

Uzzah: Difficult Lessons

2 SAMUEL 6:1-11

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All of us make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes provide an opportunity for learning some very valuable lessons. Back when I was a college student in Tennessee, I remember changing the oil in my car at that time and forgetting to replace the fill cap on top of the engine. I can tell you: That is a mistake I will never make again! I started up the car and started driving, and oil shot out all over the place, a horrible mess! But again, I learned from that mistake, and I have never done that again. Maybe you have made a similar mistake yourself. We do something wrong, but we learn and move forward a little wiser than we were before.

Well, this morning, I would like for us to study one of those scenarios from the history of God's people in the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel. And the lessons we are about to learn from God's word are especially painful, because the lessons come at the expense of a man who apparently thought that he was doing the right thing. The man's name is Uzzah, and the lessons come in 2 Samuel 6 (p. 500). The lessons we are about to learn go back many years before this, though, to the original giving of the Law of Moses, and specifically, to those passages where God explained very carefully to the people exactly how the Ark of the Covenant was to be moved from one place to another.

We know from Exodus 25 that the Ark of the Covenant was basically a gold-plated wooden box about the size of our Lord's Supper table up here, just a little bit smaller, and there were two cherubim (or angels) mounted on top of the box with their wings spread over what was described as the "Mercy Seat." The Ark was significant, because the Ark was the place where God met with his people. This is the place where sins were forgiven under the Law of Moses. This is the place where the High Priest would go in once every year to offer a sacrifice and appeal to God on behalf of the people.

Back when the Ark was first built, it was carried by the priests through the wilderness. It was kept in the back room of the tabernacle, in the Most Holy Place. And since the tabernacle was designed to move from place to place, the Ark was designed to move as well. It was actually designed with gold-plated rings on each side, into which were placed gold-plated wooden poles, and the Law was very specific that the men from one particular tribe (the Levites) were to be the only ones to carry the Ark.

We know, however, that there was a time during the book of Judges when Israel drifted away from God, they used the Ark as a kind of good luck charm in one of their battles, they failed to consult God, and as a result,

the Ark was actually captured by the Philistine army. Any army would obviously love to have a gold-plated box, and yet when they brought it home, it caused tremendous destruction in their own country. You might remember how the Philistines put the Ark in one of their own temples, and when they woke up the next morning, they found that their own idol, Dagon (half man and half fish) had fallen down before the Ark, as if worshiping the one true God. Well, that was an odd coincidence, they thought, so they set their god back up. The next morning, though, the same thing had happened again, only this time, their god had had its head and hands chopped off. “Not good at all,” they thought! So, they started moving it around from place to place, trying to get rid of it. Well, everywhere the Ark went, their people would break out in terrible tumors (or hemorrhoids, as the original text tell us). Well, that put them over the edge, so to speak – we have no plans for this! So at that point, the Philistines frantically put the Ark of God on a new cart, they hitch it up to some cows that had just been separated from their calves, and as a test they let the cows go to see whether they would leave their calves. 1 Samuel 6:12 says that the cows went straight to Israel, mooing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

Well, when the Ark arrives in Israel, the people split up the new cart for firewood, and in a sad turn of event for the cows, they use the wood to offer the two cows as a sacrifice, as a burnt offering, to God. Unfortunately, several people made the mistake of opening the Ark to look inside, and the Bible says that more than 50,000 people lost their lives that day. If you have ever seen The Raiders of the Lost Ark and the scene where the Nazis open the Ark, then you probably have some idea of what happened on that occasion. Well, after that, the Ark stayed at the home of Abinadab for a period of 20 years, until we get to our lesson this morning, where King David tries to move the Ark to Jerusalem. This brings us to 2 Samuel 6:1-11,

¹ Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ² And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim. ³ They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. ⁴ So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. ⁵ Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals.

⁶ But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. ⁷ And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. ⁸ David became angry because of the Lord's outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. ⁹ So David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" ¹⁰ And David was unwilling to move the ark of the Lord into the city of David with him; but David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. ¹¹ Thus the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

Next Sunday, if we have the opportunity, I'd like for us to study several lessons from the life of Obed-edom here at the end of this passage. And as homework, as preparation for next week's lesson, I would encourage all of us to try to remember what was actually in the Ark. As far as we know, there were three items inside this gold-covered box. What were those items? But even if we already know what those items are, I'd like for us to find the passages where those items are mentioned. That's for next week.

But for now, I'd like for us to look back over this paragraph as we try to learn something from Uzzah's mistake. Why is this passage in the Bible, and why are we looking at it nearly 3000 years later? Based on this passage, I would suggest several very easy to understand ideas that will hopefully challenge our thinking right here in Madison, so many years later.

I. **And as we look at the text itself, certainly one of the most powerful lessons is that GOD MUST BE HONORED AT ALL TIMES WITH THE UTMOST OF REVERENCE AND RESPECT.**

And this is where we discover that what Uzzah did here was much more than just a mistake. This is not a case of forgetting to put the oil cap back on the engine; instead, I want us to notice again the reason God gives in verse 7, ***"And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence, and he died there by the ark of God."*** Uzzah died because of his irreverence. And the outward symptom of that irreverence was that Uzzah failed to obey the Lord's commandments. Uzzah forgot that worship is dangerous. Some might say, "Oh, but that's just an Old Testament thing. The God of the Old Testament was a God of vengeance, but the God of the New Testament is a God of grace." Let us not forget, though, that this idea that we need to respect God is absolutely carried over into the Christian age. We think of those words in Hebrews 12:28-29, ***"Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."*** Our God is a consuming fire! And so we learn that God's attitude has not changed. We are to approach God with reverence and awe in our hearts. Worship is dangerous. We are to fear God, not with a paralyzing fear, but with respect or reverence, a fear that causes us to do things the way God wants things to be done.

This, of course, is not a popular position to take. Many are not very comfortable with a God who kills people for irreverent worship. In fact, many will twist the scriptures to avoid the true impact of God's holiness. As I was doing the research for this morning's lesson, I came across one so-called Bible scholar who refuses to believe in anything miraculous in the Bible. Normally this man has some excellent comments on the history of various words that are used, awesome comments on the background of certain passages, but he refuses to believe in miracles. With this in mind, here is his theory: This man says that "...as Uzzah was walking beside the cart, he slipped in some oxen droppings, hit his head on a rock and died, and that everyone around merely assumed that God had killed him for touching the Ark." Can you believe that? His main lesson from this passage is that we are to watch where we step. Watching where we step, though, is not the main point of this passage! The main point is that worship is dangerous, that God must be honored at all times with the utmost of reverence and respect. Again, the text itself points out (in verse 7) that ***"God struck him down there for his irreverence."*** And so, when God says that the Ark is to be moved by using those rings and those poles, when God says that the Ark is to be moved only by the Levites, those commands are to be obeyed. To disobey is to disrespect God.

But here we are nearly 3000 years later, and once again we are faced with the challenge to respect God as a consuming fire. Years ago, a fellow preacher here in Wisconsin got upset when I suggested that women should not be used as songleaders in the public assemblies of the church, and his argument was that his God was "not concerned about commandment keeping." Those were his words. The Bible, though, says that we are to ***"...offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."*** The Lord Jesus himself says that, ***"You are My friends if you do what I command you"*** (John 15:14). The Lord himself says, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"*** (John 14:15). Others have dismissed the qualifications of elders as being cultural baggage from a bygone era, and the argument is, "You cannot use the qualifications as a checklist." Checklist this, checklist that – as if that dismisses obedience, as if God is

completely unconcerned with the details he revealed to us in Scripture. I would suggest, though, that in hindsight Uzzah probably viewed Numbers 4 as a little more of a checklist than he did previously – not that obedience is a burden, not that he earned his salvation – but in hindsight some of those seemingly unimportant little details were actually quite significant: 1.) The Ark is to be handled by the Levites, 2.) It is to be wrapped in a protective cover made of porpoise skin, 3.) It is to be carried on foot by using the poles through the rings, just as it was designed; according to Numbers 4:15, “**...so that they will not touch the holy objects and die.**” Uzzah, though, failed to treat God as holy. That checklist was given for a reason, as a test of his love and Uzzah failed the test.

And the same principle applies in the New Testament. If the Lord God cared enough to have it written in the New Testament, then he cares whether we obey. Those in the world around us (and even some in the church) would like for us to believe that God is not concerned about the details. We have Uzzah, though, as a reminder. God is to be honored at all times with the utmost of reverence and respect, and this certainly includes obedience in the details.

II. **As we look back at this paragraph of scripture in 2 Samuel 6, I would point out a second basic principle here, and that is: THERE ARE NO EXCUSES THAT WILL OVERRIDE THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING AND OBEYING WHAT THE WORD OF GOD ACTUALLY SAYS.**

And I would point out: In this passage, we have two of the most common excuses for not knowing and obeying the word of God. Truly, the Bible is more up to date than this morning’s newspaper! And the first excuse covered in this passage that we often hear today is: But I am sincere! But I have good intentions! But I am zealous! Let us then ask for a moment: Was King David sincere? In his own mind, was Uzzah doing the right thing by reaching out and keeping the Ark from falling? Were all these people along the way sincere in their religious beliefs? We look at the text itself, and I would have to say, “Yes!” In fact, in a parallel passage over in 1 Chronicles 13:8, we learn that the people were celebrating “**with all their might.**” In other words, with every fiber of their being, they were doing what they thought was right. Their worship was enthusiastic. And I would point out in this regard, these people serve as an example for us today. We need to worship God with all our might. We need to sing it like we mean it. We need to enthusiastically join together in prayer. We need to sing with the spirit. We need to sit up straight, take a deep breath, and belt it out. We have so much to be happy about, so many reasons to praise God with everything that is in us, with passion, with sincerity.

The people in 2 Samuel 6 were doing this! They were sincere, but when we get right down to it, they were sincerely wrong! If they had read the Law of God, they would have known why the Ark had those rings and why the Ark had those poles. They would have known that the Ark was to be carried by the Levites. They would have known that the Ark should have been wrapped up in a protective covering. If they had known the word of God, they would have known what Uzzah was about to find out the hard way. Unfortunately, Uzzah was apparently not too familiar with those instructions. Maybe he failed to study in his own home. Maybe his parents failed to take him to Bible class. Maybe he was late to class and missed the unit where they covered the rings and poles. Good intentions do not override the necessity of obedience to the word of God. Sincerity is no excuse for disobedience.

In this chapter, we also have some insight on another excuse people will often use today, the idea that everybody else is doing it. The passage reminds us, though, that right and wrong is not determined by the number of people doing it. For just a moment, I would ask that we keep a finger here in 2 Samuel 6 but turn over briefly to the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 13 (just a few books later). And as we look at the first four verses of 1 Chronicles 13, I want us to notice leading up to what happened here, the number of people who

were brought in to consult on this decision. From an organizational leadership standpoint, David did everything right. The experts tell us that leaders need to involve as many people as possible when making a decision. That way, the entire group takes “ownership” of the decision. David did this. Notice, please, 1 Chronicles 13:1-4,

¹ Then David consulted with the captains of the thousands and the hundreds, even with every leader. ² David said to all the assembly of Israel, “If it seems good to you, and if it is from the Lord our God, let us send everywhere to our kinsmen who remain in all the land of Israel, also to the priests and Levites who are with them in their cities with pasture lands, that they may meet with us; ³ and let us bring back the ark of our God to us, for we did not seek it in the days of Saul.” ⁴ Then all the assembly said that they would do so, for the thing was right in the eyes of all the people.

We look at what happened here, and it is clear that the entire nation agreed that they were doing the right thing – everybody agreed! This was a unanimous decision. And yet, what they were doing was dead wrong! David consulted everybody but God on this issue. And so again, right and wrong is not determined by the number of people doing it. According to Proverbs 14:12, ***“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”***

Thinking back to 2 Samuel 6, did you notice that they were moving the Ark on a ***“new cart”***? Where did they get that idea? Do you remember how the Philistines returned the Ark to Israel? They put it on a new cart. In other words, instead of consulting God, David seems to be following the example of the Philistines from a number of years earlier, “If it worked for them, then surely it will work for us.” The difference, though, is that the Israelites had the Law of Moses. The Israelites had instruction from God on this. The Philistines, governed by the Law of the Heart (as we learn in Romans 2), the Philistines pretty much had to do the best they could. The Philistines were judged based on what they thought seemed right. The Jews, though, were under a very specific set of rules.

So there is a lesson here for us today: As we make decisions, let us remember that the number of people doing something is not how we determine whether something is right or wrong. As Christians, we know better. We can either do what Uzzah did, or we can read what the word says. We can read it for ourselves, not following the crowd, not just blindly trusting what the preacher might say, not just blindly following what our parents or grandparents might have done, but we can figure out what God wants us to do on our own, just as Uzzah should have done.

III. There is one more lesson for us to consider in this passage, and the final lesson is: As painful as it must have been, THERE IS A VALUE TO GOD’S DISCIPLINE.

Now obviously, all of this was a little more painful for Uzzah than for everybody else, but it did affect the nation as a whole. The king got mad. The whole incident made such an impression on the nation that they renamed the spot where this happened to “Perez-uzzah,” or “The Breakthrough of Uzzah.” And in a sense, on this spot, the entire nation had a breakthrough. As a result of God’s discipline, the people finally understood that God is to be respected, that God expects more than good intentions, that God does not judge based on the number of people doing something. The discipline, therefore, had some positive results that went far beyond just the one being disciplined. And this certainly fits in with what we read about discipline in the New Testament. We think of what Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:20, ***“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.”*** When one person is rebuked, we hope it will help with

their particular situation; but even if they continue, there is a value in saying, “This is something we do not tolerate as a congregation.” Even the innocent can learn from the discipline of others. We think of the first discipline to take place in the early church. We think of Ananias and Sapphira, the husband and wife who were struck dead by God by lying to the Holy Spirit about the amount of their offering. In Acts 5, the Bible says that, **“...great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.... And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number....”** That is what happened here in 2 Samuel 6 – the offender is dead, it didn’t do him much good, but the rest of the nation learned some valuable lessons.

Notice, please, what happens in verse 9. David is angry in verse 8, but his anger very quickly turns to fear in verse 9, **“So David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, ‘How can the ark of the Lord come to me?’”** As I see it, David was mad that his little parade was ruined, but then he very quickly thought, “I am the one who organized this thing. I might be next!” [paraphrased]. And at that point, David was unwilling to move the Ark any further. He moved it into a nearby home, and then he went home to do some research: Exactly what happened here, and how can we move the Ark without getting killed by God? And as we go through the following verses, we learn the same lesson David learned. Because of Uzzah’s discipline, King David learned that he needed to do things God’s way. The problem was not with God, but with David.

We have a more complete record of what happens next over in that parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 15. They get ready to move the Ark several months later, and David has obviously taken some time to do the research. If you want to, notice with me 1 Chronicles 15:13. King David pulls the Levites into a special meeting, and he says, **“Because you did not carry it at the first, the Lord our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance.”** You see, David had learned something! And then, several verses later, we come to 1 Chronicles 15:15, **“The sons of the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles thereon, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord.”** At that point, they offer a sacrifice after the Ark is moved a grand total of 6 paces – they are taking it very slow now on this journey! King David has a special psalm written for the occasion, the priests sing the psalm, and all the people said, **“Amen,”** and praised the Lord. The entire nation was blessed because of the Lord’s discipline. They learned some valuable lessons from Uzzah’s mistake, just as we have also learned this morning.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would point out that we have obviously seen many lessons this morning for us as a congregation – to do things God’s way. If you are visiting with us this morning, we would challenge you to observe what has happened here this morning, compare what you have seen to the word of God, and if you see something we are doing that is not found in God’s word, we want you to challenge us on that, and we promise to make it right.

As we close, we would also appeal to those of you here today who have not yet obeyed the good news – that you would think about Uzzah’s example: Probably a decent person, probably meaning well, but for whatever reason (maybe a little bit of peer pressure, maybe just ignorance of what God had actually said), but for whatever reason, Uzzah disobeyed God and paid the ultimate price. We would encourage you to not make that mistake. Do not rely on what we say, do not rely on what your parents did, do not rely on what your neighbors are doing; instead, we would encourage you to read the Bible for yourself. If we can help, we’d love to help, but by all means, we hope you will obey the good news.

The good news is that Jesus came to this earth to die for our sins, to die in our place. We respond to that message with faithful, loving obedience – we turn away from sin, we publicly confess the name of Jesus as being God’s son, and we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are added to God’s family and the Christian life begins. Again, if you have any questions, let us know – give us a call, send us a message. Talk to us this afternoon. You do not need to be baptized publicly – it can be just you and me downstairs. It only takes about 30 minutes to fill the baptistery with warm, clean water, and you can be a Christian almost immediately. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com