

papers

from the falls church

SERIES ON DAVID

9. Reject Religion – Live To God (David and Uzzah)

A sermon preached by the Rev. John Kurcina
November 2, 2008

2 Samuel 6:1-15

Our God, our American evangelical God, is a wimp. In the words of John Joseph Kurcina the First, my barrel-chested, coal-mining, Monongahela River-swimming, wood-splitting, flagpole-climbing, building-his-own-house Grandpap, our God is no more than “a sissy.” He is a soft, weak, and small God. Now, I don’t mean to say that God doesn’t meet our needs, but that’s frankly all we tend to do with God. We look at God as somebody who is there as a counselor, to make us feel better. You know how your life is lived as a Christian. It is lived no different than mine. We deal with guilt because we’ve sinned. So we go to God, and graciously he does forgive us. Or we’re insecure about our abilities or our friendships, and we go to God to remind us of our security in him. We have turned God into nothing more than our live-in therapist. God is no longer the Wholly Other, the Lord to be feared.

Pastor John Piper preached, “The fear of God just isn’t in the acceptable air we breathe today. It’s not part of the culturally correct . . . view of the healthy, satisfying religious life.” But as Mr. Beaver warned, “Aslan is not a tame lion.” David learned this the hard way. In our story in 2 Samuel 6, which is paralleled in 1 Chronicles 13, 15 and 16, David learned that God is a God that is not to be trifled with, a God whose fear of should bear on every aspect of who we are and what we do.

The story really begins in the first book of Samuel. In 1 Samuel 4, 5 and 6, the Philistines capture the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant is that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* box that had inside of it the Ten Commandments, the staff of Aaron, and some manna. It accompanied the Israelites through all of their wilderness wanderings, and was the physical and tangible presence of the almighty and invisible God. It was for Israel, “Yahweh with them.” When the Philistines had captured it, they realized this was not a good thing. It was dangerous. Many of them starting dying, so they sent the ark back on a new cart, pulled by cattle, and the ark ended up in a small village. When the villagers saw the arc, they quickly looked inside to make sure that everything was where it is supposed to be. Apparently, they also did not see the final scenes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* because seventy of them were struck dead. They decided not to move it, and it stayed almost thirty years in the house of Abinadab.

Then in 2 Samuel, David had finally become king, secured his kingdom and established his head city in Jerusalem. David now wanted to get the ark, that holy, sacramental, visible sign of the almighty God, into Jerusalem. He called together the counselors and leaders of the towns, saying, “What should we do?” They say, “Let’s bring the ark in.” They got a brand new cart pulled by oxen. Ahio and Uzzah, the two sons of Abinadab who had lived with the ark on their property for years, were going to be behind and in front of the ark. There was a whole musical procession. David most likely was dressed in his royal regalia. This was a symbolic parade, pointing to the fact that David had become king and established his throne. The ark was going along and the oxen stumbled, and Uzzah reached up to grab hold of it. In verse 7, he was struck dead. David’s first response in verse 8 is that he was angry with the Lord, “What are you doing?” Then in verse 9 it says, “**David was afraid of the LORD that day.**”

I think the fear of God is the hinge of this story. The first question you should always ask when opening any passage of scripture is not, “What does this say to me?” but rather, “What does this say about God?” This verse points us to the fear of

the Lord – that the God of the Bible and the God of the universe is a God who is rightly to be feared. I would like to ask four questions in relation to that hinge and to the rest of this passage:

1. What does the fear of God look like?
2. Why don't we fear God?
3. Why should we fear God?
4. What then should we do?

First, what does the fear of God look like? The fear of God is not, as Pastor Tim Keller points out, to be scared of God. Nor is the fear of God like me in seventh grade going to the middle school dance. My friend Dave Prell and I were riding in his mom's minivan and had her drop us off a good half mile from school, because we wanted everyone to know that we had gotten there on our own, as all 12 year olds are capable of doing. We strolled on into the gymnasium as cool and collected as two smartly dressed young men could be. We quickly huddled over in the corner of the gymnasium underneath one of those 8-foot baskets, leaning up against the wall and talking with our friends. The music was playing, some people were dancing, the lights were dim, and I was not going to dance! There were people in the room, some of whom were even girls. Of course I'm not going to dance; people might watch, they might see me. So for two hours, Dave and I and the other guys enjoyed the dance, holding up the wall, greatly concerned about what everyone else might think if we did anything else.

No, the fear of God in this passage looks like David dancing before the Lord alone. After Uzzah was struck dead, David was reminded that God is not somebody to be trifled with. He said, "Let's not move this ark. This is a dangerous thing to mess with the living God." They left the ark in place for three months, and David dug into the scriptures to find out what they did wrong, and how they should go about it the next time. They were deliberate the second time, and followed prescriptions of God in the books of Exodus and Numbers. David, rather than being dressed in his royal regalia and making the parade a procession of triumph for his royalty, was dressed in "a linen ephod," the servant and slave clothing, and danced in front of the whole parade, like a slave girl. This time it was about God.

As David danced with the whole procession into Jerusalem, his wife Michal saw him, in front of everyone, in the clothing of a slave servant, dancing with all of his might. She was horrified. She was the queen, after all. Didn't he know anything about royalty? She was appalled, embarrassed, and ashamed by him. When he went up into their room later that night, she said, "Oh look at you, David [sarcastically], weren't you such a great thing dancing out there with all the slave girls! What a mighty king you are, David." Thankfully, her cutting words didn't go too far. David quickly rebuked her and said, in verses 21, 22 of 2 Samuel 6, "**It was before the LORD." It was before God" that I danced.**" ["You were embarrassed by me? You thought I humiliated myself? **I will make myself yet more contemptible than this.**" [more humble than this, because I will dance before the Lord God alone.]

Worship is not just about singing songs on Sunday morning. It's about all of life. The Westminster Catechism says, "What is the chief end of man? What is the primary purpose of all people? ... To glorify God and enjoy him forever." At work, in our career path, in our homes, our friendships, our marriages, in our leisure time, with our money, and our parenting, our purpose is to serve, worship, and glorify God and God alone. What does the fear of God look like? It looks like living before God alone.

Why should we fear God and fear God alone? I think when we lose sight of the Wholly Otherness of God we risk instant death. God does not usually strike us dead when we sin but in this story he did. It was a description of God's wrath being brought down on Uzzah and therefore on David for breaking God's holy laws. God doesn't normally do that, but we still risk death in every aspect of our life if we lose sight of the Wholly Otherness of God and if we fail to fear him. When we lose sight of the Wholly Otherness of God, we get taken up with our own self and our own path in life. For instance, in a marriage, it might be very, very easy, with a lack of fear of God, to make career, children or the social scene, the primary focus of what we do. Pretty soon, we lose sight of our spouse. In losing sight of the Wholly Otherness of God, we lose sight of his perspective and his aims and his priorities, which translates into a life that is out of control and running the risk of shipwreck, divorce, eternal damnation.

For most of us, though, the greater risk when we fail to fear God is drifting into faithlessness. We have that too small God, that wimp and sissy God who is not worth worshipping. This God, according to David Wells, is "a mere bore" - a kind of guy who doesn't take up much of our time. Our life can end up looking like the boogey boarding I did as a middle-schooler. On vacation with my parents in Virginia Beach, I'd ride the waves with my boogey board, riding the waves in and running back out, over and over again. Eventually I had no idea where I was or where my parents were, because the drift of the ocean had dragged me a half mile down the beach. As we drift in our life on our own course, a lack of fear of God causes us to pull further and further away, and pretty soon we can't see him. Drifting, as Pastor Alistair Begg likes to call, "into capitulation" and losing our faith all together.

Why should we fear God and live to him alone? Because God is Wholly Other. In that picture of the Wholly Other God, that big God, that fearful God is awe-inspiring. It is thrilling and engaging. It is what we are made to do. When you tap into the gloriousness of God and the majesty of God, it begins to excite you, like when my boys saw *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* for the first time this summer. Immediately afterwards they donned robes and rags and swords, becoming Luke Skywalker battling Darth Vader in the basement. The grand story of the *Star Wars* epic had captured their imaginations and was translated into what they wanted to do next. That is what God wants to do in our lives. When he shows himself to be the Wholly Other God, the majestic Almighty, Creator, Sustainer, Judge and Savior of the entire universe and of your life, when that gets a hold of you and you sit under that God, it begins to excite and fill your imagination and drive your life. It is worth it to fear God and to live for him alone.

Why don't we live for God alone? Why don't we fear God? For many of us in the DC area life is frankly just too busy for God. I was trying to convince a friend of mine in Charlotte to move here to do ministry, and he said, "We don't want that pace of life again." Living in DC is like riding the Thunderbolt Roller Coaster at Kennywood Park in Pittsburgh, PA, one of the great old wooden roller coasters. As you're riding on the Thunderbolt and going down the fourth and final hill, and you've just been shaken to death for about a minute and a half, you can look off to your left and see the vista of the Monongahela River, one of the three rivers in Pittsburgh. It's a beautiful scene of a valley, river, trains and barges. Most of the time, though, you're holding on for dear life and not noticing the view. As an eleven year old, when I rode that coaster for the first time with my dad, I went through the whole thing, shaking, screaming and grabbing my dad. When I got to the end and my mom asked me how I liked it, she said, "Did you see me waving at you?" "Where? No, of course I didn't see you! I saw my life flash before my eleven-year-old eyes! I felt the wind and the bugs in my face. I felt my heart in my throat. But I didn't see you, Mom." But later when I rode the coaster, I would try to spot my grandfather, my mom or my uncle, and maybe I would wave, but at least I saw them, right?

For many of us, life is a roller coaster. Do we have the time to look out over our life, over the course that we're on and see the bigger picture of the Monongahela in our career, in our child raising? Maybe we get that brief glimpse to think about what we're doing and where we're going before we drop into the utter abyss. *Do we have time, truly time, to know God?* For many of us because of our pace of life, knowing God is a bit like knowing your mother or your grandfather as you fly past them at sixty miles per hour every Sunday morning for a little bit. It's hard to fear God when you're waving at him on the way to a conference call or Whole Foods Market or Fed Ex field tomorrow night.

What has become of our God? He's "an inconsequential and weightless God," as theologian David Wells writes.

It is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal, but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticed. Those of us who assure the pollsters of our belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than our appetites for affluence and influence, his judgments no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers' sweet fog of flattery and lies. God has become weightless.

What then should we do? How can we begin to rightly fear God, to live for God alone, to dance as David danced? First, get off the coaster; don't set the *Guinness Book of World Records* for continuous rides. David, after Uzzah was struck dead, was forced to take a little hiatus from his ark parade endeavor. By the grace of God it won't come to that in our own lives. Take the time to step off of the coaster and reflect, "What am I doing? Where is my career heading? What is my marriage going to be like in thirty years? My small children, what might they look like?"

I have three children; my son John is going on seven. Every so often I have to stop and reflect on him as a person and on me as a father to him. One of the challenges is to examine what we are doing with him as a boy and where we're trying to go with him. It takes getting off the coaster and saying, "What am I doing with this boy? Where am I going with him? How does my time and my effort with him make him know where I really want him to go?" Then we need to put our eyes on God, specifically the God of scripture.

That's what David did. He said, "when we go about this ark-moving the second time, we're going to do it right." They were not supposed to move the ark on a cart. It was to be carried on poles by Levites, a specific branch of Israelites, and not only by the Levites, but by a specific family within the family of Levites. So it was very narrow who was allowed to carry the ark and how it was to be moved. Not only that, but David went through the whole process of selecting extra Levites to write psalms and hymns that would be sung specifically to worship God. He wanted to remake this entire ark parade into a God-honoring event and not a David-honoring event.

What are God's aims for my son John and for me as a parent? I could turn just about anywhere in scripture, but Ephesians 4:13 says that Paul wants people **"to attain . . . to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."** Rather than a letterman or going to a great college, whether or not he makes a football team, that my son John at age 17 is a mature man of God. How will I get him there? Again, in Ephesians 6:4 Paul says, **"Fathers [not mothers],"** it says, **"Fathers . . . bring up [your children] in the training and instruction of the Lord."**

I have gotten off the coaster and have put my eyes on the God of scripture and on what he desires for me as a parent and John as a son. Now I simply need to live to God alone, to dance as David did. David was dancing before an audience of One. He was not leaning up against the wall and looking at everyone else to determine where he needed to go and what he needed to do. He looked at the God of scripture. He knew the fearful Wholly Other God, and he decided to act out of his heart in accordance with scripture before the living God. And so he danced with all of his might. I need to ask in my parenting, am I fearing God and not only man? I need to disciple my son in Jesus and not just in pass patterns and square roots. And not just in my parenting but in every aspect of life, I need to live to God alone.

We are called by the God of the universe to know him, to enjoy him, to glorify him, to worship him, to fear him. So let's dance as David did. Let's live for God alone.

This sermon is also available on CD if you or someone you wish to give it to would find that more convenient. CDs are available for \$4.00 from the Sermon Ministry, The Falls Church; 114 East Fairfax Street; Falls Church, Virginia 22046.