

Sermon Given by

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## 2 Samuel 6 - "The dance of death"

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Last week we had Psalm 2 as a 2<sup>nd</sup> reading and there's a phrase in Psalm 2 that gets to the very heart of 2 Samuel 6. The phrase is in v11 and it describes how we are to come before God – the phrase is this: "rejoice with trembling." The God of the Bible, the true and living God is to be acknowledged with both fear and joy. One of my favourite French films is called "La Gloire de Mon Pere" which Simon Scott introduced me to about 10 years. It's a beautiful film set in most part in very rural SW France and the weather, reflecting the upbeat feel of the film, is always warm and sunny – apart that is for one dramatic scene where these two young boys are caught out in a mighty thunderstorm. They're out in this rugged hilly terrain walking along a cliff face when the thunder and lightning starts. One of them in particular is terrified by the storm but the other knows this cave in the rock face where they can shelter and yet watch this awesome spectacle. They are both fearful and yet full of boyish delight and joy as they watch the storm.

God, like that thunder storm is a God who we should rightly fear and yet also rejoice and delight in. He is more awesome than any thunderstorm and yet He's also a far better shelter and refuge than any cave in the cliff face. When we're called in Scripture to fear God, what that means is the kind of fear that is left when all the life-threatening terror has been removed and yet the awe and the trembling remains. Before the true and living God we should, as Psalm 2:11 puts it, "*rejoice with trembling*" – rejoice to know God as a merciful, gracious Refuge and Saviour and yet not a trivial light-hearted airy-fairy rejoicing – we're to rejoice with trembling. That, I think, gets to the heart of the message of 2 Samuel 6.

It's a chapter all about the ark of the covenant and we probably all need to put aside from the start any dodgy theology that we've picked up from watching the Indiana Jones movie: "Raiders of the Lost Ark". Let's look down at v2: "*He (David) 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.*" It wasn't that God lived inside the ark but it did represent his presence among his people. And there are 3 key aspects to God's presence with his people as symbolised by the ark. First, it represented his RULE. It was as though God was enthroned above it, and it was a sort of symbolic footstall beneath his throne. Secondly, it represented his REVELATION because inside it were the two tablets of stone inscribed with the 10 Commandments. Thirdly, it represented RECONCILIATION because the blood from the sacrifice of atonement was sprinkled on the lid and in front of the ark. That's why its lid was known as the "mercy seat", where people could find mercy, the forgiveness of sins, from God. So this box made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold was not just any old box. It was a visible reminder of God's presence among His covenant people. For 50 years it had been kept in a backwater near the Philistine border. David had finally been crowned over all of Israel and had taken Jerusalem as his capital – he now wanted to bring the ark into the new capital. And this is a

good and wise thing to do. By taking this action David was saying that he wanted to bring God to the centre of the nation's life. The worship of God, this ruling, reconciling, revealing God must be at the heart of Israel's life.

This helpfully challenges us to think: is my worship of the Lord central to my life; is it in the capital so to speak or is it in a little backwater where it is easily ignored and forgotten for most of the time? The journey from Baalah to Jerusalem was only 10 miles; not far at all and yet boy was it an eventful journey. In the end it occurred in 2 stages and at each stage there's a lesson for us to learn.

### **Fear before the Holy God (v1-11):**

The journey got off to a great start. Can you see that v5: *"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."* There was a carnival atmosphere, the place was rocking – it was a wonderful celebration and then v6&7 happened. It took a few moments for everyone to realise it. The dancing stopped, the music stopped – all eyes were on Uzzah as he writhed on the ground, there was a final twitch and then he lay motionless. V8: *"Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah..."* David was angry to start with and that's how many people react to this; maybe that how you're feeling right now. Why did God do that? Why did he respond so harshly; I mean the oxen had stumbled v6 and Uzzah was just trying to steady it, to stop it from toppling over. To many people God's reaction seems offensively over the top.

We need to learn afresh or perhaps for the first time that God is a holy God – there's nothing tame about God. He's not a comfort blanket that we can cuddle to ourselves. He is holy and as the narrator says in v7 Uzzah's act was irreverent. It may look nothing much to us but it was irreverent. As we saw in our first reading from Numbers 4 God had laid down very clearly in his law how the ark was to be moved. It was to be covered at all times, it wasn't to be gawped at and it was stressed no less than 8 times that the ark was to be carried. It was to be carried on poles by particular people – men from a certain clan (Kohathites) of the tribe of Levi. And yet what had they done in 2 Sam 6. Have a look back at v3. Did they carry the ark on poles? V3: *"They set the ark of God on a new cart..."* That was the way the Philistines had returned the ark back in 1 Sam 6. That was the worldly-wise way – it was not God's way. He had clearly stated that it be carried on poles by Kohathites. And the people had been warned – golden rule - Numbers 4:15 that to touch it would mean death. God had lovingly warned them of these things. They were to worship him in the way that He had prescribed. Enthusiasm was not a substitute, it is not now a substitute for obedience.

When David sets out with the ark again notice how meticulous he is to obey God's word. He carries out sacrifices v13 & 17 and this time v13 there's no cart – this time it's carried...according to God's word. Ok so what does all this mean for us? 1 warning, 2 encouragements.

The warning is this: God has not changed so make sure you know Him and fear Him as He truly is. Why do I stress this? Because there's a good chance that some of us are thinking: "Oh that's just the God of the OT. Surely the God of the NT would never act like that." But he did – have a read of Acts 5:1-11 the story of Ananias & Saphira – Simon preached on it 2

weeks ago in the morning services – you can listen to it online. God did not have a personality change when he sent Jesus. It is healthy to have a right fear of the Lord and that fear of the Lord will only grow and be maintained as we read Scripture and get to know God better, get to know as He truly is rather than as we might like to imagine him.

I like the story of the 2 men who at the time of the American Civil War were making their way to a reception in Washington D.C. on a rainy evening. The one had offered to share the shelter of his umbrella with the stranger on their way. As they sloshed along and chatted away, the stranger declared his opinion that General Grant was highly overrated. Naturally, he wouldn't have said that had he known General Grant was holding the umbrella over him. He acted foolishly because he did not know with whom he was dealing.

So many Christians have a warped and lop-sided view of God. "I just like to think of God as a God of Love – as a kind of grand-fatherly figure." As we walk with God day by day, let's strive to know him better, to know what pleases him because we so easily tend to forget what he's really like. We forget for example that he's holy – and that there's heat in his holiness. In 2 Sam 6 as they set out with the ark they thought they were honouring God as they sung and danced but by ignoring his word they were actually despising and dishonouring God. So 2 Sam 6 is a strong warning to us, it's a powerful challenge to our complacency and a great spur to obedience. God is holy – don't mess with him!

That's the strong warning for us – now 2 quick encouragements. First is that for me, passages like this, are evidence of the supernatural origins and trustworthiness of the Bible. The story of Uzzah goes so against the grain of human preferences doesn't it? No human being would have invented stories like this – not if we want to win converts and influence people.

Maybe you're here tonight as an inquirer and perhaps one of the objections you've always had against Christianity is that the God of the Bible is merely a projection of our wish fulfilment. 2 Sam 6 shoots that argument down in flames. Who would have made this story up – no-one would have! Second encouragement is that although God has not changed – He is still white hot in his holiness, He is the same but the means by which we come into his presence that has changed. To come into God's presence we don't need to join Indiana Jones in searching for the ark – the way we come in to God's presence is through Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel – God with us. Through Christ's death on the Cross all our sin has been paid for, all God's righteous anger has been spent. Through faith in Christ we can call God "Father". Yes, we should still have a right fear of Him, yes we should strive to know and obey his will but wonderfully we have far greater access - far freer access to God's presence than OT believers. And so, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it: *"Therefore, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..."* Christ has fulfilled the ark – He is Emmanuel, God with us and through him, through his one sacrifice for sins, we can come near to God with confidence.

Ok back to the passage...and we see David's anger in v8 soon changes to that right response of fear v9 "*David was afraid of the Lord that day...*" God's presence seemed unsafe and dangerous to David and so he took the ark v10 to the home of Obed-Edom for some safe-keeping. What happens? The Lord blesses the entire household of Obed-Edom, David hears about this v12 and he's reassured that though God is not safe, He is good and his purpose is very clearly to bless. David is reassured of God's covenant goodness and so decides to have another bash at bringing the ark into Jerusalem and this brings us to our second heading...

### **Joy before the holy God (v12-23):**

David carries out the sacrifices v13 but it wasn't a sombre affair by any stretch of the imagination. Have a look at v14: "*David, wearing a lined 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.*" Yes his joy was tempered with fear and reverence but it was nonetheless a real, heartfelt, exuberant joy and enthusiasm as David dances with gusto and the people shout and the trumpet blasts away. Here is a holy delirium over the presence of God. It's amazing isn't it how the Bible balances truth. On the one hand fearfulness before the Lord and on the other hand, effervescent joy before the Lord are held together in one chapter. In God's presence we should both shudder and dance. Why David's joy? Because of what the ark symbolised and expressed – God's presence - God who made and rules the entire universe – this great awesome God was with them - they may have been a small fry nation in the world's eyes – but they were God's special chosen people and so they celebrate with all their might. Everyone that is apart from Michal. When she saw her husband dancing we read end of v16 "she despised him in her heart" – so demeaning, so vulgar and she tells him so in no uncertain terms when he comes back home. What a dampner of a home-coming - V20 "*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.'*" And David answers saying this wasn't a performance for the slave girls – no this was for God. God was the only audience David had in mind. You think I was forgetting who I was Michal, you're wrong, I was remembering who I am before God, a subject delighting in my Master, a sinner thrilled by God's saving grace and loving kindness. He says if you find that humiliating Michal, tough, because I intend to keep on humiliating myself like that before the Lord - remembering who I am and marvelling at who He is. Joy before the holy God is how it should be says David.

If that was true in David's day - how much more so for us! God is with us through Christ, through his Spirit and that is something to celebrate with joy and yet for most of us, if we're honest, heartfelt joy doesn't always mark us as it should.

It's not that we have to dance, we don't have to put our hands in the air – no we can express ourselves in a way that we feel comfortable with and which is fitting with our personality and culture. In the same way we don't have to use tambourines and trumpets – guitar and keyboard is fine. The issue is not how we express ourselves but what we express and I fear that all too easily what we express is dare I say it little more than cool detachment or a kind of bored acknowledgment of truth as we sing or say the words with our hearts and emotions

switched off. Not exuberant joy and reverent fear. Like Michal, David's wife, sometimes propriety is our main concern – we're fussed about how we may seem to others rather than recognising who we are before God – sinners saved by God's grace, loved by him, accepted by him.

Many of us find our emotions more easily stirred by some sporting contest or a music concert or some other hobby that we're passionate about rather than being in the presence of God like we are now. And in a sense that is inevitable; one we can see - the other is a matter of faith. And yet I think that there is truth in what one commentator writes when he says this: "There are doubtless times to be calm and times to be enthusiastic; but can it be right to give all our coldness to Christ and all our enthusiasm to the world?" In a similar vein Jim Packer, in his excellent book assessing the Charismatic renewal movement: "Keep in Step with the Spirit", writes at one point as follows...(p.186)

That is sometimes how it can be with some of us. We're to rejoice before the Lord with trembling. Joy before the holy God is what should mark us. Joy that should enthuse our whole being as we remember God for who He is and what He has done for us.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)