WORSHIP: MY RESPONSE TO GOD’S PRESENCE

2 Samuel 6

By

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I read a story (Reader's Digest [7-82]) about a church in which the choir loft sits below the eye level of the congregation. Running across the entire front of the church is a low, velvet-draped railing. Several of the more creative choir members discovered that after finishing the anthem they could crawl on hands and knees behind the railing and exit through a side door. They could then buy fresh donuts around the corner and return to the worship service undetected.

One Sunday, an elderly, distinguished-looking man made a successful exit. But on his return trip he realized that in order to reach his seat, he would have to crawl back carrying the bag of donuts between his teeth. It wasn’t until he was halfway across that he noticed the laughter spreading through the congregation. He was on the wrong side of the railing!

While that story is funny at first, the longer you think about it, the more tragic it becomes. It’s a sad commentary on the condition of worship to think that it is okay to sing an anthem to the Almighty God, who sits enthroned above the cherubim in unapproachable glory, and then to sneak out behind a railing for a bag of donuts to munch on during the remainder of the service. I remind you that the God we worship is able to see on both sides of the railing!

We need to recover today in our evangelical, Bible-believing churches the sense of reverence that ought to characterize those who gather in the holy presence of the living God. In many churches the fellowship is warm and the Bible teaching is faithful. But each week the people file in and out of what is labeled a “worship service” without ever coming close to sensing the holy presence of God. It’s easy to fall into the disease of “playing church,” of going through the motions of worship without encountering God. But,
Worship should be a reverent response to God's holy presence.

This is a main lesson from David's bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). David had been king now for over seven years. The kingdom, which at first was divided, was now consolidated under David's rule. He desired to make the worship of God central in the national life. To do this, he proposed to bring the ark of the covenant, the central piece of the Mosaic Tabernacle, to Jerusalem. We learn from this story that ...

1. God's holy presence should be the focus of true corporate worship.

God is omnipresent—present everywhere at the same time. But His presence is not realized everywhere. When I talk about the presence of God, I mean His realized presence. When God's people come together for worship, they ought to focus on His holy presence among them.

A. God's holy presence was symbolized in the ark.

The ark was a rectangular box about 3 3/4 feet long by 2 1/4 feet wide by 2 1/4 feet high. It contained the 10 Commandments and, in earlier days, at least, Aaron's rod which budded and a pot of manna. It was made of wood overlaid with gold. On top of the ark was the mercy seat, a solid slab of gold on which the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificial lamb once a year on the Day of Atonement. The ark was kept in the Holy of Holies and was always kept covered when being moved on a journey.

The ark was the symbol of God's meeting with His people on the basis of atonement. The Lord told Moses, "And there I will meet with you ..." (Exod. 25:22). It was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. The materials of the ark, gold and wood, typified the person of Christ as both God and man. The function of the ark as the mercy-seat typified the work of Christ as the sacrificial lamb of God.

When we gather as God's people, we gather unto the Lord Jesus who is in our midst. It is because of His Person, God in human flesh, and His work as the satisfaction of the divine penalty for our sins, that we can draw near unto God.
B. God’s holy presence is an awesome thing.

The ark is described here (6:2) as “the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim.” The cherubim are angels who dwell in the presence of God. They are awesome in their appearance, being associated with fire and lightning and the blinding brightness of the glory of the Lord (Ezek. 1:4-14; 10:3-22). Two golden cherubim with their wings touching overshadowed the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. The only human eyes that could view that sight were those of the high priest, and that only once a year in strict accordance with the procedures God had ordained.

As David and the people worshiped before this ark, it’s clear that they were worshiping “before the Lord” (the phrase occurs six times in this chapter: verses 5, 14, 16, 17, 21 [twice]). As we’ll see, even though they had this sense of God’s presence, they were too careless about it at first, with tragic consequences. But God made it explicitly clear that to worship in His presence is an awesome thing, not to be taken lightly.

We live in a day of flippant Christianity that has brought God down to the “good buddy in the sky” level, where we’ve lost the proper sense of awe and fear in His holy presence. John MacArthur tells about a pastor friend of his who told John that Jesus often appears to him and talks with him in the mornings as he is shaving. John’s incredulous response was, “And you keep shaving?” In his excellent book, The Ultimate Priority (Moody Press), pp. 79-80, he writes, “I am certain that if the people today who claim to have seen God really saw Him, they wouldn’t be lining up to get on the latest Christian talk show; they’d be lying prostrate on the ground, grieving over their sin.”

As we gather to worship, it would transform us and our worship if we would focus on the truth that we are gathering in God’s holy presence. We should not come primarily to meet with our friends, although fellowship is an important function of the church. We should come primarily to meet with God. True corporate worship involves focusing on the fact that the Holy God is here. That means that ...
2. Reverence in God's presence should be our response in true corporate worship.

Since the ark was the visible symbol of the presence of God in the midst of His people, you would think that there would have been a uniform response of reverence on the part of all who were in the presence of the ark. But if you go back about 75 years and trace the history of the ark, you find quite different and instructive responses to its presence.

The Israelites: “A good luck charm” (1 Sam. 4): The worship of God was a dead ritual for most of Israel at this time. The two priestly sons of Eli were corrupt, committing immorality with women at the doorway of the Tabernacle (2:22). When they encountered difficulties with the Philistines, someone got the idea, “Let’s get the ark and carry it into battle” (4:3, 5-11). They were using it as a good luck charm. God allowed them to be defeated, and the ark was captured by the Philistines.

There are churchgoers in our day who attempt to use the church as a good luck charm. They’re having problems in their lives, so they think, “I’ll go to church and try to rub God the right way and maybe He will solve my problems.” But for them, worship is nothing more than a good luck charm to try to get God on their side. They know nothing of God’s holy presence.

The Philistines: “A plague” (1 Sam. 5): The Philistines set up the ark next to their god, Dagon, but the Lord caused their idol to fall down and break into pieces. Next, God struck them all with tumors of some sort (some scholars have suggested hemorrhoids) and with mice (5:6; 6:4-5). As you can imagine, the Philistines wanted to get rid of the ark as quickly as possible. They were quite uncomfortable (literally) with the presence of God.

Even so, there are some who feel a plague of guilt when they come near a church where God’s presence is known. They are uncomfortable around those who manifest the presence of the Lord.

Abinadab: “Ho hum!” (1 Sam. 7:1-2; 2 Sam. 6:3): The Philistines sent the ark back to Israel on a cart, and it wound up in the house of Abinadab. It had been there for almost 70 years by David’s time. It is significant that we do not read of any results in
Abinadab’s household for having the ark there all those years. We’ll see in a moment that it was in Obed-edom’s house for just three months and resulted in great blessing. But it was 70 years in Abinadab’s house, and nothing happened.

Some churchgoers are like that. They can come for years into a church where God is present, but it has no appreciable effect on their lives. “Huh? What’s that gold box up there on the mantle? Oh, it’s the ark of the covenant. Interesting piece of furniture, isn’t it? Ho hum.” You can be in the very presence of God and have it glance right off, if your heart isn’t seeking after Him.

Uzzah: “Don’t have a cow, man!” (2 Sam. 6:6-7): That’s what Uzzah might have said if he had lived in our day and if he had lived to say anything! As David and company moved the ark toward Jerusalem on an oxcart, the oxen stumbled and the ark almost fell to the dirt. Uzzah reached out his hand to steady it and God struck him dead on the spot.

Some folks think that God was a bit touchy and harsh for doing this. Even David got angry at God, as we shall see. What was so bad about what Uzzah did? After all, he was just trying to help, wasn’t he? Any wagon driver would have done the same with any valuable piece of furniture under his care, wouldn’t he?

Yes, and that was precisely Uzzah’s problem. He saw no difference between the ark and any other valuable article. He was overly familiar with that which was utterly sacred. Uzzah was the son (or grandson) of Abinadab. He had grown up with the ark in his home. It was commonplace to him: “What’s the big deal?” But he should have known that even the Levitical priests who carried the ark were not permitted to touch it, but carried it on poles inserted through rings attached to it.

Some in our day--often they are people who have grown up in the church--trifle with the things of God. God is commonplace to them. I once worked with a young man who was studying for the ministry at a liberal seminary. At work one day he joked about how he had been drunk Saturday night and had spent the night in immorality with his girl friend, but had to get up and conduct a communion service for some young people the next day. I was horri-
fied at his flippancy toward God! He wasn’t struck dead on the spot, but he was in grave danger spiritually.

Those who have a problem with what God did to Uzzah need to gain the Bible’s perspective on God’s absolute holiness and man’s utter sinfulness. As R. C. Sproul points out (The Holiness of God [Tyndale, p. 141]), what Uzzah did was an act of arrogance. He “assumed that his hand was less polluted than the earth. But it wasn’t the ground or the mud that would desecrate the ark; it was the touch of man.” We need to take God seriously!

David: “Angry at God” (1 Sam. 6:8-10): David got angry at God and then he grew afraid—not a healthy fear of the Lord, but an unhealthy fear that caused him to draw back and ask, “How can the ark of the Lord come to me?” There was some pride behind David’s anger. He was embarrassed in front of the crowd. God had not done things David’s way. God had rained on David’s parade.

But the problem wasn’t that God hadn’t done things David’s way, but that David hadn’t done things God’s way. God’s Word is clear that the ark had to be carried by the Levites in a prescribed way, on their shoulders without touching it, not on an oxcart (Num. 4:15; 7:6-9). Where had they gotten the idea of an oxcart? From the Philistines (1 Sam. 6:7)! It worked in the world; why not bring it into the church?

Any time the church starts imitating the world in its worship, they can’t expect the Lord to give His blessing. And, they dare not get mad at God when He doesn’t! There are folks in the church who think that they want God’s presence, but they don’t understand God’s holiness. Or they play loose with God’s truth. When things don’t go the way they wanted, they get angry and blame God. What they ought to do is get on their faces and figure out why God’s blessing is not on their lives or on their church.

Michal: “Don’t get fanatical!” (6:16, 20). She was David’s wife, but here she is called the daughter of Saul to show where she’s coming from. Notice her relationship to the worship celebration: She was a spectator (6:16). Why wasn’t she a participant? She should have been down in the streets, rejoicing in the celebration. But instead she peeked out the window and got embarrassed
by what she saw as David’s fanaticism. Michal loved David the warrior but she could not sympathize with David the worshiper. That embarrassed her. Her problem, like that of her father, was pride. David had dealt with his earlier pride and now he humbled himself to worship the Lord without caring what others thought (6:22). Michal was not willing to humble herself, and so the Lord humbled her with the ultimate disgrace in that society, barrenness (6:23).

The critics of true worshipers are always proud spectators, not humble participants. They’re concerned about what others may think. It doesn’t occur to them to be concerned about what God thinks.

Obed-edom: “Delighted in God” (6:10-11). We’re not sure who Obed-edom was. He was probably a Levite who lived nearby. But he had no problem bringing the ark to his house right after Uzzah was stuck dead for touching it! Isn’t that amazing! Can’t you hear him: “Hey, this is great! Put it over there on the coffee table, guys!” Here was a man whose heart was right before the Lord. The presence of God was not a threat to him. It was a delight! He was totally comfortable living with God in the midst of his home. So the Lord blessed the man and his household (6:11). David heard about it, got his heart right with the Lord and joined Obed-edom in desiring the presence of God again. But Obed-edom had something to teach David (and us) in that he wanted the ark of the holy presence of God with him immediately after Uzzah had been struck dead for touching it.

How would you feel if, as happened in the early church with Ananias and Sapphira, someone here was struck dead for trifling with God and then Jesus appeared bodily and said, “I’d like to come live in your home for three months”? Would you welcome Him or would you be a bit nervous? He is there, you know! If you revere God in your personal devotions and in your corporate worship, you’d be delighted at the prospect, as Obed-edom was.

Conclusion

How could it be that the same ark could be one man’s delight and another man’s death? How could the same ark be one man’s
pleasure and another man’s plague? How could the same ark result in seven different responses?

The difference must not lie with the ark of God’s presence, but with the hearts of the people who were in contact with the ark. If that is so, where is your heart? Do you come on Sundays expecting to meet with God? One way to answer that question is to ask another question: How carefully do you prepare your heart for that meeting?

If you were granted an audience with the president, would you prepare yourself before you went, or would you just go into his office in your work clothes? If you’re going to meet with the holy God, should you not at least spend a few minutes beforehand preparing your heart? The Hebrews didn’t have a bad idea in beginning their Sabbath at sundown the night before. That way, they were ready for worship the following day. I find it helpful to spend a portion of Saturday night getting my heart ready for meeting with the Lord corporately on Sunday morning.

Another way to answer the question of whether or not you come expecting to meet with God on Sundays is to ask, “Would you worship any differently if Christ were watching you?” One night something happened to Pastor A. J. Gordon that transformed his ministry. He dreamed he was in his pulpit ready to deliver his Sunday morning message when a stranger with a regal yet loving look attracted his attention. As he preached, his eyes kept returning to that unique guest. While the closing hymn was being sung, he decided to speak with him. But before he could get to the back door, the unknown man was gone. As the dream continued, this same person came back again at the evening service. Once more he slipped out before the minister could shake his hand.

Turning to one of his deacons, the pastor inquired, “Who was that man?” “Oh, didn’t you recognize Him? That was Jesus of Nazareth!” “You mean Christ Himself was listening to me? What did He say?” exclaimed the preacher. Before the deacon could reply, Gordon awoke with a start. It had all been so real that he could hardly believe he had been dreaming. For the first time he fully appreciated the reality that the Lord Jesus is present in a special way when His people gather for worship. This thought changed his ministry. (From “Our Daily Bread” [6/77].)
What about it? Would you sing any differently if Christ were listening? Would you worship any differently if Christ were watching? Would you listen to His Word being preached more attentively if He were in the chair next to you? He is present, of course. The question is, Are you aware of His presence? Do you come expecting Him to be present, expecting to meet with Him as we gather in His name?

Go through the list of various responses to God’s presence in the ark again. Which one fits you the closest?

Could you, like the Israelites of old, be hoping that God’s presence will be a good luck charm, that if you’ll go to church, maybe God will bless your plans for your life?

Or, like the Philistines, could it be that God’s presence makes you uncomfortable? Could there be guilt in your life because you have never come to the cross of Christ for pardon and cleaning?

Or, like Abinadab, is God’s presence in the church something which doesn’t affect you in the least? Ho-hum! Another church service.

Or, like Uzzah, are you too familiar with God? Do you treat as commonplace that which is sacred? Have you, through over-familiarity, lost a sense of awe toward the things of God?

Or, perhaps like David on this occasion, you wanted God’s presence, but when you got a glimpse of His absolute holiness, you drew back and weren’t so sure you wanted to be that close to God.

Or, like Michal, could you be a spectator who doesn’t believe in getting too fanatical about worship?

Or, like Obed-edom, do you welcome the presence of the living God into your home and life, resulting in great blessing to you and to all your household? Do you come to the gatherings of the church expecting to meet with God and to experience His presence? True corporate worship should be a reverent response God’s presence.
Discussion Questions

1. What makes for vital, dynamic corporate worship?

2. Is it wrong to go to church to “get something out of it”? Should we go to minister to the Lord, to have the Lord minister to us, or both?

3. Where’s the balance between drawing near to God in love and standing apart in reverent fear? Was God overly harsh on Uzzah? Why/why not?

4. How can a person raised in the church guard against over-familiarity with spiritual truth?

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