

The way to blessing

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn together for just a few minutes to the chapter that we read in the Old Testament. We were reading in the second book of Samuel, chapter 6, and I'd like to read again, as we think about this chapter, I'd like to read again verse 17.

And they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in his place in the midst of the tabernacle that David had pitched for it. And David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. Now, the events that we have described for us in this chapter are the story of one of the great happenings of Old Testament history. This was one of the high points of Old Testament history. You know, the story of Israel had its ups and it had its downs. Some people might very well say, well, if you look at the history of Israel, there were more downs than there were.

Ups to it. But the scene that we have at the start of these incidents is one where things have been going really tremendously well. Things have been going just great.

[1 : 12] After centuries and centuries of instability, the tide had turned. Things were different. They had a great king on the throne. David.

They were secure from threats from outside nations and hostile forces in a way that they hadn't been within living memory. And for far, far longer than that.

For hundreds and hundreds of years, they hadn't had stability like they had now. Right through the time of the judges, the country had always been under threat.

Now, it was stable. David was a great king. And in one sense, one of the things about David that, you know, went home to people, was that he was a man of the people.

He knew the way that ordinary folk thought. He thought like an ordinary mortal himself. He didn't come from a privileged background. He hadn't been spoiled as a child.

[2 : 17] He knew what it was like to work for his living. He knew what it was like to face tremendous difficulties, tremendous problems. There wasn't a soldier in the whole of the army of Israel to touch him.

And there wasn't a soldier anywhere else to touch him, either. No one could beat him. And David was someone who had a concern that extended over every aspect of the nation's life.

Now, not saying David was perfect, we know very well he wasn't perfect. But he did have a real concern for every aspect of the nation's life.

He had a concern for the military security of the nation. Of course he had. And he had a concern for the economic prosperity of the nation. It wasn't just that he would be saved, or that he would be well off.

He had a concern that the nation should be saved. The nation should be well off. But more than that, and far more important, David realized that unless the spiritual side of the nation's life was right, then nothing would be right.

[3 : 29] Unless people were right spiritually, then nothing else was going to work out properly.

There was a sense in which the whole future of the nation depended on the public life of the nation and the private life of the people of the nation.

Honoring God. So, where was he going to start in dealing with the spiritual side of the nation's life? That was the question.

And to David there was one thing that seemed obviously appropriate. Something that he'd have to do. You see, there was something that was actually, he was thinking, now this is inappropriate and I've got to sort it out.

What's the most appropriate way of sorting it out? Because what was inappropriate was that he was living in comfort in Jerusalem, at the heart of the nation's life, and people were seeing him there, and he was the focus of their attention, and he was thinking, well, that's wrong.

It's God that should be the focus of their attention, not me. And surely, the symbol of God's presence amongst his people should be at the heart of the nation's life.

[4 : 43] What about the Ark of the Covenant? What about that box that was designed to remind people of God's presence among his people? Should that not be right at the center of things?

Should it not be right at the focus of people's attention all the time, so that their attention will be on God and not on me? I don't want it on me, I want their attention on God, because unless their whole way of thinking centers on God, things are not going to work out at all.

I'm a frail, fallible human being, their attention should be not on me, but on God. Now, of course, the Ark of the Covenant, for years, and years, and years, and years, long before his time, had been at Shiloh, been at the place of worship in Shiloh, until in the time of Eli, you remember, it was taken out by Eli's sons onto the field of battle against the Philistines, taken out as a sort of lucky charm, taken out as a totem that they thought would enable them to win.

It didn't, that wasn't what it was designed for at all, it had been taken captive by the Philistines. And as you know, it didn't do the Philistines any good at all, they had problems when it was with them. It brought on them plagues, acutely unpleasant plagues, and they were desperate to get rid of it. So they'd returned it to Kyriath-yarim, and it had stayed in Kyriath-yarim for twenty years.

[6 : 19] But now the question was, should the Ark of the Covenant stay where it was, or should it be brought away from there, and brought up to Jerusalem?

And to David it seemed that the answer was obvious, bring this Ark of the Covenant, this symbol of God's presence among his people, bring it to Jerusalem, so that it'll be at the center of the nation's life, Jerusalem's the capital, let's have the Ark of the Covenant here, and that will focus people's attention on spiritual things, rather than on the king as their leader.

The whole business was arranged in a very public way. It wasn't a case of sending some people down to collect the Ark of the Covenant, it was to be a great national festival.

It was something that people's attention was to be focused on. David wanted everyone to see the whole thing going on, taking place, with lots of pomp, and lots of ceremony, and lots of public expression.

I suppose, in a very crude sort of way, although the Ark of the Covenant being transported was a lot more dramatic and impressive, you could compare it to the attempt at ceremony in bringing the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey to Edinburgh Castle.

[7 : 43] You know, it was something that they wanted people to see and take note of. Well, David wanted them to see it, he wanted the nation to participate in it, and David's motives were good.

He wanted their attention focused on God and on spiritual things. Now, you would have thought that something like that was a very positive idea, indeed, wouldn't you? But there was something happened during this ceremony that everyone, including David himself, was left very confused after.

Something went drastically wrong. The event that should have been an indication of tremendous happiness had a disaster in it. The Ark of the Covenant slipped, went to slip off the cart on which it was being carried, and the man who went to stabilize it, to rescue it, died as he touched it.

Now, the event was marred by tragedy, and the tragedy went further than just the man himself and his family. It threw a huge question mark over the whole exercise.

Was David doing the right thing? Was it something that God wanted done, or wasn't it? What should David do now? Something's gone wrong. So David put the whole exercise on hold for a time until he'd see things more clearly.

[9 : 11] Then, after a time, we find that he proceeded with the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. It ended up a tremendously happy exercise.

It was a great public event. But you know, the second attempt was very different from the first one. The planning was quite different, and with very good reason.

And in this, there's a whole series of lessons, not just for people who lived 3,000 years ago, but for you and me as well. And foremost of these lessons is that it's not always what we think that will be appropriate that's actually, in reality, most honoring to God.

Now, there are a few things I'd like us to think about very briefly here. First of all, the fact that David wanted to see God at the heart of the nation's life. Then secondly, David organized things for the Ark of the Covenant to be brought to Jerusalem.

And lastly, when things were eventually done God's way, blessing followed. Not everybody approved of it, but blessing did follow.

[10:31] Now, first of all, David wanted to see God at the heart of the nation's life. That's why the whole thing took place. David recognized that the success that he himself had had up to that point in time was due to the working of God.

You know, people around him were saying, isn't David great? But David knew very well that it was God's working, not David's ability. David was established as king over Israel.

He had a measure of security that he'd never had before or the nation had never had before. And nobody looking at David's situation could reasonably argue that he was anything but a successful king.

He was successful in all sorts of ways. It would have been almost impossible to point to anyone in the world of David's time who was more successful even in worldly terms than David was.

It would certainly have been impossible to find anyone in Israel who'd been that successful. and what you might have expected to find would be that David would have got a bit swollen-headed.

[11:45] You might have expected to have something of the attitude, or look at what I've achieved and take careful note of it, I've done pretty well, haven't I? You just take note of everything that I've done and recognize that I'm someone more special than anyone else.

That's what you might have expected. That's what we might have been tempted to see. But David, with all his faults, wasn't saying that. He was very conscious of the background that he'd come from.

He was very conscious of the fact that no matter how hard he might have tried, if it hadn't been for God's working, he'd never have been able to accomplish what he'd achieved.

It wasn't his own efforts that had done it. For a start, all the abilities he had, where did he come from? Why had he got them and other people not?

Well, they'd come from God. They were trusts, things that he'd been entrusted with, not for his own selfish gain. He'd been entrusted with them by God to use them in a way that was honoring to God.

[12:52] The very position that he had as king, where did that come from? Was it because he'd fought his way into the leadership? No, it wasn't. It had come in a very real sense from God.

David was very conscious of the fact that whatever resources he had, whatever power he had, whatever authority he had, he had them to use them with a view to God's glory.

Now, when it comes to you and me, you know, it's desperately easy for us to think of what we ourselves have done. We've achieved this and that and the next thing.

But the fact of the matter is that left to ourselves we'll never achieve anything worthwhile. We ought never to be full of ourselves and what we've done.

We ought to recognize very readily, as David did, that it's God who makes it possible for us to do whatever things are worthwhile that we may ever have accomplished. There ought to be in us, in other words, the sort of humility that leads us to acknowledge God's goodness to us rather than us claiming credit that rightly belongs to God.

[14:10] David wasn't claiming credit himself and he didn't want anybody to ascribe credit to him. Now, he realized that the people of Israel didn't just need a king.

that wasn't going to sort their problems. What they needed was God. They needed a right relationship to God as individuals and they needed a right relationship to God as a nation.

David was king over Israel, but that didn't solve the nation's problems and it didn't solve David's problems. At the moment, everything was fine between David and Israel.

people. But what guarantee was there that that situation would go on indefinitely? What if they were going to fall out with each other? How could there be any guarantee that they would work in harmony together?

How could there be any reasonable certainty that David would go on wanting what was worthwhile? How could there be any reasonable certainty that the nation would go on wanting what was genuinely worthwhile?

[15:14] Well, David realized that if the nation were going to have a worthwhile future, then the people of Israel would have to be wholeheartedly committed to God.

They needed God as individuals, every one of them, more than anything else. They needed a right relationship to God. And if their relationship with God was going to be right, it didn't stop with their need of a personal right relationship with God, it applied to the whole public life of the nation as well.

the whole thing had to be run in a way that was honoring to God. You couldn't restrict religion to the private lives of the people of Israel.

It affected, it needed to affect the public life of the nation as well. The nation needed more than an able military leader to succeed.

They needed more than an able politician to succeed, more than an able economist socialist to succeed. They needed more than an able cultural leaders to succeed.

[16:20] They needed more than an able social leader to succeed. They needed a right relationship with God in their public life and in their private lives for Israel to succeed.

Now, you know, we all know, how many times do we hear it, the popular saying, the popular dictum that religion and politics don't mix. religion and politics can be a very inflammatory mixture, that's most certainly true, but the lesson of the Bible is that the nation that doesn't have at the very center of its approach to life, in a public sense, as well as a private sense, the honoring of God is heading for disaster.

The only worthwhile recipe for a secure future for any nation is that they should honor God in every aspect of life. Now, that's very much at the heart of David's thinking in his plan to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, to the focus of the nation's life, and he wanted to see people's attention focused on God, not on David himself, not on the people themselves, but on God.

If they were going to place their hope for the future on David, then they were going to be sadly disappointed. Not because he was any worse than anyone else, for there were many things that he was far from perfect in, and far from right in.

Not that he was any less efficient than other rulers, he certainly wasn't, he was an exceedingly effective ruler, but because he was a fallible human being with very limited powers.

[18:02] And if they were pinning their hope for the future on themselves, well they were going to be very disappointed too, because they were even more limited than David with all his failings was. What they needed was to focus their attention on God and to look for a worthwhile future through a right relationship to him.

And that raises for you and for me the question of where is our attention focused? Is it on ourselves? Or is it on someone else?

Or is it on God? We need to focus our attention on God. Now, David realizing that arranged to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem.

And what he did was he organized the bringing of the Ark on a new card. That you remember was the way that the Philistines had sent it back to Israel on a brand new card.

And that's the way that David arranged to have it transported to Jerusalem. There's going to be nothing shoddy about the way that he would do it. It was going to be an impressive ceremony.

[19:11] It was going to be something that people would remember for the rest of their lives that David had anything to do with it. All the great military men of Israel were to be there to accompany it. 30,000 men.

And there was to be a great show of pomp and circumstance, a tremendous ceremony. there would be a great religious orchestra to accompany the ark on its journey to Jerusalem.

People would look back to that day, David reckoned as a day to remember for the rest of their lives and say, I was there, I saw it, I heard it. For myself.

They'd tell their children about it, they'd tell their grandchildren about it. The ceremonial nature of the occasion would make it that way, David thought. And you can see the way that his mind was working. But do you see what was wrong?

There was something wrong even at that stage in proceedings. Before the day was even out of the planning stage, there was something wrong. It was being planned in just the same sort of way as any great worldly ceremony would have been planned.

[20:19] It was being planned to impress in an outward sense. But that is not necessarily what God requires. It's not necessarily what's pleasing to God at all.

And there was a problem happened. The problem came with the death of Utzah. Now, what we find in reality is that things had gone very seriously wrong.

It seemed all right at first. They took the Ark of the Covenant from the house where it had been kept for all the years since it had been returned by the Philistines. And no doubt Abinadim himself was actually dead, we think, by that time.

But anyway, two of his sons took responsibility for loading the Ark of the Covenant onto this new cart and handling the transport arrangements. And the journey started.

But before they got to their destination, something dreadful happened that made people remember the day for reasons that weren't what David had hoped.

[21 : 20] the oxen stumbled. Now, some commentators think that it was more than just a simple stumbling, because the expression, the word actually means that they were shaking.

You know, if you're terrified how you're shaking your shoes. Now, the suggestion that some commentators make, rightly or otherwise I don't know, is that the oxen were actually shaking, terrified, that even the animals knew that there was something out of guilt or something wrong in what was going on.

But in any case, for whatever reason, the cart shook. The Ark of the Covenant, this great big box about so long, so wide, so deep, it started sliding off the end of the cart.

And Utsa, who had been watching at the back just to see that nothing happened, saw what was happening, and he jumped to it, to put his hand to it, to stop it sliding any further. Now, the thing was, that a way back when God had given instructions about the making of that symbol of his presence, they were told very clearly, but one thing they must never do is touch it.

Out of reverence for God, if they were obeying God's instructions, they would never touch the Ark of the Covenant, out of respect for the holiness of the one whose presence among them it symbolized.

[22 : 54] God had given instructions about how they were to carry it. It was to be carried on big, long poles, there were rings, the poles went through, wooden poles, and the poles were to be carried by Levites.

And the fact of the matter is that in David's arrangements, God's instructions for the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant had been ignored. And the day that was supposed to be memorable for good reasons became memorable for the den of Uzza.

Just what mechanism was used to strike down Uzza isn't the point. It's a fact, a historical fact, and perhaps an electrical fact as well that the Ark of the Covenant was made of wood.

And wood, of course, is a good insulator, covered on the inside and on the outside with a layer of gold. And what you have there is an enormous electrical capacitor or condenser capable of carrying the most tremendous electrical charge.

That may well have been the means that God used, but it's quite irrelevant what means God used, really, because the fact is that they didn't follow God's instructions and that's why the problem occurred.

[24 : 12] You see, for you and me, what we've got to take note of is that God's instructions are given for our good and we ignore them at our peril. That was the problem.

David might have had a motive that he thought was appropriate. He might have been doing this in a way that he thought was appropriate, but he was ignoring God's instructions. Now, things were let live, but eventually David saw that the blessing of God had not been withdrawn from the place where the ark was left.

And when things were eventually done God's way, and the ark was brought to Jerusalem God's way, not everyone approved, but great blessing followed.

Obed-Edom prospered. When the ark was in his house. Months went past, and something remarkable was noticed by the wider community around Obed-Edom.

He prospered in a way that he never had before. And the only sensible conclusion that anybody could reach was the hand of God must be in it. How come this fellow who had never been particularly prosperous before, who always had things going wrong for him, how come that in the time that the ark of the covenant was there, he prospered like he never had before.

[25 : 35] That's some coincidence. Well, it's no coincidence. It must have been the working of God. And the information about Obed-Edom percolated as far as David himself, and it was taken as an indication that something was clearly right in the ark of the covenant having been brought that far along the journey.

And just as God made things clear to David in the fullness of time, so God will make things clear to ourselves in his own good time. Now, you and I may be very impatient.

We're all impatient by nature. David was impatient. But God's time is always right. And what we ought to be praying for always is that God will give us the right understanding of the things that we need to understand at the time that we need to understand them.

Obed-Edom prospered, and that was God's guidance to David. And David arranged a very different program for bringing the ark to Jerusalem. On the last leg of its journey, it was quite a different plan from the first leg.

It was still an impressive ceremony, but this time it was arranged in accordance with God's instructions. Not on a cart, but carried by the Levites in the appropriate way.

[26 : 58] it didn't hinder their enjoyment. It didn't make the ceremony one whit less impressive. And quite obviously from what we're told here, there was the chance for David to express his joy and delight in a very open fashion.

Skipping along with the ark of the covenant. That's how the Old Testament describes him. Now, God's instructions are not intended to spoil our enjoyment at all.

In fact, without God's instructions, we can never have the most and the best out of life. A very different ceremony, but no less happy, no less worthwhile for most people.

But you know, there was one person, at least, that wasn't pleased. Not everyone was pleased, but yet God's blessing was on the exercise. David's wife, Michal, we're told, wasn't at all pleased by what she saw.

She saw her husband. She looked out and she saw her husband. She wasn't there herself, but she saw her husband skipping along. What is he dressed in? Not his kingly robes at all.

[28 : 06] She thought, oh well, the king, you know, he should be there, he should be riding in state, he should be, as it were, not that you wore a crown in the fashion that we would understand it, but if you could transfer the idea, he should be there in his robes with his crown and his head sitting on a throne, transported in a very elegant fashion in front of the whole Lord.

What's he doing in ordinary clothes, skipping along? Just, it's disgusting, she thought. Nothing but a linen he for a dog, just the same sort of thing as other people might wear, and she despised him for it.

But who was wrong? It wasn't David, it was her. And you know, the thing that should concern ourselves, most of all, is that we should honour God, and do what he's spelled out.

God's blessing is more precious than anything else we could ever gain. Now, there's three things I'd like to take away and ponder over, and they're these.

First of all, are you awake to the fact that our right relationship with God that permeates every aspect of our life is what we need most of all as individuals and as a nation?

[29 : 20] There's nothing we need more. And secondly, are you awake to the fact that worldly ways of doing things are not always what's appropriate when it comes to honouring God?

And lastly, is it the blessing of God that you seek? Most of all, whatever else was wrong in David's thinking, this was right, that he was seeking God's blessing above everything else, and that he was trying to focus people's attention on God rather than himself.

And in these respects, may God make each one of us more like that. May God bless to us these few thoughts and from his own word. Let's join together in prayer. Let's pray. Almighty and eternal God, we pray indeed that thou write thy word into our way of thinking.

we pray that our eyes would be set constantly upon the Lord because that's where our attention should be focused.

Lifted from ourselves, lifted from other people, turn our attention to thee, because when we give thee the right place in our lives, then everything else falls into place.

[30 : 39] when we give thee the right place, the first place in our lives, we have happiness for ourselves that we could never have otherwise. When we give thee the first place in our lives, other people are no less precious to us, but rather we have more to share with them and to give to them.

May we honor thee in thought and word and in action, and we pray that nothing might matter to us more than that. what we ask, we ask with the forgiveness of our sins, in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen.