

THE RIGHTS OF GOD

Before talking about the story of Uzza, I feel like I need to remind you that people of ancient times were not necessarily less intelligent or more superstitious than we are. Just the other day, a person was bemoaning the fact that their favorite uncle had died without being baptized. This person was very sad because, though a wonderful man in many respects, his uncle was going straight to Hell. Why? He had not been baptized. The power and love of Almighty God was canceled out because some human institution had not put water on his head. That is pure superstition – as any Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, or Congregationalist could tell you. Some of you know how much I love baptism. I even believe it should hold in the hearts of Christians the place that Christmas has usurped. I am sorry that the uncle missed it. But cancel out the power of Christ's love for human folly? Not likely! We have to keep weighing our human creeds against His Cross. Then hear Paul chanting in the background: *“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39)

But it's hard to move past our superstitions. Some of them cling to us as if they came from some ancient memory, even if we are not aware of their source or conscious of their presence in our brains. The most ancient religions we know anything about come from the Nile and Euphrates river valleys. In general (meaning, oversimplified and with notable exceptions), until about the time of Moses, people sacrificed to gods who seemed to them whimsical and arbitrary – gods who punished or blessed without any rhyme or reason that humans could detect. The sacrifice was food or perfume or your firstborn child – anything that might please the gods. The sacrifice was a bribe in the form of a gift, and its intention was to appease and, if possible, gain favor with the gods. If you could find the right gift, maybe the lightning bolt would not strike you or maybe the crops would not fail. And if it was a terrific gift, maybe the lightning bolt would strike your enemy or maybe their crops would fail. Sometimes the veneer between then and now is very thin indeed.

All religion has evolved from those earliest assumptions. The atheist says the whole thing is groundless – empty human imagination. The religious are convinced that the ancient peoples were experiencing spiritual

realities but that, over the generations, God has worked to bring our fuzzy awareness into greater clarity. Many of us now believe that the sacrifice is intended to be our own lives turned back over in joyful recognition to the God who loves us, who created us, who has a marvelous and eternal destiny prepared for us. Except it doesn't take much to make us revert, at least at times, to former images of punishment, fear, and guilt – or to turn away from the grace and love of Jesus Christ and imagine Him coming again to mercilessly smash and destroy everyone who has not loved Him, said the right words about Him, or had water sprinkled on their heads in the correct fashion.

With Moses, there came a dramatic change from the ancient river-valley religions. There was one God over everything that was happening. And this God was a God of purpose, meaning, and destiny. God was not whimsical when things went right, or accidental when things went wrong. God was purposeful, and all things either fought the will of God and were destroyed, or cooperated with the will of God and were blessed.

It did not happen easily or fast (and Moses was not the only proponent of the “new age”), but this was an incredibly new and different way to understand life. Religion began to shift from superstition to ethics. Some kinds of behavior pleased God because they matched what God was doing. They built up rather than destroyed. Other kinds of behavior displeased God because they went against the way things were designed to work and so they inevitably destroyed things – they fought against God's purposes. Stealing, murder, adultery, and bearing false witness were not forbidden out of whimsy, but because they were always destructive in the long run.

This new religion – and its way of seeing life – caused tremendous conflict and upheaval of course. If you chose to serve the God of Moses, you had to break from the old gods and stop the superstitious ways of trying to appease them. Think how scary it must have been for the early Israelites to stop their superstitious acts. It took only a few weeks to fall from the Covenant on Mount Sinai to the making of the golden calf. And what if the old gods really *did* have some power and you stopped honoring them – *then* where would you be? The many Old Testament passages about idolatry and idol worship reveal the tremendous conflict going on as the people switched from the old gods to the new God of ethical behavior. Naturally they wanted to do both, to cover their bets. But it would not work. Loyalty to one was distrust of the other. The people could not keep the old superstitions *and* move into the new way

of life – which we call the Old Covenant. And the New Covenant in Jesus is as radical a departure from Moses as Moses was from the river-valley gods.

Yet you cannot just start out with Jesus. You cannot be born at age twenty-two; you have to come up through the ranks of embryo and baby and child. We each have to come up through the ranks of spiritual growth as well. When we are little children, our parents and teachers are whimsical gods who punish and bless for reasons we cannot fathom. Some people never advance beyond this stage. Others never advance beyond rebelling against it. Most of us go on to some level of ethics. At first, we only learn the rules to avoid the punishment and get the rewards. But some of us see behind the rules to their true intentions, and we begin to love the good because it is good. And how many advance, before they die here, into the levels of mercy and love and a personal relationship with God?

Well, that is way beyond our passage for today. We are back in the reign of King David – 1000 B.C. David is trying to establish a kingdom that will honor and illustrate the Covenant of Moses – the new way of life that God is bringing into the world. The Israelites had come into the Promised Land three hundred to five hundred years before David. In other words, trying to establish the Israelite nation has not been easy. If it isn't the Canaanites, it's the Amorites, the Philistines, or your own internal squabbles. But the shepherd boy from Bethlehem has charisma and magic like the world has seldom seen. All his life he has fought, yet he has never lost a fight. Usually he fought against superior odds and often with inferior armor. Yet no one could out-strategize or stand against him. And finally, he unites the twelve tribes and establishes the kingdom, as the annals say, from Dan to Beersheba. Actually, he controls territories far beyond that. He even conquers the unconquerable fortress citadel of Jerusalem. He makes it the capital of the new kingdom, and to this day it is called "The City of David." So now, victorious, David turns to the reason for all this fighting and striving. And like all of us, he discovers that the reason and purpose for all the striving is harder to grasp – and harder to establish – than all the physical struggles and battles ever were.

God's Holy Nation – a Chosen People who will keep the sacred Covenant, a civilization that will become a light to all the nations – that is what it was for and about. So David's thoughts turn to the Tent of Meeting and to the sacred Ark in which the Covenant commandments

are kept. It must be brought to Jerusalem. In time, a great temple must be built to house the Ark. All must know that this kingdom's God is Yahweh, and that all who dwell here are committed to obey Torah – the Covenant they have made with God.

And yet, in the very moment of such inspiration, and even with a man like David, we see the subtle depths of human pride and rebellion revealed. David is not a lightweight! He has trusted God since his boyhood days, when he guarded the sheep from lions and wolves. Who has not thrilled at his youthful challenge to the giant, Goliath? David's poetry and songs – of praise and worship, of hope rising out of despair – have thrilled the world for three thousand years. David is “a man after God's own heart.” His very name, in Hebrew, means “beloved of God.” And here, as he turns from battle and the affairs of state to honor the God who is behind all he has ever done – even here it turns out that David means to honor his God, but he does not mean to obey him. David means to do this marvelous thing *for* God, to praise God, but in David's own way, not in God's way. I see myself there reflected. I hate it, but I see myself there reflected. “Yes Lord, I love you, but I love you so much I don't have to obey you. I will do it my own way, even when I do it for you.”

So they are bringing the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem. It is a great celebration with singing and dancing, and the whole nation is praising God and saying how marvelous God is to have made them a great and successful people. And everything is absolutely marvelous, until ...

The oxen stumble, the Ark teeters precariously, and dear Uzza reaches up to steady the Ark, to save it from harm. And Uzza drops dead as if a thunderbolt had struck him. That ends the celebration for that day! A very sober crowd goes home. A half-angry, half-frightened king stashes the Ark in the nearest shelter, no longer eager to get it to Jerusalem.

Our first reaction, like David's first reaction, is that God is certainly being some unreasonable kind of sorehead. That's bad enough on *our* level, but when you get it on a cosmic level, who is going to survive? How could God do such a thing?! Uzza had only tried to help – tried to save the Ark from damage and dishonor. It is beyond comprehension that the Lord would strike down such a man for such a reason. And yet he is dead!

That is all most people know about this story. It may not impress you very much, but it impresses me, so I want to tell you the rest of the story. First, one sentence from the passage already read: *“And they conveyed the Ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, with Uzza and Ahio guiding the cart.”* (I Chronicles 13:7)

So they were hauling the Ark along *on a cart*, probably one they built for this very purpose. Does that bother you? Of course not; you don't know any better. But David knew better! He was being, in the vernacular, a smart-ass. David, in the full bloom of his own importance and success, had decided to do it the modern way – to dispense with God's instructions. He had decided on his own authority to let the wrong people transport the Ark in the wrong manner. David was not ignorant of the instructions; he was showing off his “special relationship” with God. He and God were buddies. He had done so much for the nation that he didn't have to honor the Ark as in the days of old. He had done so much for God that he had special privileges.

Here are the instructions from Numbers 4:15 (with more in Exodus 25:10-13): *“Once Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the sacred equipment, when the camp is due to move, the Kohathites [a clan of the Levite priests] shall come to carry it; they must not touch it on pain of death.”* (But hey, it's okay – God is only kidding.)

The Ark had been built with rings attached so poles could be slid through the rings and then the Kohathite priests could carry it on their shoulders. The seventh chapter of Numbers describes gifts of wagons and oxen given by the chief men of all the tribes for the purpose of carrying the equipment necessary for service in the Tent of the Presence (Tent of Meeting). It speaks of Moses accepting the wagons and distributing them among the Levites to carry out for their service at the Tent of the Presence. *“He gave none to the Kohathites because the service laid upon them was that of the holy things: These they had to carry themselves on their shoulders.”* (Numbers 7:9) The wagons were available, but they could not use them for the holy things.

David knew all this. He chose to ignore it. So Uzza died. Was that God's fault, or David's? Such familiarity and disrespect reversed everything Israel was supposed to stand for. If David could pick his friends to do the honors and treat the holy things any way he chose, then God was servant to David and the nation, instead of David and the nation being the servants of God. If David had done it God's way, the Ark would

never have been on a cart and would never have been in danger of falling. But he did not and the oxen stumbled – and David and Israel were reminded that they belonged to God and that God did not belong to them. (“I am not your mascot.”)

In time, David got over his pout and realized that he still needed to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. In First Chronicles, there is the account of a chastened king bringing the Ark to Jerusalem the way he knew he was supposed to do it in the first place. *“David summoned [the priests and Levites] and said to them, ‘You who are heads of the families of the Levites, hallow yourselves, you and your kinsmen, and bring up the Ark of the Lord the God of Israel to the place which I have prepared for it. It was because you were not present the first time, that the Lord our God broke out upon us. For we had not sought his guidance as we should have done.’ So the priests and the Levites hallowed themselves to bring up the Ark of the Lord the God of Israel, and the Levites carried the Ark of God, bearing it on their shoulders with poles as Moses had prescribed at the command of the Lord.”* (I Chronicles 15:12-15)

It was not a problem of confusion, you see. There was not doubt in David’s mind about what had gone wrong or why. He had been wrong. He had acted in disrespect, out of human pride. He had lost his “fear of the Lord” and his inner commitment to obedience. And his friend had died because of it.

To digress for a moment, the Ark of the Presence is analogous today with our own individual relationship to God. We still have to carry it personally, in reverent humility. We cannot pawn it off on any modern cart of group psychology or social philosophy. No institution, cult, or social-action program can wheel it down life’s highway for us. The Ark of God is still carried on personal shoulders.

People cannot survive or sustain very large amounts of spiritual reality. It is not easy for humans and God to meet without endangering human life. From our side of things, the sheer voltage of God’s holiness and truth and glory is often mistaken for wrath or vindictiveness. Who gets angry? We do. Who gets blamed? God does. Especially in those times when we did not bother to seek guidance or to carry the Ark the way God told us to in the first place. It is still lethal, one way or another, to approach or touch holy things without reverence, humility, and preparation. Cult deaths, suicide, madness, and many lesser forms of withdrawal, depression, and burnout reveal that this is still true.

While we are digressing, what about Uzza? When Uzza died, did that punish Uzza – or did it punish David? I like to picture Uzza as a faithful man who was quite aware of what was at stake. He maybe did not like the way things were being done, but neither was he willing to disobey his king. And when the oxen stumbled, it was as he had feared. And as he reached up, the warning flashed through his mind: “Do not touch it!” But he said, “It’s okay Lord; I understand. But I cannot just let it fall.” Then like a thunderbolt, he dropped. And after that, another Word in a different realm: “Welcome home, Uzza. You did the only thing you could, and I thank you. Now come, let me show you around a far greater Kingdom.”

Back from the digression. It’s time I tried to make my point. There are many stories in the Bible similar in their impact to the story of Uzza. They leave us feeling angry toward God. For a time, I always sided with the people. It always seemed like the people were being abused or mistreated, and God was being too harsh. He did not understand; he did not respect human rights; it was not fair. And like so many others before me, I thought a lot about disbelieving in this God I did not like. After all, how else can a poor human “get even” with God, except by disbelieving? Trust and belief are what God seems to want from us. Naturally, when we are angry with God, the first reaction is to stop believing or trusting in him. Our rejection will serve him right for making life hard – for making a world with so much suffering. It is the anatomy of all atheism: little children saying to the Parent, “I hate you.”

Like some of you, I read the Bible for a while to find fault, to build my case against God – to prove that God was bad or, more likely, that he was a figment of the imagination of superstitious and primitive peoples. But you have to read the Bible really fast and skip over the surface on purpose to make it come out that way. The people were not primitive; they just lived a long time ago. They struggled and doubted as much as any of us do, some of them with much greater earnestness. The more I tried to take their side, the more I heard them saying that it was really their own fault: They had broken the Covenant; God had been more than patient. Whatever my own thoughts toward God, these people I thought God had wronged loved him with ardor and returned to him again and again, despite their troubles and with eager joy. They shattered my case against God with their honest confessions and earnest repentance. They still said he was the only source of hope and joy and promise. It was not a case of good people in a naturally pleasant world striving against a cruel God. We like to pretend it was, but that is not the truth.

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Slowly the picture turned around until one day I found myself weeping, not for Uzza – not for all the poor abused people – but for the ONE who is truly the injured party, the ONE who is really abused, maligned, misunderstood, and hated. God keeps building up, and we keep tearing it down and then blaming it on him. God keeps showing the WAY, and we keep refusing to obey and then blaming the consequences on him. God keeps bailing us out, and we keep going right back to the same old sins and then blaming him for that too. God should have designed things so we could lie, cheat, steal, and screw – and bitch and moan as well – and smoke and drink and overeat and it would never hurt anybody, least of all us. And woe to God if he protests, tries to correct, makes requirements, asks for loyalty, or hands us a difficult assignment.

Sometimes, in fleeting moments, we can see where the story is going: How the New Testament is not just an accidental appendage tacked on to the Old Testament, but is the inevitable, inescapable march of a drama and a purpose that will not be called off. And how it is not just a nice man on a cross whose luck has run out or things didn't break right, but the holy and righteous God is in it all the way.

In any case, it's easy to get wrapped up in our rights: what I like, what I think is fair, what I think is good – my rights, your rights, women's rights, civil rights, property rights, constitutional rights. WHAT ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF GOD? It is the deep truth of the Torah that if the world truly honored the rights of God, no human would ever be wronged. It is the deep truth of the Cross that, wanting all the rights for ourselves, we give *no* rights to God.

When we come to the core of it, the only reason we should not be treated shamefully or destroyed utterly is because we belong to God. Sooner or later, anyone who harms us will answer for it to our Maker, just as we will answer for anyone we have harmed. The truth is, we cannot take away God's rights. We are not that powerful. But if we do not give God his rights willingly and on purpose, it obscures everything that happens here, until eventually we are living in a great cloud of anarchy and unknowing. If God has no rights, there *are* no rights. So I ask you: What are the RIGHTS OF GOD in your life?