

# A Proper Fear of the Lord

2 Samuel 6:1-15

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC Pearland Campus on February 21, 2016

## Introduction

- ❖ I love snowboarding. When I lived in Vancouver it gave me a lot of chances. Now in my younger days I used to love ducking under the ropes and going out of bounds into the backcountry – in spite of all the warning signs. All for the fresh powder.
  - ▶ But after getting married, my wife would tell me about new reports of skiers and boarders getting lost in the backcountry and falling into tree wells or cliffs to their death. But I would usually just brush her off, telling her it's not a big deal.
  
- ❖ Until one day she showed me a report of someone who just died doing the same thing on the same mountain I frequented. **That hit home, and it hit me that the warning signs were placed there for the purpose of creating a proper fear of the backcountry.** The signs have words like “danger: hazards ahead” or “avalanche risk” or “cliff edge” or “warning: you will die if you ski past me”. Those signs were trying to get you to fear whatever is beyond the boundaries.
  - ▶ **But the goal is not to paralyze you in fear.** To “fear the backcountry” doesn't mean you end up sitting on the slopes scared to move a muscle because the scary backcountry is right there on the other side of that rope.
    - No, a snowboarder with a fear of the backcountry will have lots of fun within the boundaries. But if he gets dangerously close, then a proper fear of the backcountry will kick in, preventing him from carelessly ducking under the ropes and riding into the unknown.
  
- ❖ I think the Bible does pretty much the same thing. **It contains warning signs that remind us of the boundaries within which we are to joyfully live out our lives.** They come to us in the Bible in different forms. They could be found in a law or a divine threat. But the most powerful of warnings signs are often the narrative accounts in Scripture where God deals harshly with individuals in ways that simply shock modern readers like us. Where he strikes people dead!
  - ▶ **These passages are intended to create in us a fear of God – not a paralyzing fear – but a proper fear.** But I totally understand if these difficult passages cause you to doubt or if they're stumbling blocks to faith for your nonChristian friends. But just think about it. Think of how much worse it would be if God never gave us these passages. If he never revealed his boundaries. If never gave us warning signs. **Then we'd be living our lives under a constant fear that we might have crossed a line without even knowing it.** Never knowing if at any moment we might be struck down dead
  
- ❖ **So a warning passage like the ours today is actually God's good gift to us.** It has a way of instilling within us a proper fear of God that will drive us back to him, in repentance, anytime we get too close to those boundaries. These difficult passages are here in the Bible for our good, for our maturity, for our holiness.

## Background

- ❖ Let me give some background information. Prior to chapter 6, David was recently crowned king, and his first priority was to restore the spiritual state of Israel. And he believed the most symbolic way to emphasize the importance of God in their lives was to bring the Ark into Jerusalem.

- ❖ In case you're not aware, **the Ark was a special chest revered by the ancient Israelites because it represented the very presence of God.** In **Exodus 25**, God told Moses to make a chest of wood and overlay it with pure gold. He said the covering of the chest was to be made of pure gold and have two images of cherubim hammered out on top.
  - ▶ And that covering was called the mercy seat of God because the glory of the Presence of God would rest between the two cherubim, and from there God would show mercy and forgive Israel of their sins through the sacrifices administered by Israel's high priests.
- ❖ Now as the Israelites wandered through the desert for 40 years, they would march with the Ark of the Covenant in front of them, and they would even carry it into battle with the belief that God would fight for them. **But, years prior to our passage, the Israelites foolishly led the Ark into battle against the Philistines even though they were commanded not to. And not only did they lose the battle, they lost the Ark itself to their enemies.**
  - ▶ Now eventually it was returned during the reign of King Saul, but it was neglected. The people had moved on and cared little for having the Presence of God in their midst. But King David wanted to bring spiritual reform to the nation, and his first step was to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. But disaster occurred and a man was struck down dead.

### Three Perplexing Questions

- ❖ Look at v8, it says, "*And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day.*" Now if David, the man after God's own heart, was angry at God's treatment of Uzzah, how much more offensive are these verses to readers like us?
  - ▶ We've been told time and time again that "*God is love*", that God is "*slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*". So what happened here? God explodes in anger and strikes Uzzah dead for what? Trying to prevent the holy Ark from hitting the ground?
    - There are three hard questions to raise. **1) Why did God strike down Uzzah? 2) Why is God so particular about the Ark? 3) What was Uzzah's real fault?**
- ❖ **1) Why did God strike down Uzzah?** Consider the details again. It was a day of national celebration. The glory of God was returning to the midst of his people. David had chosen thirty-thousand of his choicest men to fetch the Ark, and they had just secured it to a brand new oxcart.
  - ▶ Now as they made their way from the house of Abinadab, the processional was led by a full band. It says in v5 that they were celebrating before the LORD with music and song. But at one point in the parade, as they crossed a threshing floor, the oxen stumbled and the unthinkable was about to happen. The oxcart began to teeter and the Ark began to slide off. **The glory of God was about to hit the dirt!**
- ❖ Suddenly – probably instinctively – Uzzah, who was helping drive the oxcart, stuck out this hand at just the right moment to prevent the Ark from hitting the dusty ground. You would think he'd get a medal for his efforts. That he'd be lauded as a hero! But instead he was struck down dead.
  - ▶ **A story like this makes it easy to fear God, but it can also make it hard to love him.** Our initial reaction is usually to think that God is coming across as too strict, too harsh. It sounds like you mess up once and "zap" you're a goner.

- **But what we have to understand is that Uzzah is not an innocent victim of an impulsive, raging God.** It'll make more sense once we consider the commands that God gave his people in regards to handling the Ark of the Covenant.
- ❖ This leads to our second question: **2) Why is God so particular about the Ark?** Let's first consider the particularities. In **Numbers** we're told that the LORD had set apart the tribe of Levi to be priests among his people, responsible to carry all the contents of the tabernacle as they wandered through the wilderness. And it says that, among the Levites, the sons of Kohath were responsible to carry the most holy things in the tabernacle, which included the Ark (4:4).
  - ❖ We're also told that the Ark was constructed in a very detailed manner (Ex. 25:12-14) with four gold rings attached to the sides and two gold-laden, wooden poles that were inserted into the rings. It was designed to be carried by these poles because the Israelites, even the Kohathites, were forbidden to touch the Ark.
    - ▶ In **Numbers 4:15** we read, *“And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the sons of Kohath are to carry.”*
  - ❖ So God could not have been any more clear: No one is to touch the Ark of the Covenant, not even the priests who are responsible for its care and transportation. **But why God is so concerned that no one touches his Ark?** Why is he so particular about it?
    - ▶ **Answer: Because God is holy and we are not.** God is light and we are darkness. God is a consuming fire and we are sin-soaked pieces of kindling. Even the slightest glance at the unshielded holiness of God would consume us. So the slightest touch is even worse.
      - **And since the Ark was the earthly representation of God's glory, the holiness of the Ark was of an extension of the holiness of God.** That is why God gave specific instructions for its care and transportation. Attention to detail proved your fear of the LORD. **To fear and respect the Ark was to fear and respect God.** *So what was the Ark doing on an oxcart that day? And why were thirty-thousand men of David's own choosing bringing back the Ark instead of God's chosen Levites?* These were clear violations of God's specific instructions.
  - ❖ **Perhaps some of the men, including David, could plead ignorance – but not Uzzah.** He wasn't a random guy they picked off the street to drive the cart. The text says he was the son of Abinidab the priest. Now we know from 1 Samuel that the Ark stayed in Abinidab's house for twenty years before this day. **Uzzah grew up with the Ark in his house.** Imagine how many times his dad warned him not to touch the thing.
    - ▶ So out of the thirty thousand men that day, Uzzah the priest should have known better than to carry the Ark on a cart, and he certainly knew that you were not supposed to touch the Ark for any reason. The Ark is holy because the God whom it represents is holy. Yet Uzzah stretched out his hand, grabbed the Ark, and prevented it from toppling on the ground. **An act of heroism? No, it was an act of arrogance.**

- ❖ Consider our third question: **3) What was Uzzah's real fault?** Stemming from his arrogance, he made **two deadly assumptions** that cost him his life. **First, (as R.C. Sproul puts it) Uzzah assumed that his hands were less polluted than the ground.** He had the arrogance to think that his hands were less filthy than dirt on the road. But dirt is not what desecrates the Ark of God. It's the touch of sinful man.
- ❖ The dirt of the earth is an obedient servant of the LORD. It does what God tells it to do. It yields its fruit in season and obeys the laws of nature established by God. The earth is not guilty of moral failure and so its dirt won't pollute the holiness of the Ark if they touch.
  - ▶ **But guilty moral creatures like us will.** That's why God said no finger of sinful man may touch his holy throne. **What Uzzah failed to realize is that it was *not* the Ark in need of rescue that day. It was he who needed rescue, along with the rest of us, from the sinfulness that pollutes all we touch.** That was Uzzah's first deadly assumption.
- ❖ **Second, he assumed that God was not serious when he threatened punishment.** Clearly he didn't think God was going to do it. He knew God's warnings but he didn't believe God.
  - ▶ It's important to recognize that his loss of fear for the LORD was not something that suddenly occurred that day. No, Uzzah must have lost that fear years ago.
    - Yes, his death is shocking, but it wasn't sudden. **Uzzah had been dying on the inside for years with an ever-hardening heart towards God.**
- ❖ For Uzzah, the proverbial saying "*familiarity breeds contempt*" was all too true in his attitude towards God and the Ark. **He was graced to have the very Presence of God in his house as he was growing up.** Who else could boast of such a thing?
  - ▶ But instead of turning those years of experience with the Ark into a proper fear of the Lord, he became complacent towards the Ark to the point of contempt.
    - To him, the Ark was no longer a holy scared object that could bring death upon whoever mishandled it. **To him, the Ark was simply a piece of furniture that he grew up with in his house.** Uzzah did not treat the Presence of God with proper fear. He treated it like a coffee table. And no one fears a coffee table.
- ❖ So don't imagine Uzzah to be this innocent victim of God's wrath. Uzzah was not punished without warning. He was well aware of God's law. **But he had too high a view of himself and too low a view of God, which led him to think he could touch the Ark and get away with it.**
  - ▶ And God was not unfair in punishing him. God simply kept his word (as he always does). "*But they must not touch the holy things, lest they die.*" (Num. 4:15). God was clear and completely justified to strike Uzzah dead.

### Application

- ❖ My point is this passage really shouldn't shock us. **It shouldn't shock us when God punishes sinners swiftly and decisively.** Because in the end he's just giving them justice. He is giving them what they deserve. **It is all those times when God is merciful and delays punishment or forgives altogether, that should really shock us.** That's when we should be surprised.

- ❖ But because he normally exercises great patience towards us, not treating us as our sins deserve, we take his kindness for granted, so we end up shocked and offended in those rare moments when God actually does treat a sinner as his sins deserve with a swift and decisive punishment.
  - ▶ **But the fact is that all of us deserve to be struck down like Uzzah every time we disobey God.** We may not have polluted the holy Ark of God, but we've polluted our bodies with our sin, which according to 1 Corinthians 6, *is* God's holy temple (6:18-19).
  
- ❖ **Instead of reading this and asking, "Why did God strike down Uzzah?", the question we should be asking is, "Why has God *not* struck *me* down already – like Uzzah?"** That's the question. That's why the Bible contains stories like this. To remind us of what we easily forget. That God's justice requires all who sin to forfeit their lives with a swift and decisive death.
  - ▶ **Just like the warning signs on the mountain, difficult passages like this one are planted in the Bible to re-instill in us a proper fear of the LORD.** We're to remember that God is loving, but he's also holy and will not bear the sight of unholiness. So we deserve the same treatment Uzzah received that day. That ought to strike a holy fear in us.
  
- ❖ But Uzzah's story should not be read in isolation from the rest of Scripture. We have to read this in light of the grand story God has woven through Scripture. **In the NT we read about another priest, a Great High Priest, who – instead of transferring his sinfulness onto the holy – he would voluntarily transfer the sinfulness of others onto his holy self.**
  - ▶ Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, who knew no sin would become sin for us on the cross that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). **The only reason God has not struck each of us dead already like Uzzah is because of the mercy that extends from the cross of Christ.**

### To the Non-Christian:

- ❖ **Even nonChristians are still benefiting from the mercy of the cross.** If you're not yet a Christian, you're alive because of Jesus' mercy. He's being patient with you, giving you your next breath, giving you more time on this earth to place your faith in him (2 Pet. 3:9).
  - ▶ **But just because he's merciful to you, that's no reason to fear him less. Because his patience for the unrepentant will one day wear thin.** One day he'll withdraw his mercy from them and give only justice.
  
- ❖ The Scripture is clear when it says that it's appointed for man to die once and after that face judgment (Heb. 9:27). **And if on that day of judgment you want to stand by yourself before the Holy Judge without a Great High Priest, if you want to bear the weight of your sin of your own shoulders, then you can expect a swift and decisive punishment to befall you.** The only escape from this judgment is Jesus – to trust in Christ to be that Savior for you.
  
- ❖ You see, a Christian is not someone who's better than a non-Christian. A Christian is not smarter or holier or more righteous than a non-Christian. No, the Christian is equally guilty before the Holy Judge and equally burden by sin. **But the difference is that the Christian is someone who has called upon the name of the Lord for salvation and thrown himself on the mercy of God.**

- ▶ The Christian is the one who has put his hope of salvation in Christ the Redeemer who died in our place and who rose again, conquering death and offering mercy, forgiveness and eternal life to all who trust in Him. If you are not a Christian, I invite you to call upon the name of Jesus for salvation and to throw yourself upon his mercy.

### To the Christian:

- ❖ Let me speak a word of application to Christians. The Scripture is clear that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). **But though we no longer have to fear God as an enemy – since now he’s our Heavenly Father – we must still maintain a proper fear of him.**
  - ▶ We have to be careful to not let our familiarity with the things of God ease us into a complacent attitude towards God. We must not get too comfortable with God to the point that we forget he is the Mighty Lion of Judah and not some domesticated house cat.
- ❖ But the Christian’s fear of God is fundamentally different from the non-Christian’s fear of God. **We fear God for who he is rather than just fearing God for what he could do to you.** We fear God in the same way a child who loves his father still fears his father’s hand of discipline.
  - ▶ **For the Christian, our fear of God can coexist with sweet peace in God because we know whom it is we fear.** We know he is our Loving Heavenly Father who has given us his law, his boundaries, for our good and for our holiness.
- ❖ If you read the rest of chapter 6, you find David on his second attempt to bring back the Ark, but now equipped with a proper fear of the Lord. And you’ll notice that he is not paralyzed or shaking in fear before God. Rather we read that he stripped down to his loin clothe and danced with all his might before Ark all the way back to Jerusalem.
  - ▶ **Apparently David’s fear of the Lord in no way prevented him from experiencing great joy before God, because he knew the goodness and mercy of the God he feared.**