their thanks to and fellowship with him. David has also changed his clothes from kingly garments to a linen ephod, the attire of a priest. Altogether, these changes represent an attitude change on David's part. The focus of the celebration is now on God and his presence and rule of his people Israel. David leads the procession as a king in submission to God, the true sovereign of Israel, and his role is primarily to lead his people in worship. True worship must be obedient to God.

David returns to pick up the ark and proceed with it to Jerusalem with an even grander celebration than before. David takes correction well. May we do the same.

However, this procession is also marred by disappointment. It seems celebration is always counterbalanced in the David story with hardship. Of course, that is true in all of life. We celebrate God not in the absence of trouble in this world but in spite of it. That is faith.

### **David arrives home to Michal**

**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, disrobing in the sight 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 ruler over the LORD's people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. I 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."**

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

This time, when David enters Jerusalem in his loud and celebratory entrance, it is his own wife, Michal, who rains on his parade. Notice that Michal does not come down from her window seat to welcome David and/or God into Jerusalem. She holds herself aloof from the joyous worshippers below. In the text, she is identified as Saul's daughter and not David's wife – a hint at her attitude toward both David and God. She sees David given over to worship, and she hates him. His uninhibited worship of God is interpreted in her eyes as a disgusting display, with David exposing himself to the on-looking women (perhaps the ephod flew up). She sees him as undignified, foolish, and definitely not kingly.

I have seen worship look foolish. Sometimes I catch those commercials on television that are advertising Christian worship concert music. As an observer of worship on TV, I find it pretty silly to watch. People close their eyes, wave their hands, cry, sway, or whatever, and if you are not participating, it can look really foolish and even unreal. This is because worship is a participatory event. In the throes of worship and abandonment to it, we lose our cool and become vulnerable. No one is to be a watcher at a worshipping event.

David, who can give his whole heart to God, worships him in spirit and in truth and is our model of a worshipper of God.<sup>8</sup>

While there are undoubtedly reasons for Michal's bitterness against David (he took her from a man who loved her), she still proves to be so angry that she cannot see God at all in her life. Unlike David, who took his anger and bitterness to God and was healed, it seems that Michal is Saul's daughter. She proves to be more concerned with outward appearances than with God.

Michal might be thought of then as the person who thinks too much of him or herself. Michal is as spiritually dead as Uzzah is physically dead. But David is alive, and vibrantly so.

### **Letting God be God**

David's reply to Michal is a lesson all of us must learn. David's wild abandon to celebration before God was for an audience of one – God.

I have thought of David's declaration of faith in this passage as "letting God be God." David has come to the point in our story for this morning of trusting that God's ways are right and good, and if we differ with them, we are the ones that need to adjust. David's concluding words to Michal are, "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than his, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes."

David's choice to worship is an act of his will to humble himself. In David's story this morning, David has let God be God and submitted to God's will in his life. He did not understand Uzzah's death, but he took it to God, spent time alone with him, and came back with a new attitude toward God and a renewed commitment to follow him. He was rewarded for his faith when God promised David that one of his descendants would reign as king of the people of God forever (2 Samuel 7). That one, the Son of David, rode on a donkey into Jerusalem many years later, an event foreshadowed by the entrance of the ark of God, as the book of Hebrews tells us. Jesus's celebration was also marred by death, this time his own. There were Uzzahs in the crowd who only wanted to manage God, and there were Michals in the crowd who had no interest in God at all, but there were also those like David, who welcomed him with singing and dancing and rejoicing. We want to be like David.

David knew where his help came from. God marched his heavenly army over the tops of the balsam trees and David heard the sound of it, and it sounded like salvation.

I want us to have a moment to praise God together, so in the Davidic tradition of poem as prayer, may this be our prayer to close our time together:

### **Praise from All Creatures, Laughers, and List-Makers**

by Ted Loder

Praise be to you, O Lord,  
who spins shining stars across the wondrous heavens  
and stretches out the seas,  
who lifts the dawn into place  
and sets boundaries for night.  
who awes the earth with storms  
and gentles it with green,  
who gives everything a season  
and breathes life and love into the dust of me.  
Praise be to you.

Praise in all things,  
for all things:  
the soft slant of sunlight,  
the sweat of battle,  
a song in the wilderness,  
the evening breeze,  
the deep breath,  
the tended wound,  
mercy, quietness, a friend;  
for the miracles of he daily,  
the mysteries of the eternal.  
Praise be to you.

Praise from all creatures,  
laughers and list-makers,

wonders and worriers,  
poets and plodders and prophets,  
the wrinkled, the newborn,  
the whale, and the worm,  
from all,  
and from me.  
Praise,  
praise be to you  
for amazing grace.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Filmtracks <<http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/gladiator.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*. Tyndale, 1980. pg. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Youngblood, Ronald F. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Zondervan, 1991. pg. 869.

<sup>4</sup> *The Spiritual Formation Bible*. Zondervan, 1991. pg. 454.

<sup>5</sup> Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace*. Riverhead Books, 1999. pg. 214

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, Joyce. *1&2 Samuel*. Intersity Press, 1989. pg. 209.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, Brian. *Dance or Die*. PBC Cupertino Discovery Paper.

<sup>9</sup> Loder, Ted. *Guerrillas of Grace*. Augsburg Books, 2005. pg. 32.