

Tragic Worship

Four Bible Puzzles:

2 Samuel 6:1-8

March 13, 2005

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Have you ever gone to church, and found something totally unexpected. Some times it is funny, and some times it's scary. After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and after the descent of the Holy Spirit on believers in Jerusalem, something unexpected happened. A couple sold some land and pretended to give all the proceeds to the church. When their deceit and complicity were exposed in the assembly of believers, they died instantly. In his account of that incident, Luke said that "great fear gripped the entire church and all others who heard what had happened" (Acts 5:11).

Why did God deal so harshly with these two believers? The Bible extols the patience of God. However, God didn't seem very patient in this matter. Certainly, there are many greater sins, aren't there? Why was death instant in their case?

Before we proceed, let me address something. We are looking at *Four Bible Puzzles*, a different one each week, because we want to see God as he really is, not just as we, in our limited understanding, would like him to be. What is God actually like and what is the nature of the world? Theology is the human attempt to understand the work and word of God. God acts and God speaks. We human beings take notice; and if we are wise, we'll seek to understand and then live accordingly. Because God doesn't act or speak like some would expect, they reject Jesus, and so they reject the God of the Bible. I think they do so prematurely. To reject God and the Bible, you must reject Jesus and credible historical testimony that was validated through

God's fingerprint in history and through the martyrdom of many witnesses. You must turn your back to the authentication or validation that can be seen in countless souls whom God has changed and through whom God has lived and brought great blessing.

The very people, who observed the tragic death of this lying couple, concluded that God is the definition of love. Paradoxical, but not unique! Listen to these words of David in Psalm 145:

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. (Psalm 145:8-9, NIV)

David penned that God was gracious and loving to all; yet at one point he was scared and even angry with God. David was the king of Israel. He was returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The ark was carried on a brand new cart. David had 30,000 soldiers march in a parade. The Bible says:

David and all the people of Israel were celebrating before the LORD with all their might, singing songs and playing all kinds of musical instruments — lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals. (2 Samuel 6:5, NLT)

Two descendants of a family that had taken care of the ark for decades walked ahead and behind the cart. When the oxen stumbled and the cart tipped, Uzzah grabbed the ark to steady it. Immediately, he collapsed and died. David, who orchestrated everything, was angry. Fearful, he abandoned his plans to move the ark to Jerusalem.

The Bible says that Uzzah's understandable attempt to steady the ark was irreverent. There's more behind the story, however. The Philistine armies had captured the Ark of the Covenant earlier. They were proud of that feat. However, God was powerfully present with the ark, so that when they placed it in the Temple of the god Dagon, the temple that had collapsed in earlier days when its worshipers had blinded and taunted Samson, something strange happened.

When the temple reopened the next morning, the statue of Dagon lay face down before the ark. After standing it up again, worshipers found things worse the next morning. The statue was on its face before the ark, and its head and hands were broken off. Even worse, the people of the city were suffering a strange illness. When they moved the ark to a second and third city, the same thing happened. People got sick, and some even died. Also an infestation of rats occurred wherever they moved the ark. The spiritual practitioners of that pagan country devised a test. If this was truly Israel's God doing this damage to them, they would put the ark on a new cart with guilt offerings. To the cart, they would hitch two cows that had never pulled anything but their own tails. They would separate the cows from their calves and see where they pulled the cart. If they headed into Israelite territory, then they could conclude that the disease and plague were not accidents. When they implemented their plan, the cattle were distressed. They lowed loudly and continually. Some of you remember our dog Buddy. Occasionally, we left him at a kennel. There was one irritating problem with this. When we picked him up, he would bawl loudly the entire trip home. Our ears would ring. Sometimes in the rural town we lived in, I'd stop a few blocks from home, let him out of the car and watch him sprint to our house. You'd expect the cows pulling the cart to go wherever the calves were. The cows did bawl badly, but they pulled the cart right into Israelite territory. Moreover, what they found to bring disease and illness to the pagan hosts brought blessing and prosperity to the believing hosts. So King David wanted to move it to Jerusalem. It came to Israel on a cart; so he decided to pull it on a cart. However, he did not pay attention to the ark's effect on the Philistines or to the instructions God had given to his people. Levites were to carry the ark on poles, never touching it; for God was strongly present with the ark. His holiness was toxic to defiled humanity. Despite David's affection and elaborate and lavish plans for worship, unbelievers influenced his treatment of God.

I don't know what influences your treatment of your parents, spouse or children. I've learned, however, that we can be well-meaning and still damage the most precious relationships we have. Even our most elaborate plans can create pain. If we don't recognize and receive people as they are, if we don't pay attention to their words, we will harm what we hold precious.

I can't count the number of spouses who've walked into my office over the years and expressed utter shock over their partner's demand they leave. Somehow they didn't pay attention. The warnings went unheeded; and I often learn from the mates that there were many.

If we can be that oblivious to people we live with, work with, and talk with; how much more can we be out of touch with God? King David left the ark there where Uzzah died. He took it a short distance to a nearby household. He was through with it. Maybe you've been disappointed and hurt and feel that way about God? Maybe you are through with God, or at least through with the church he calls you to belong to. Maybe it's brought harm to you. Uzzah and his family suffered from King David and his leadership in worship. David knew that. His decisions caused many to prosper and many to suffer.

David went somberly on with his life. However, he had some good friends. They told him what was happening with the family that hosted the ark. In just three months God poured astounding blessing into their lives. God is a God of love. God is generous and compassionate. God is a God of life. King David organized another parade. In this one, David paid attention to every word God had spoken. In fact, it began in a most notable way. The Levites carried the ark only six steps before they stopped to repent of their sins and offer sacrifices to God. They would not use God anymore. Instead, they welcomed God... as he truly is. How about you? Will you welcome God? How will you welcome God? Will you ask his Son to wash away your defilement? Will you invite Jesus into your heart to destroy your idols and rule your life?