

Uzzah and the Holiness of God

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What did I just read? Sometimes we don't even know how to deal with that. There are a lot of very familiar stories in the Old Testament that we're okay with showing at Sunday School, and there are other ones where we read and we're like, "What's the rating on this book? It's rated R!" And then we see some things that *God* does and we're kind of taken aback. How on earth do we understand this, and how on earth is this relevant to my life in the 21st century? And it's a very legitimate question, because normally I'm not reading books that are 2,000-3,000 years old and saying that it's relevant to my life. If I was going exploring in some ancient ruins somewhere and I found a really old book, my first instinct isn't to start reading it and saying, "Hey, this applies to my life." So it's a very legitimate question. But the thing is, *if* this book truly is inspired by God and written *to* us, then *everything* in it, even passages that are more difficult to understand, they are also applicable to our lives.

So we have to test the theory, though, and we'll test it by considering the story of Uzzah. And no, I didn't just sneeze. Please turn to 2 Samuel 6:1. It's on page 218 or 244 on the bibles in front of you. While you're turning there, let me just kind of give the backdrop of what's happening in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. It's really describing the rise of the kings in Israel. It starts off with the prophet Samuel, and then we get to King Saul, who is the first king of Israel, and then we get to King David. At this point in the story, 2 Samuel 6, at this point, Saul's out of the picture and David is now trying to consolidate and strengthen his hold both over Israel and in the land of Canaan. He had just conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites, which was one of their enemies, and he's making it its capital city. He's now calling it the City of David. And after he's having victory after victory over the Philistines, another one of his enemies, he comes to a realization: he believes that he has to bring this thing called the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. It's supposed to be bringing the final rest of the land, and things are supposed to be going good, but as you see in the story, things do not go according to plan. So follow along as I read in 2 Samuel 6. I'm going to start at verse 1 and go to verse 7.

David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. He and all his men went to Baalah in 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 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 with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.

When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, 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.

(NIV)

So what just happened there? It kind of strikes you as a little odd and strange, because it seems to come out of nowhere. Here, David is transporting the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, and it's a happy time. Everyone is celebrating. Then, all of a sudden, one of the oxen who were carrying the ark stumbles, and the Ark of the Covenant is about to hit the ground. Uzzah, being just your standard guy, seems pretty reasonable, he instinctively reaches out to keep the ark from falling on the ground and being damaged, and God kills him for it! I don't know about you, but that strikes me as a little bit strange! The same God that tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves strikes down Uzzah for wanting to keep the ark from falling. In verse 8, we'll see that David is kind of angry about this, and I don't know if you kind of feel that, too. Why, God, would You kill Uzzah for something as simple as that? I mean, I kind of like Uzzah. Uzzah seems like he's a good guy! Why on earth would he be struck down for something as simple as touching this box?

Well, the author of 2 Samuel has given us clues to help us understand how to make sense of this story. Look back at verse 1-2 here.

David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God...

(NIV)

Hold on. We'll stop right there. The Ark of God. What's so special about the ark? Now, you might be thinking, is this Noah's ark? It isn't Noah's ark. If you've seen Indiana Jones, they're searching for the Lost Ark, there's a picture of it, I have up there – there it is. [picture was shown on screen] That's what it kind of looks like. It's about a box this big by about this wide [motions with hands], that has angels that are on top that have their wings spread out over a space that's about this big [motions with hands]. You kind of wonder what's so special about this box. It's made out of wood, but overlaid with gold, and what the Israelites did is they stored it in the tabernacle or the temple. Not just in the courts of the temple, not just in the sanctuary, but in the Holy of Holies, the holiest apart of the sanctuary, this box was being held. What's so special about this box? Verse 2 tells us.

...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 on the ark.

(NIV)

This isn't just some box; this is actually God's throne on earth. The very place where he manifests His presence. We all know that God is not contained in a space, right? He's omnipresent. But at the same time, He is able to manifest Himself in a special way in a particular spot. And as He is Israel's only *true* king, He shows that by having His throne, the Ark of the Covenant, be in the midst of His people and He lives among them. This is the visible throne of the Ancient of Days, a being with so unimaginable power whom we all worship! He's the one that created us with just a simple word, He is the Lord God Almighty, and this is His throne, and they decided to put God's throne on a cart carried by some cows.

You see, God had specified to Israel how He wanted His throne to be handled. He had told them that the only way you're supposed to be carrying this ark is with two poles and with specially appointed individuals to carry it. This was supposed to be moved with dignity and respect, not because God is some egomaniac, but because it is dangerous for people who are sinful to handle God's throne in any other way. And yet, here they chose to put His throne on a cow cart. We would find it pretty strange if some foreign dignitary came into Edmonton riding on a cow cart. It would look a little strange. You would expect there to be horses and a chariot and something more noble! And God would certainly have the right to command some noble horses or tanks or something to make it seem like He's important... He's the creator of the whole universe! But He doesn't do that. His commands are simple and are designed to protect sinful people. You cannot touch the ark.

And yet, everyone seems to be unaware of this fact who are carrying this ark. They just seem to be walking blissfully with the cows and they're not realizing that right beside them is God Himself. They are completely unaware of this fact. It's like they were transporting a nuclear bomb that was ready to go at any moment, and they were treating it like it was no big deal. Even the Philistines had more awareness than the Israelites did here. In 1 Samuel 6, the Philistines and the Israelites were fighting, and the Philistines captured the ark – God's very throne. They captured it and they bring it back to the land of the Philistines, and God begins to strike down the Philistines with the bubonic plague. The Black Death. They are terrified, and so what they decided to do was to make a new cart and, led by cows just like what the Israelites were doing, they set the ark on there. But the Philistines didn't have the special instructions that Israel had. They were pagan. They had no idea. And yet, even at that moment - they were doing the same things the Israelites were doing - but even at that moment they treated God with greater respect than the Israelites did because when they were leading the cows, they stood miles away from it. They did not want to go near the Ark of God at all, because they understood that something unearthly and *dangerous* was about that ark, and that sinful people cannot dwell near it. The Israelites showed less awareness of their *own* God than the Philistines, their enemies, did. And because of the Israelites' lack of awareness, 2 Samuel 6:6-7 shows us what happens. Because they ignored God's clear instructions, Uzzah had to reach out his hand to stop the ark, and he died because of it. We cannot touch something that is holy or else we will die.

One author writes about Uzzah's actions like this. He says: "Was Uzzah's act an act of holy heroism? No! It was an act of arrogance, a sin of presumption. Uzzah assumed that his hand was less polluted than the earth. God did not want His holy throne touched by that which was contaminated by evil, that which was in rebellion to Him, that which by its unholy revolution had brought the whole creation to ruin." It was the touch of a human being that was forbidden, and Uzzah was not an innocent man. Uzzah did not take seriously the holiness of God. God was right beside him as he walked, and he was completely unaware. He was unaware that a being of so much goodness, almost a terrifying amount of goodness, was right beside him, and he could have been killed at any second, and he'd had no idea. God's holiness cannot tolerate evil. It cannot tolerate sin. And that explains why throughout the bible, whenever people see God for who He is, they're scared of Him. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah sees God sitting on His throne, and what does he say? He says:

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

(NIV)

And when Peter sees Jesus for who He is, he says:

"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

(NIV)

The holiness of God is the quality of our God that is most unfamiliar with each and every one of us. Each and every one of us is sinful. We live and we breathe in sin like fish do in water. One person has compared it like this: When you look around, and you see light, it looks nice, right? You can see it and your eyes are able to handle the light and you're able to see. But if you look at the sun, your eyes will burn and you can't handle it. It's not that the *sun* has done something bad to you; it's that your eyes are *unable* to bear that brilliance, that amazing amount of light, and you'll become blind. God cannot tolerate evil and nothing evil can dwell with God. How could Uzzah have been so unaware?

And then, I realize that at this exact moment, right now, here in this building, God Almighty is with us. Right now. Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am with them in their midst." Did we realize that when we came together today, that we didn't come in alone, that we've come into the presence of God Almighty? And there isn't an ark for us to touch, but each one of us brought with us our thoughts throughout the week, our actions, our words, and each one of us is just as polluted as Uzzah's hand. And as each one of us believers are the temple of the Holy Spirit, God dwells closer to us than we have ever realized. And are we aware? Because Uzzah, he was one of the sons of Abinadab, and the ark had been in their possession for years. Uzzah should have known better. He's like somebody who grew up in church, went to Sunday School, went to youth group, went to all the small groups and is involved in church, and how could we have come to church being unaware that God is with us? And that leads me to wonder: How is it that a good God can dwell in our presence right now and not strike us down like Uzzah? God is an unbelievably good being, and Uzzah shows us that He cannot tolerate evil, but why hasn't He struck each and every one of us down right now? We are in His presence.

Well, the rest of the narrative kind of gives us some clues as to why this is the case, that a holy God can dwell with each and every one of us who are sinners. Starting in verse 8 and going to verse 15, this is how the narrative continues:

Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. (Which means outbreak against 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 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. 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 sound of trumpets.

(NIV)

How is it that an unbelievably good God can dwell with us sinful people? God *can* dwell with us because He *wants* to dwell with us, and those who approach Him *in faith* find that God's presence is actually a blessing. What happened to Uzzah wasn't what was intended to happen, it wasn't what God desired to have happened. God's presence was supposed to be a blessing, and this is seen in the fact that there is an ark. Why have an ark? Why have the visible throne of God on earth dwelling with His people? It was meant to show the world that God Himself was, again, dwelling with humanity, and that is a big deal. Because when was the last time God dwelt with humans? That was in the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, God dwelt with His people in paradise. In Genesis 3, we see that God would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. It was paradise. But then what happened? In the words of Romans 1, humans exchanged the glory of God and chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator. God had given one rule, and that was one rule that was too much, and because of that, God *had* to separate from humanity because He is good and humans are no longer good. And as a result of this, because God is no longer able to dwell with humanity, we don't have the Author of Life being with us, and that means each and every one of us will slowly decay and die and at the end of time will be separated from God forever, and there is no hope.

But, inexplicably, God then begins to dwell with humans again! Starting with Abraham and then going through the book of Exodus, He takes and saves His people out of Egypt and He begins to dwell with them again. And this should change the whole picture! God is dwelling amidst His people, and that's why He's got an ark! He was wanting to dwell with the people in a land just like He was dwelling with humans in the Garden of Eden and, eventually, from there, He'd be able to dwell with each and every one of us personally through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So having God's presence, it means it's the reversal of the curse. It makes what is hopeless and turns it into hopefulness. It takes what is death and makes it into life, and our holy God is able to dwell with us again. And this fact is what each and every one of us as Christians hopes for. Listen to what Revelation 21 says here. It says:

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

(ESV)

God's presence is what each and every person longs for. And it *is* a blessing living in the presence of the Author of Life. But the issue then becomes: How on earth is that possible? How can God dwell with us when we are sinful? How can we have His presence be a blessing when He has to strike down Uzzah for touching the ark? David even asks this question. He asks in verse 9:

“How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?”

(NIV)

He wants to take it into the city, but he knows that if he does that, the people are sinful and He could strike down the city just like He did with the Philistines! So what he tries to do is he tries to pawn it off to a guy named Obed-Edom, who's outside covenant community. And so we'd be thinking, “Oh my goodness, Obed-Edom is a goner! If Uzzah didn't have a chance, how on earth would Obed-Edom a Gittite, not an Israelite, be able to have the Ark of God with him?” But yet, God does *not* pour out the Black Death, God does *not* strike down Obed-Edom; instead, He blesses Obed-Edom and his whole family. And the author doesn't tell us why, but I think it's safe to assume that Obed-Edom approached the ark with a different kind of faith that the Israelites did. And David picks up on this. By blessing them, God was signaling to David that His presence was supposed to be a blessing, and was not supposed to destroy. Only approach in faith. David is told in verse 12:

“The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.”

(NIV)

So David, he hears this, and he approaches the ark a second time, but this time, he approaches with faith. This time, with a faith-fueled reverence, he aligns himself to what God has revealed, and he is able to bring the ark into the city. We notice in verse 13, it says:

When those who were carrying the ark...

(NIV)

Now they're following what God has revealed. Now they're treating God with the respect and reverence that is needed for sinful people to even be close to dwelling with Him physically. And that's just living in the land with them! And David doesn't even take six steps before he has to sacrifice. He is so overwhelmed by the glory and awesomeness of God and the fact that this is a blessing that he sacrifices immediately. And then what happens? They have shouts and they have trumpets and they're able to actually celebrate because they aligned, they approached God with a faith-fueled reverence. Trusting not in their own righteousness, but in God Himself.

So what does this story tell each and every one of us? What does it reveal to us in the 21st century? We don't got no ark! We don't have a nation that God is dwelling with. Instead, we have the church, where people throughout the entire *world* are able to have fellowship with God personally. David was able to have fellowship with God in the land, but that wasn't where God wanted to leave Israel. He doesn't want to leave humanity. He wanted to take it so that we would relate *personally* with Him. And how on earth is that possible for us sinful people? It is only through what He did through Jesus Christ. In Him living a righteous life we could never live before God, and dying a death we deserve to die, that's the only way each and every one of us can stand before God, and that's the only way that we can experience God's dwelling as a blessing. Even consider, we don't have an ark anymore, but with Jesus Christ, He was *God* in flesh! He was a human being but He was also God! And you'd think that if Uzzah died for touching the ark, wouldn't you think people should die for touching Jesus? But instead, what happens? In Matthew 9, the woman who had a continual bleeding for 12 years, with fear and trembling, she reaches out and she touches Jesus, and what happens to her? She is not struck down; she is healed immediately. And what does Jesus say in response? He says, "Take heart, daughter. Your faith has saved you." Faith, faith in Jesus Christ is the *only* way that we can call our God, who is in heaven, our Father. That's the *only* way.

So for people who are here who have not known Jesus Christ, have not come to Him in faith, know that one day this whole creation will become the dwelling place of God with humanity. And what will we do on that day? Because each and every one of us, we can't stand on our own. Unless you come to faith in Jesus Christ, believe in His righteous life on your behalf, and believe that His death is enough to save you - it's not your own works, it's solely on Jesus Christ - that's the only way you'll stand on that day. If you think you have to wait to be perfect before you come to Jesus, that's going to be the problem, because you will never be perfect, and you will be waiting forever. You have to come and you have to come today. Talk to anybody here who you came with, or anyone that you've seen and ask them what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ, because the time *will* come where God *will* make this world His dwelling place, and the only way any of us are going to stand is by believing in Jesus. And for those who have believed in Jesus and have approached our Holy God in faith, always understand that God Himself is dwelling with you, because you are, as 1 Corinthians 6 tells us, you are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God is closer to you than you've ever realized. Let us be aware of that thought, and let it guide us throughout our week as we are on the job site, while we're at school, while we're on the computer, while we're at home, may the thought that God is constantly with us always be in our minds, knowing that we are His temple and His presence is supposed to be a *blessing* for us. His presence is a blessing for us.

So is Uzzah and the ark relevant to us in the 21st century? Not only do I think it's relevant, I think it is the only way for us to live. Amen.

[praying]

Dear Lord, thank You so much for the message that Your presence is supposed to be a blessing, oh God. Help each and every one of us to approach You in faith, knowing that it's only by Jesus Christ that we can dwell with an absolutely good God, and enjoy Your presence forever. In Christ's name, amen.