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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Tabernacle

Last week, we traced the journey of the ark of God from its capture in battle, to the house of Dagon and through the cities of the Philistines, and finally back to the territory of Israel. After mishandling it, the people of Israel entrusted the ark to the household of Abinidab in Kiriath-jearim, where it sat for decades.

After King David consolidated his power over the house of Israel, he decided that it would be a good time to return the ark to its place in the tabernacle.

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; and let us bring back the ark of our God to us, for we did not seek it in the days of Saul.” Then all the assembly said that they would do so, for the thing was right in the eyes of all the people (1 Chron. 13:2–4).

This was, no doubt, the correct and righteous thing for them to do. God had instructed the children of Israel to construct the ark and to set it up in the holiest place beyond the veil in the tabernacle, as the centerpiece of worship to Him. It represented His presence on earth among the Israelites. It was the place where the high priest was to go once a year to make atonement for the sins of the entire nation. The fact that Saul and his men had done nothing to return the ark to its place demonstrates Saul's lack of concern for God. It makes me wonder what the high priest been doing instead all this time? David was right encourage the people to national repentance, to correct this problem, and to restore sacrifices and tabernacle worship to the divine pattern. That's why what happens enroute is puzzling.

They carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinidab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. David and Israel were celebrating before God with all their might, even with songs and with lyres, harps, tambourines, cymbals, and with trumpets. When they came to the threshing floor of Chidon, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, because the oxen nearly upset it. The anger of the Lord burned against Uzza, so He struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. Then David became angry because of the Lord's outburst against Uzza; and he called that place Perez-uzza to this day. David was afraid of God that day, saying, "How can I bring the ark of God home to me?" So David did not take the ark with him to the city of David, but took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. Thus the ark of God remained with the family of Obed-edom in his house three months; and the Lord blessed the family of Obed-edom with all that he had (1 Chron. 13:9-14).

Why in the world would God kill a man whose only intention was to keep God's holy mercy seat from hitting the ground? Why would God spoil such a festive atmosphere of rejoicing and returning the ark to its place? Why would God spurn David's heartfelt effort to restore the worship of God, and instead inflict upon him the kind of disaster that filled David's heart with uncertainty and anger?

Apparently, God looked at the situation a little differently than we do. A deeper examination of God's law shows that God did not fly off the handle capriciously.

In the book of Numbers, God specified how the ark was to be transported when it set out from the tabernacle. First, the sons of Aaron were to cover it with the veil, then with a covering of porpoise skin, then with a covering of blue fabric, so that the ark itself could not be viewed or touched (Numbers 4:4, 15). Then, a special subgroup of Levites, the Kohathites, were to be responsible for carrying it (4:1–4, 15). God forewarned the Kohathites not to approach the ark until the sons of Aaron had covered it. Even for the Kohathites, it was forbidden them to touch or even look upon the uncovered furniture of the tabernacle “or they will die” (vv. 15, 20).

Furthermore, God in the Law of Moses was extremely specific in having the furniture of the tabernacle, including the ark, fitted with four rings. These were not for decoration. They were for special poles to be inserted, allowing the priests to hoist the furniture onto their shoulders. “The sons of Kohath shall come to carry them,” God said.

In fact, lest there still be any question about it, a little later on, in Numbers 7, Moses allocated materials to each of the subgroups of the priests to help them do their jobs. Moses gave the sons of Gershon four oxen and two carts to help them transport the curtains and outer fabric of the tabernacle (7:7, *cf.* 4:21–28). Moses gave the sons of Merari eight oxen and four carts to help them transport the boards and metal framework of the tabernacle, as well as all the boards and pegs and ropes of the barrier that formed the outer courtyard of the tabernacle (7:8, *cf.* 4:29–37). And when Moses came to the sons of Kohath, he gave them zero oxen and zero carts, “because theirs was the service of the holy objects, which they carried on the shoulder” (7:9).

We can speculate all day long as to why God wanted His ark to be transported this way. God didn't explain Himself in these contexts. Maybe it was no more complicated than the fact that people are more surefooted than a wooden cart. Perhaps it was that transporting the

furniture on the shoulders of His chosen priests indicated the objects' holiness and significance, while other means of transport—such as being towed on the flatbed of a jostling ox-cart (even a brand new one)—would be common and improper. But without a doubt, David, Uzza, all the priests who had come to preside over the transport, and all the people who showed up to attend, should have known God's word.

Uzza's sin was not intentional, nor particularly wicked. Nonetheless, to God, it was yet another careless outrage at the end of a series of careless outrages. It was the sin of presumptuousness. If things had been done God's way, the ark never would have tipped, and Uzza would never have been in a position to have to prevent it from falling.

We are confronted once again with an example of God's holiness. Surely, God was just in defending His word, and making an example of Uzza. How dare any person suggest that one aspect of God's word is not important to follow! This is true, regardless of the sincerity of the person, the love and joy and praise in the heart of the person, or the good intentions of the person. God, at times, rises up in wrath to remind us of the importance of obedience in all aspects of our faith.

David realized his sin. Some months later, he prepared the tabernacle for the ark. This time, David proceeded correctly.

David said, "No one is to carry the ark of God but the Levites; for the Lord chose them to carry to ark of God and to minister to Him forever ... 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..." [Thus] 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 (1 Chron. 15:2-15).

Let's learn from David's mistake. Our handling of God, or of the things of God, must never become casual.

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

"What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to life." —*Emil Brunner*
