

# ***“Paraders of the Lost Ark”***

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

***Asking and waiting are almost always the wiser course.***

**2 Samuel 6:1-15**

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## ***The Real Ark***

Unlike you who are so biblically literate, when most Americans hear about the Ark of God, they think of Indiana Jones. After my Thursday Bible study, I decided I needed to watch *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* again, so that’s what Linda and I did for Date Night this week. She’s a good woman, isn’t she?

You can learn a little something about the biblical ark by watching the movie. At the beginning the archeologist Indiana Jones is explaining its significance to colleagues. He describes it this way:

The chest the Hebrews used to carry the Ten Commandments around in.... The original stone tablets that Moses brought down out of Mount Horeb and smashed, if you believe in that sort of thing. Didn’t you guys ever go to Sunday School? Look, the Hebrews took the broken pieces and put them into the Ark. When they settled in Canaan, they put the Ark in a place called the Temple of Solomon, where it stayed for many years, till all of a sudden...whoosh, it was gone. Nobody knows where or when.

There’s a mix of Bible, legend, and historical error unbecoming an archaeologist in there, but it’s not bad for someone who learned it in Sunday School and isn’t sure he “believes in that sort of thing.” The movie might be a good prompt to dig into the Bible’s version.

Let’s start here. This is not the same as Noah’s ark, which was a boat. This was a gold-plated wooden box, about 3 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet, with a gilded lid and angels on top. About a year after the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, God had

commanded Moses to construct this box and place inside it the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. I don't think they were the shattered pieces; God had given Moses a second set, intact.

The Ark in turn was to be placed in the Holy of Holies, the innermost room of the sacred worship tent. The tabernacle was designed to be portable, and the Ark small enough to be carried. How it was to be transported was explicitly described by God to Moses. It would be centuries before the Temple of Solomon, was built and The Ark had a permanent home. That is what Solomon's father, King David, was attempting to do in 2 Samuel 6.

There's still something confusing and unsettling about what happens in this text we read. David, whom we know as "the man after God's own heart," is described as "angry" with and "afraid of the LORD." We would say for good reason. God comes across as unstable and unpredictable. Someone who is trying to do the right thing for God's sake dies.

### ***Two parades***

What's going on? Last week we studied the best season of David's life. He was anointed king over all Israel. He showed remarkable resilience and patience while waiting for someone else to eliminate Saul and his sons. Now everything came together. He had grown his family, and they were at peace. He had conquered the city of Jerusalem, which had eluded capture by Israel since the time of Joshua. He had beaten back a new threat by Israel's nemesis to the coastal west, the Philistines. He properly credited all this to God. God had been good to David, better than David had been to God. We said last week that David would need to remember that season when God didn't come through.

We turn the page to chapter 6. David needs to trust the God he has come to know when he doesn't know what God is doing. Same with you and me.

David makes two attempts in 2 Samuel 6 to bring the ark of God from its temporary home to his new capital city. One attempt is cut short; the other succeeds.

The reason the ark needs to move is not only so it will be more secure in David's fortress. The location of the Ark was a place called Baalah. You should see embedded in that town name the word Ba'al, the chief deity of the Canaanites. Baalah was located in Judah, close enough to pagan territory to be called by another god's name. This is the "ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD God Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark" (2).

How the ark came to Baalah is a story told in three chapters of 1 Samuel, so too long to retell here. In short, the Israelites had taken the ark into battle to ensure success and instead they were trounced by the Philistines who kept the ark as a trophy.

It did not go well for them, however. A curse fell on them, something like the bubonic plague. Their pagan priests told them to load the ark on a new cart drawn by oxen and not give it human accompaniment. If the oxen wandered into Israelite territory, they would know this was a God-thing.

The ark wound up in a place called Beth Shemesh, but some curious Israelites could not restrain themselves and looked into it. They died, and in terror the people of Beth Shemesh sent it on to the hilltop home of Abinadab in a place called Kiriath Jearim, aka Baalah. No tabernacle, no prescribed sacrifices or festivals. The ark was ignored by Israelites and Philistines for two decades.

The ark needs to come home. David takes 30,000 “able” (or “choice” in some versions) men with him, probably because he is venturing close to the Philistine border. A smaller band might prompt an attack if they realize David is among them. This is also an opportunity for David to showcase this significant moment in front of impressionable army recruits. The ark is placed on a “new cart,” which might be the same “new cart” the Philistines had used. It may never have been moved. Two of Abinadab’s two sons, Uzzah and Ahio, are its bodyguards, presumably because they had grown up with the ark in their home and knew its holiness.

As the ark moves toward Jerusalem, “all Israel” realizes the consequence of this moment. We learn that the king has also arranged a marching band. “David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD.” It’s a parade, a party, a performance.

The entire thing comes to an abrupt halt when the oxen stumble, Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the ark, and God strikes him dead on the spot. We are left to imagine what happened next, except that David is mad at God for being mad at Uzzah, and David is also afraid of God. He is immobilized. The ark is going to stay right where it is at the closest house. Ironically that house apparently belongs to a Philistine, identified as a Gittite (a man from Gath). The giant Goliath was a Gittite. It’s almost as if David is saying, “God, I am so mad at you I am giving your ark back to the pagans.” David seems to ignore the ark for a while.

Instead of a plague striking the Gittite’s home, he is blessed. David hears that Obed-Edom’s house has been blessed, so he decides to try again to bring it into his fortress, the city called by his name, the City of David.

This time the parade is also a time of “rejoicing.” Another parade, another party, another performance. David is “dancing before the LORD with all his might,” wearing a linen ephod – sort of a priestly miniskirt. There are “shouts and the sound of trumpets.” This time it’s successful, and the critic of the whole thing is not the LORD but David’s first wife, Michal (Saul’s daughter) who sees David’s undignified actions as unfit for a king and an erotic display to commoners, especially women.

So why is the second parade successful? The narrator tells us three ways the second parade is different. First, the Ark is not placed on a “new cart.” It is carried by its poles, which was how God had prescribed its transport to Moses. The cart idea was copied from the Philistines.

Second, there were sacrifices. Whether verse 13 implies a single sacrifice event or one every six steps between Obed-Edom’s house and Jerusalem is hard to determine, but it doesn’t really matter. The point is the sacrifice. And from what we can tell, these are the first sacrifices to God made under David’s reign.

Third, David wears a linen ephod (14). This was a priest’s garment, so perhaps the point is that David is acting like a spiritual leader instead of a military one. This time the focus is on priests not warriors. But there is also dancing and shouting and trumpets.

### ***The profit***

The Apostle Paul says all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable. The challenge is that, with the stories in particular, we are not told how it is profitable. With Aesop’s Fables, every story is followed by a moral. For example, in “The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf,” the moral is, “Liars are not believed even when they speak the truth.” The moral is printed right there underneath the story to make sure the reader doesn’t miss it.

In the Bible, that’s rare. This is because the main point of every story is The Story. The main character is always God, and The Story is God’s initiative to reconcile alienated humanity to himself. In the stories sometimes we see the problem; sometimes we see God’s solution. Second, the purpose of a variety of stories is to help us relate The Story to a wide variety of our own life situations.

There are a number of ways this story might be profitable. I will suggest three.

1. Experiences and things *can become* idols.

An idol is what you trust instead of God or more than God.

The Indiana Jones films illustrate this problem. The thing becomes the quest, not God. Legend grows so that the ark can level mountains and destroy entire regions.

As important as the ark was to the Israelites, it disappears after the Babylonian Captivity. And nobody cares. The New Testament shows almost no interest in the ark. Jesus and Paul make zero mention of it. In the New Testament the only mentions are in Hebrews and Revelation, and they are symbolic – how the ark represents Jesus.

David wasn’t just guilty of idolizing the ark, though. He was guilty of idolizing an experience. What worked before must work again. But God rarely does things the

same way for anyone. Just because God guided in a certain way once or answered a prayer the same way or gave you a sign doesn't mean he'll do it again.

2. Presumption *sometimes* feels the same as good intentions.

David, like all of us, is a man of mixed motives. It's a good and godly goal to get the ark to Jerusalem, to the temple. This will play out in 2 Samuel. But David also wants a show of his own glory, for his kingdom.

Uzzah should have known better. He lived with the ark in his house for two decades. David definitely should have known better. But David did the obvious thing, the thing his instinct told him to do. "If we make a big show for God, he's sure to bless it!"

What if there had been no consequences, if God had just let this go? David would have been confirmed in his view that it was all about him, his glory, his leadership skills.

Success causes you to presume you're right, to presume that God will continue to bless you. Remember I said that David needed to learn the lessons from his best years? The lesson of 2 Samuel 5 was a lesson about God's faithfulness and provision. It was not a lesson about no longer needing God, about presuming your actions and motives are right. This brings me to my final point.

3. Asking and waiting are *almost always* the wiser course.

Our narrator regularly reminds us of times when David inquired of God and times he didn't, of times when David waited for God and times he didn't.

This is one of the times he doesn't inquire and doesn't wait. He doesn't ask the priests, doesn't consult the Law, doesn't wait. He's too kingly for that, and he gets burned. Not only that, but Uzzah dies for David's sins of omission.

Notice the pattern, though. Experiences and things *can become* idols. Not always. Presumption *sometimes* feels the same as good intentions. Sometimes it just feels like arrogance. Asking and waiting are *almost always* the wiser course. In some situations, you have to act urgently.

That's why this life of faith can't be tied up with a bow and packaged in three little points. It's a life of faith, of trust, of trial and error, of grace. Examine your life for idols, check your motives, ask and wait whenever possible – but trust God that he will redeem even your worst decisions for your good and his glory.

That's the kind of God he is. Amen.