

City of God

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[0 : 00] I usually start every sermon with the same prayer and I feel like it's a significant prayer.

It's always a significant prayer, but in a passage like this, this is an important prayer to pray. So let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening.

In Christ's name, Amen. People who don't particularly like Christianity often use this passage as a proof text for how silly our faith is.

And some people who probably are beginning on a faith journey arrive at passages like this and then chuck the whole thing out because it just sounds ridiculous.

What kind of God would do this? What kind of God would kill a man for steadying the Ark of the Covenant? Well, before we tackle that question, I need to do quite a bit of background.

[1 : 04] So what is the Ark exactly? So the Ark is a wooden box about four feet long, two and a half feet high, overlaid with gold, built by the Israelites on Sinai on their way to the Promised Land.

God gave them the specifications for it. On top is the thing called the Mercy Seat we'll talk about later, golden angels. It was kept in the tabernacle in the Holy of Holies, a very special room that only the big high priest could go into once a year.

And we'll talk more about that shortly. And it contained the Ten Commandments, which God had written. So, the Ark is about, theologically, is about three major things.

It is about the rulership of God. It's described as God's footstool, the throne. It's all pointing to God as king. It's also about reconciliation. So rulership, reconciliation.

Because on the annual Day of Atonement, blood would be sprinkled on it, right? So, to symbolize the sacrifice of sin. So, rulership, reconciliation. It's also about revelation because it contains the Ten Commandments, God's words to his people.

[2 : 17] But it's not just sort of like this cool kind of novel kind of way of explaining a few things. It points to Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment, in many ways, of what the Ark represented with those three things.

You may have heard of Christ talked about in terms of being a prophet, priest, and king. That may ring a bell. A prophet is a revealer of God's word.

A priest is a guy who kind of organizes reconciliation with God. And a king, obviously, rulership, right? So, Christ is the prophet in that he reveals to us God's will for salvation.

He is the priest, the reconciler, who bought peace with God through his own blood. And, of course, he's the king. Rules us. Defends us.

Now, I hope that makes sense because that's important in terms of understanding this passage.

Now, my only piece of application in this whole sermon is going to happen right now.

[3 : 21] When David was bringing the Ark back from this backwater town, the idea was to be bringing God back into the center of these people's lives, which is a great idea.

We have no Ark now, but we have the fulfillment of the Ark. So, how do we keep God central to our life, like King David was trying to do?

How do we do that? And the answer is we fix our eyes on Jesus. That's how we do that. Okay.

That's a lot of background. That's big picture stuff. A little bit more.

Just a little bit more big picture stuff. Here's something you might not hear about the Ark that regularly. It is more than a symbol of God's presence.

It's more than that. It's more than just a representation. It's more than just this idea which helps us explain some things. In my previous sermon, do you remember the great story about the Ark and Dagon and stuff, right?

[4 : 27] That was probably about a month ago. I described the Ark as a religious furniture, which was naughty of me. That wasn't... That's not right.

So, I'm sorry about that. I totally put you wrong by describing it like that. It is more than a symbol. In the presence of the Ark, people experienced the very real presence of God, the immediate presence of God.

Now, of course, God is everywhere. He does not exist in a box. But, you know, the Bible records that people came into the presence of God when they came into the presence of the Ark.

Things happened when the Ark was around. Philistines got, you know, I don't know, goiters or something. We don't quite know, but it wasn't pleasant. Statues fell over. Armies were blessed or cursed when the Ark was present.

So, it's definitely more than a symbol. Indiana Jones knew that. That's the title of the sermon, right? Indiana Jones was right. Do you remember at the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark? I have more proof than this, by the way. Do you remember the Raiders of the Lost Ark?

[5 : 33] When the Nazis had got the thing, the Ark, and they're about to open it up. And Indy is tied to a stake with Marion, right?

And they're all tied up. And so they open up the Ark. And Indiana Jones says to Marion, don't look at it, right? He says, don't look at it. And he doesn't. And the Nazis melt.

And, you know, they're okay, right? So, all right. Maybe something a bit more biblical. Cool. In Exodus 25, when God was talking about the Ark, he says this.

He says, I will meet you there. I will meet you there. So, in a sense, it is... Actually, as my friend Dave Little sort of talked about it, the Reverend Dave Little, he said it's kind of sacramental in that sense, isn't it?

You know, there is... It points to something, but something very real is happening as well. Okay. Tons of background. Okay, just a little bit more background.

[6 : 35] All right. No, no, no. Let me remind you of the story very quickly. All right. So, David decides to bring the Ark out of obscurity from this little town where it's languished, I guess, for 20 years.

Bring it into the central city. Great idea. You know, let's bring God's presence into the middle of the city. This is a good thing. There's some political stuff in there probably as well, but I think it's basically a really good idea.

So, it's a national affair. Huge parade. Singing. Dancing. They've built this new cart for the Ark to sit on. And everyone can see it.

And then it all goes sideways. All of a sudden, there's a dead guy on the ground. And all he was trying to do was steady the Ark when it hit some bumpy ground. And that's the end of the party. I guess everyone goes home.

And the Ark gets sent off to somebody's house to stay for a little while. David hears that this house has become incredibly blessed over those few months.

[7 : 35] So, he decides to have a second crack at bringing the Ark back into the city. And this time he does it right. We'll talk more about that shortly. Except his wife. Because David's dancing in front of the Ark, right?

And his wife says, look, you're dancing in your undies in front of the maids. You look stupid. And she never has children. Never has kids.

That's how that chapter ends. So, that's 10,000 feet. Let's get into the details. All right. David's first attempt to bring the Ark into the city.

So, I mean, you have to ask yourself the question of motivation. What's happening here? And as I said, I think there was probably some clever political motivation here.

But I think, I really think, David wanted the reality of God in his life and in the life of his people. It's a wonderful desire.

[8 : 34] Let me read something from Psalm 27. It's beautiful. This is the heart of David. Psalm 27. One thing I've asked of the Lord that I would seek after, that I might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.

So, it's a good thing he wants, you know. Big celebration. Music, dancing, worship. Huge gig. We've got a huge gig. He's even made a special cart, as I said. Cart slides off.

The guy in charge, Azza, not wanting the party ruined, puts his hand out steady yet, dies.

Now, obviously, people have a problem with this story. Some people have a problem with this story. We could rewrite it, perhaps, and it could go something like this. So, the Ark started to slide off.

Uzzah, not wanting the ark desecrated by the filthy dirt, reached up to stop a disaster. And he does. Clouds open up.

[9 : 38] Voice from heaven, Well done, my good and faithful Uzzah. Whilst everyone else was caught up in the emotion of the moment, you were the only guy attending to me. You are currently my favourite.

So that would be a good story, right? That would sell. I could preach that. But that's not what happens. The story we have is less popular. It gets stuck between our teeth. Ironically, though, I think, far from undermining the Bible, I think it lends to the truthfulness of it all. It lends itself to the rightness of the Bible, if I can put it like that.

I mean, one of the accusations leveraged against the Christian faith is that God is a projection of your great hopes, that he is a function of your wishes, that you want to believe in a nice deity. And, you know, this is a God we would never invent. Not if we want converts, anyway. You know, not if we want bums on seats in churches, right?

[10 : 56] This is not a God that we would invent. This is a God that is not what we expect. And at the risk of using a cliché that you've heard many times before, but I think it is a great explanation of the kind of God described here.

You know, C.S. Lewis in *The Lion and the Witch in the Wardrobe*, and Lucy asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan, who is like, you know, the God sort of figure, the Christ figure, is Aslan safe? And he says, certainly not. He is not safe, but he is good. All right, the \$64 question. Why did Azar die? Why did it have to be like this?

Why couldn't he, couldn't have God made his point with giving Azar like a really sore arm or a bit of a jolt? Or like, you know, when you walk up to somebody in the office and you put your hand on their shoulder and you get like a spark, you know, the electric shock thing, right?

Why couldn't it have just been like that and the story be like, you know, and Azar got a shock and everyone realised, oh, you've got to, you know, be more respectful or something. So, in the book of Numbers, there are laid out very specific rules about transporting the ark.

[12 : 07] It has to be covered, so it's not to be a spectacle. It has to be carried. There were special rings on the ark, right? And they had these long big poles made out of acacia wood that guys would carry it with.

It was carried by Levites who were like a priestly class. And of course, it was not to be touched. So, no looky, no carry, no touchy, basically.

So, when we read the story about David bringing in the ark, every one of those rules was disregarded. And they're not arbitrary rules. Not the rules of a grumpy old man being protective of his stuff.

I don't know if you guys have had the experience of, like a great aunt or something who's, you know, a bit grumpy and she's got nice things and you'd visit her as a little kid and she'd be like, leave it alone, you'll break it.

You know, that kind of, just don't touch it. Get down from there. That's my special saucer or something, whatever, you know. That's not what's going on here.

[13 : 06] The rules of the ark that God laid forward were about God's kindness. About God's kindness towards his people. My wife and I have taught our little girl who's sort of, you know, one and a half, that hot is bad.

Hot is bad. So, when the oven is open and she sort of goes near it, she knows that now and she'll go, hot. Which is good, right?

We're not being mean to her. It's just that the oven is unsafe. So, we've taught her that when you're around the oven, you don't touch it because, we've taught her that because we love her, right?

So, the rules that God laid forward were to protect his people. As I've said that, when you came into the presence of the ark, you were coming into the presence of God, which means you're, and this is very important, you are confronted by God's holiness.

Another way of saying all this would be that Azar didn't die because he broke the rules. He didn't die because he broke the rules.

[14 : 15] God wasn't being fussy about his toys. You know, there was no magic force field around it. These rules existed. The rules that existed were a symptom of something else.

The rules point to the reality that there is a chasm between humanity and God. A great chasm with a holy God on one side and a people who are not holy on the other.

And Azar likely didn't think himself on the other side of that chasm. When it feels like that, you know, you could have talked to these guys and they're like, wow, this is a really great celebration. Like, Azar's here and Larry's here and God's here and Jimmy's here and this is really cool, you know. There was almost a presuming on God. But there is a great chasm between God and his people.

One that can only be breached by radical grace, by atonement. And that idea is at the heart of biblical faith. And I believe it was ignored that day.

[15:28] And that's why Azar died. Verses 12 to 15 record David's second and more successful attempt at bringing the ark into the city. But before we sort of get into that, you find in scripture, if you find two stories which are kind of similar, right, here's one story.

Here's another story. If you look at, like, there's something in the middle often, right? That little middle thing is like a hinge.

So the hinge between two stories which are kind of similar. Often that hinge is really, really important. Often the hinge is telling you stuff that you really should know.

And let me read the hinge story here. Verses 10 to 12. So David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David, but took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.

And the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite three months. Here's a Philistine. There's probably lots of things to say about that. I will say none of it. The Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his household.

[16:39] And it was told, King David, the Lord has blessed this household and all that belongs to him because of the ark of God. Okay. That's a little hinge story. The reader is drawing your eyes to that.

And here is what he is saying. He is saying, the ark is not automatically deadly. Hence, this guy Odom doing pretty good. The point of this hinge is that it is God's intent to bless.

It's God's intent to bless. And David sees this and he has another go at getting the ark back into the city. Now his second attempt was successful. Why was it successful? Well, through this whole ark story, God teaches David something very important.

And the Bible teaches us something very important here. God teaches David how to be in the presence of God. How to get the presence of God in your life. Firstly, you have to recognize that there is a chasm.

You have to recognize that there is a great separation between a holy God and you. So first. Second, that there must be a provision for the sin.

[17:52] Hence, in the second go, there are sacrifices every six steps. Now I know that some people have a problem with that whole idea of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament.

Why all the sacrifice stuff? And why can't God just forgive? All our wrongdoings. Why can't he just get over it? Why can't he sweep it under the carpet? There are a lot of things to say to answer that question.

Let me just pick one small strand of an answer here. Forgiveness takes suffering. It hurts to forgive. If you were a person, you know, and you, you know, if you were one person, right, and you wronged me, I could go the way of revenge and I could hurt you.

You would suffer. You know, I want you to pay for this wrong, right? That's justice. That seems reasonable. Or, I could go the way of forgiveness and I suffer.

Forgiveness is healing, but forgiveness hurts because you give up your right to punish. You give up this innate sense of justice. And if, and you and I feel this, how much more so God on a cosmic level.

[19:26] The cost of God forgiving us, as you know, was nails and thorns. Now, so, you know, what we feel sort of internally when we forgive, the cost of that God did objectively and practically with Christ.

And I think this passage really, really points to that. Forgiveness costs. It costs. But it opens us up to the presence of God. And what comes of all this as we start to close it all up here?

What comes of all this? Well, what comes of it is joy. When you read the stories of people dancing, there's celebrations, you know, like, when we really understand the huge chasm, when we understand the provision for breaching that chasm, there is a dance about our lives.

David's dance is joyful and expressive and exuberant. He strips down to an ephod, which is like a loincloth, a priestly loincloth.

And in stripping down, he is stripping himself of his regalia. Remember Saul was kind of like, remember when, you know, like, you know, in the other sermons we talked about, you know, these clothes represented their prestige and their place and stuff, right?

[20 : 51] David is stripping himself of this stuff. He strips himself of all the stuff that says, I'm in charge. Which is why Michael, Saul's daughter, David's wife, has a major problem with it.

See, when I first read it, I was thinking, oh, she doesn't like it because it's not organized and she likes order and stuff. I've been watching, I'm addicted to Downton Abbey at the moment, right? And so I'm all about, I'm all thinking about, like, doing things right.

And I started, so I immediately, my mind went to that, like, oh, she doesn't like it because it's all disorganized and random and it's not very seemly, you know. But it's not right. she despises David because she wants him to be a king's king.

In chapter 5, which we didn't read, David is made king over all of Israel and Judah. She wants him to be a king's king and David knows he is under God, that he is a servant king.

And so she never has children. And we don't know whether this is a curse or whether, you know, some kind of, like, David struck a baron or something or whether they just stopped sleeping together because their marriage was practically over at that point.

[22 : 05] Either way, it's, it's an end to Saul's offspring having any say, any involvement in the kingship.

But that's a whole other topic so we won't go there. Okay, to finish off, I have no applications because I don't want this to be turned into some kind of program for your life.

I really would love you to pray and think about how this story shows us a couple of things. How it shows us that fearfulness and gladness can be held together and are held together in the Bible and in our relationship with God.

And I want you to ask yourself if this is your experience of God. Let me finish with a few lines from Psalm 2. Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear, and this is good here, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the son lest he be angry and you perish in the way for his wrath is quickly kindled.

[23 : 19] Blessed are all who take refuge in him. Folks, you are worse than you know. You are worse than you know you are.

But you are loved more than you can imagine. That's the big message. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.