

## DAVID – ISSUES RE WORSHIP

### Introduction

These are two puzzling incidents. The first is also shocking.

The first is something enemies of Christianity use to try to discredit it – ‘a harsh God’. But that is taking something out of context – God as love – and failing to understand it – there were reasons why God acted that way. Nevertheless we should feel shocked, and that should lead us to work out why it happened.

The other incident appears bizarre – but when we take them together we realise there is a major issue at stake in both. It is a very contemporary story, and speaks into our own situation.

Both have to do with God’s worship, and that is what Satan attacks. We see that in Jesus’ wilderness temptations – ‘all these I will give you if you only bow down and worship me’. If Satan can disrupt or pollute the worship of God he has gained a victory. Part of our Christian responsibility is to avoid reacting to his provocations in a way that would spoil God’s worship.

### Uzzah and the Ark

The Ark was the symbol of God’s presence and as such was very precious to him. Similarly Jesus is God’s presence with humanity, and the Holy Spirit is his intimate presence in the church and individual Christians. Satan has always tried to distort the teaching of who Christ is, and provoke God’s people into things that will grieve the Holy Spirit.

The ark was built in accordance with God’s instructions during the days of Moses. He also gave instructions about its use including a prohibition on manhandling it (Numbers 4:15). This was a constant reminder that God is in a class by himself even though he lives with his people.

The way we handle symbols of God’s presence reflects our attitude to God himself. If we treat the Bible, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, as ‘common’ things we can do what we like with, that shows we have little respect for God. This was the outstanding sin of the priesthood in Malachi’s day – they treated his worship as something contemptible and did as little for him as they could.

The way we treat God’s worship also affects the way we perceive him. If we show reverence it will help us to be reverent in heart. If we treat it as something unimportant we are telling ourselves and others that he is unimportant. If it is designed to honour him we will see him as someone to be honoured; if it is designed to tickle our fancy we will see him as being there just for our convenience.

There are two common attitudes to worship that show this. One is the attitude that says, ‘Well, I’ll go if I feel like it, I’ll not bother if I don’t’. That becomes a habit and makes a person think little of God. The opposite attitude is to say, ‘Just being there is all that matters; we must go through the routines but don’t expect me to think’. That also harms our ability to relate to God in a personal way.

That is true today. That was true in David’s day.

For several generations there had been little regard for God. That was reflected in the way some people treated his worship – the sons of Eli used it for their own ends, and used the Ark as a ‘good luck’ charm to take into battle. David’s day marked a spiritual turning point, and part of that was to bring the Ark into a central place in national life – hence his attempt to bring it to his capital city (now Jerusalem).

The man Uzzah showed complete disregard for God's Word (and therefore for God) when he manhandled the Ark. So did King David, who also ignored God's instructions on how to handle it. And judgement fell.

What does this show?

It shows that God's Word remains valid unless and until he changes it. The argument, 'That was a long time ago – surely not for today', is illogical and carries no weight. If God said it, it is true; if God ordered it, we are under obligation to do it; if God promised it, we have every reasons to expect it – no matter which century he said it.

It also shows that his people's worship is so important to him he will not ignore it being spoiled. There are two reasons for that – one is his regard for himself (do any of us like being treated with contempt?); the other is that he desires to relate to his people and will not allow anything to come between them. 'The Lord will judge his people.'

This was a defining moment in the life of David's nation. A new era was beginning. If they treated God with contempt then and got away with it they would never enjoy the blessing of his covenant relationship with them. It was almost unique; so was the judgement that corrected them. Almost unique – we will need to think about an incident in the Acts of the Apostles at another defining moment.

The shock of this event is like the shock of a child being punished, or the shock of someone having an unpleasant experience. It opens our mind and makes us start to listen when we did not listen before. The Lord does this to individuals and churches; he has given church discipline for the same purpose. 'If we would judge ourselves we would not be judged' (1 Corinthians 11:31). 'Let everyone think of himself soberly, as he ought to think' (Romans 12:3).

It is very easy to think of God's worship as no more than a routine – because it is a routine. The danger is we lose our regard for God without realising it. Worship is nothing if we are not: contrite for sin, humble before him, believing his Word, rejoicing in his promise of salvation; obeying his commands, loving his people, showing his glory to the world (Isaiah 1:12-15).

Acceptable worship cannot take place in isolation from godly living. Jesus gave clear instructions about this.

'For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison' (Matthew 5:20-26).

Some people think they can fall out with their neighbours, then breeze into God's presence and he'll accept them. He won't. We can't separate Sunday from the rest of the week.

### **Michal – who is the important one?**

The story of David dancing before the Ark and getting a row from his wife seems strange, but it is of a piece with the story of Uzzah and God's judgement. Both are about worship and God's relationship with his people.

Some cultures show emotion, others hide it. Middle Eastern societies tend to be expressive. That partly explains David's dance as the Ark was finally brought to his capital city. There was a deep spiritual component. It was a historic moment, when God was taking his rightful place (symbolically) among his people. In a sense, this was a revival of religion, and David felt it.

Religious revival does not always gain favour, and his wife Michal despised him for what she thought was undignified conduct. There is often suspicion when the Spirit of Christ begins to work in a person or community. That is partly because he has many imitators and there have been counterfeit revivals; but that is no excuse for disparaging the real thing.

It often depends on what we consider to be most important – the glory of God or the reputation of man.

David laid aside his royal robes and dressed like a commoner – one of the people. In God's eyes people are equal. David took his place as one of the people of God, not claiming any privilege for himself. He only wanted to honour God, as did the others present.

Michal was different. This daughter of King Saul was more interested in power and status. She could not agree with David relinquishing his royal position; she wanted him (and his wife) to have the honour of the occasion.

It comes back to our attitude towards God. If we honour him we will acknowledge that, 'There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). We will identify with our fellow-sinners, and with fellow-saints whoever they are – social background will count for nothing.

When the Spirit of Christ works God's glory is the only thing people are interested in - petty ambitions and quarrels disappear. That is when our spirit feels free in worship, and that is why David acted as he did. Michal did not seem to share David's love for God, otherwise she would not have put personal position first. It reminds us of John Baptist and his followers – when they complained about Jesus having more disciples he replied, 'He must increase but I must decrease.'

That leads us to think about our own attitudes to God, and to help us do that we can use three other occasions when the Bible addressed this issue. These are: Jesus' controversy with Scribes and Pharisees; the Spirit's rebuke for the church in Corinth; and the Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3).

### **Practical application**

In Jesus' day the heart of Jewish religious life was the Jerusalem Temple (the Wailing Wall is the only part left). It was their pride and joy and gave them a sense of identity.

When God chose Abraham to carry his revelation down the generations he did so with a view to blessing others. The nation forgot that and turned this privilege of grace into a sense of superiority. They then kept their spiritual privileges to themselves – only then could they maintain their sense of superiority.

Jesus rebuked that in his sermon at Nazareth; and they tried to lynch him because he said that God blessed people of other nations also. He rebuked it when he cleansed the Temple before his crucifixion – 'A house of prayer for all nations' – but they had excluded the Gentiles from it.

One result was that their relationship with God suffered. They tried to relate to him on the basis of obedience to law instead of his free grace. They majored on minors while neglecting love and justice.

Their relationship with the world suffered. Instead of being a light to the Gentiles to bring them to salvation they called them 'dogs'. This was a problem even in the early church. And the root cause was lack of love – for God and their fellow men.

Jesus warned that such misuse of religious privileges would provoke God's judgement – 'Your house will be left unto you desolate' (Like 13:35). That happened a few years later when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans army. As in King David's day God's Word remains valid.

Therefore every church should reflect on its attitude to God's worship. Who do we think it is for? Is it to affirm us? Is it to use for the salvation of our fellow men? Is it to give God his place? Or to use for selfish ends?

A second way the Bible addresses these issues is in 1 Corinthians especially chapters 1 and 11. The church in Corinth was divided into various parties. It was so bad that when they came to the Lord's Supper they did not even celebrate it together; indeed the wealthy brought lots of food (and some became drunk) while the poor had nothing.

It was tearing apart the body of Christ and God judged them for it – 'For this reason many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep' (1 Corinthians 11:18-34). Paul was telling them that some instances of illness and untimely death were God's punishment for such mistreatment of his worship and his people.

A third place we see those issues addressed is in the Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3). Ephesus was sound in doctrine but had lost the love it once had. Consequently Christ warned them he would remove the light of the gospel from that place – and he did. In the Pergamos church some people were teaching gross heresy and wickedness. Christ said he would fight against them. The church in Laodicea was lukewarm – not against Christ but not on his side either. Christ said 'I will spew you out of my mouth'.

Those examples are written for the benefit and correction of every church. His Word remains valid today. We are called to love and serve him, to love one another as Christ loves us, and to make disciples from all parts of society. He says, 'Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give every man according to his work' (Revelation 22:12)

## **Conclusion**

We are not at the end of the story.

In spite of his people's unfaithfulness Christ came. In spite of Satan's hostility Christ conquered. Because he bore our sins to the point of death he rose as conqueror of sin and death. And he reigns today to give repentance and forgiveness of sins.

There is hope for sinners. He calls the lukewarm to repent, promising he will share with them if they do.

When we become conscious of our sin we should remember that he bore our sins in his body on the tree and ask him for mercy for that reason.

He will have the victory. People will serve him. Only, 'Do not harden your heart'.

When we do honour him his Spirit will be with us and the relationship restored. His worship will become a delight with his own presence. And it will be a foretaste of heaven.