

2 Samuel 6: Don't Take God for Granted

In 2 Samuel 5 we see David prospering with God's backing. In 2 Samuel 7 we see God pledging to David and his household his full support in a covenant that profoundly shapes salvation history. In 2 Samuel 6 David learns not to take God's backing for his kingship for granted.

Following a Shane Warne sex scandal Channel Nine terminated a \$300,000 a year contract. In March 2005 the electronics company, Gizmondo ended their \$2.25 million sponsorship of the Newcastle Knights following the drunken antics of several players. Are you sure you have God's sponsorship for the way you presently live your life, actions you have recently embarked upon and major decisions you are currently making? 2 Samuel 6 teaches us not to be presumptuous about having God's backing.

In another example, Tsar Nicholas II believed his position entitled him to act like God. In 1905, 100,000 peasants staged a peaceful demonstration at the palace of the last Tsar of Russia to petition him for better wages and working conditions. On this "Bloody Sunday" the Tsar's guards opened fire, killing about 100 of them. The Tsar's refusal to let go of his divine right blinded him to the extent that he eventually lost all control of the empire in a bloody revolution, which involved his own imprisonment and execution.

If any king had the right to believe he was backed by God, it was David. In many ways the David of 2 Samuel 6 is a model king. Chapter 5 begins by stressing the legitimacy of David's coronation. Fulfilling Deuteronomy 17, God's people recognize David as their "brother", declaring, "*We are your own flesh and blood*". Also, as per Deuteronomy 17 Israel appoint as king one whom God has chosen, stating: "*And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'*"

In 5:10 we read: "*And he became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him.*" David is next enabled to build a magnificent palace for himself using the best of materials and craftsmen, all the valued exports of Tyre. Again we are reminded of God's backing: "*And David knew that the Lord had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel*" (v12).

The Philistines decided to strike before David became any stronger. Twice, in the Valley of Rephaim, they brought massive armies against David. Both times David seeks God's guidance and God fully backs him. On the second occasion God says, "*As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees move quickly, because that will mean the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army*" (v24). David acted after hearing the marching of God's heavenly army, a sound coming from heaven above and so heard in the tops of the trees. This teaches that David will enjoy God's backing when the Lord of the Heavenly Armies leads from the front.

2 Samuel 6 is all about "the ark of God", a box measuring 1.15 metres long and about 0.7 metres high and wide. This box last figured prominently back in 1 Samuel 4-6, also in the context of the Philistine threat. But at that time the Lord did not back his people. They were defeated. The Philistines even captured the ark. But the Lord

continued to be especially present wherever the ark was located. The Philistines discovered this box was lethal. It's as though Chernobyl was leaking deadly radiation. People kept contracting fatal diseases and dropped dead, until the Philistines let the ark return to Israel on an ox cart. Of course, a nuclear meltdown and a disease like Ebola are not selective because they are impersonal. But there was a personal presence inseparably linked to the ark which was highly discriminatory. When the ark was stationed in Kiriath-Jearim at the home of Abinadab it caused no more fatalities for 20 years.

In many ways David is a model king. But discordant notes are also sounded. David captures the fortress of Jebus and exalts himself, calling it "the City of David". Next he contravenes Deuteronomy 17 by taking many concubines and wives, something Israel's king is explicitly warned not to do. This tragic legacy was passed on to his son Solomon. It was Solomon's downfall and the root cause of the disintegration of the kingdom so wonderfully united under David.

In Chapter 6 David wants to get the sacred box to Jerusalem, just 13 kilometres away. One smart alec has advice on how she succeeded in making her own wine called "Post Office Red". She simply mailed herself a box of grapes marked "Fragile". The box David is transporting is not "Fragile" but it is extremely dangerous. He puts it on a cart and when the oxen stumble, Uzzah, one of Abinadab's sons, puts out his hand to steady the box and is immediately struck dead on the spot by God. It has been said, "The only thing we learn from history is that we never learn from history". Uzzah's death shows this, corresponding to what had happened 20 years before when God killed 70 Jews from Beth Shemesh after they decided to snoop at the contents of this box (see 1 Sam 6).

Uzzah is only partly to blame. I came across a picture of a sign perched near the edge of a dangerous cliff. Large letters announced: "Caution. This sign has sharp edges. Do not touch the edges of this sign." Below this in much smaller print the sign read: "Also, there is a dangerous cliff ahead". In a humorous way it shows what happens when you get warnings out of proportion. What matters more is knowing about the dangerous cliff ahead, not about the sharp edges on the sign.

Yes, Numbers 4 clearly legislates, "Do not touch the ark". Uzzah touches the ark and is struck dead. Yes, these words are on the sign. However, this is really just the subtitle. What has happened carries with it a bigger warning to David: "Don't take me for granted. Fear me and don't just assume I will automatically back up your ideas and actions, no matter how noble they may seem to be." We all need to heed this warning. Don't behave as though you are calling the shots.

David has enjoyed God's full backing. He astutely recognises that his rule over a unified Israel will be greatly strengthened if all perceive an inseparable link between his rule and God's rule. Verse 2 explains the ark represents the rule of God, because it is called by the name of the Lord of Hosts, that is, the Lord of the Heavenly Angelic Armies, the very same armies David heard marching into battle before him at the end of the last chapter. We are told in v2, this Lord of the Heavenly Armies "*is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark*".

But David has reached a dangerous stage in the development of his kingdom. Prior success makes him too cocksure that he enjoys God's backing, too confident that God will rubberstamp what he has in mind. His conceit makes him careless and slap-happy in the way he goes about transporting the ark. David was a man who treasured the Scriptures. Yet David sometimes violated the clear teaching of God's Word. He violated Deuteronomy 17 by taking many concubines and wives for himself. Now he ignores laws which specified how the ark must be transported. As the parallel passages in 1 Chronicles 13-15 confirm, the ark should never have been loaded on to a cart. It must be carried by priests using poles to avoid any possibility of touching it. David should never have placed Uzzah in harm's way.

David, not learning from the history of 1 Samuel 4-6, also took 30,000 specially selected troops to ensure the safety of the ark. This is ironic because as 1 Samuel 4:10 reminds us, previously when the ark was captured by the Philistines Israel lost precisely 30,000 soldiers. History taught clearly that 30,000 soldiers are useless when it comes to protecting the ark. David had not learnt from history and had things completely back to front. He had failed to recognise that it is God's presence which protects him and not the presence of David and his soldiers which protect God.

But let's not overstate the case. There is no doubting David's sincerity and, indeed, spirituality. He genuinely seeks to praise God. Verse 5 tells us that as the ark was being conveyed, "*David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals*". It is when we feel most spiritual that we are courting danger. When we feel close to the Lord we are tempted to think that our desires are desires of the Spirit and that the Lord backs us when we follow those desires. In this state many Christians confuse their sense of inner peace or confidence with the Lord's guidance and sometimes make far-reaching decisions which presume too much upon the Lord. Don't assume that because a method or strategy meets with success that it has God's blessing - this is the mistake made by many sincere Christians who, for example, justify the use of a popular watered-down user-friendly message because it attracts greater numbers to church.

Notwithstanding David's spirituality his attitude is sullied by his underlying pride. Henry Winkler has said, "Assumptions are the termites of relationships." David is devoted to the Lord but at the same time he is taking the Lord for granted; he is presuming that God will automatically play tune with him and endorse his plans. He is treating God like a domesticated pussy cat, not like the uncontrollable Lion that he is.

In Chapter 6 all David's self-exalting ideas are smashed to the ground. David named the place of his first victory over the Philistines *Baal Perizim*, meaning "The Lord who breaks out". As David explained, "*As waters break out, the Lord has broken out against my enemies before me*" (5:26). When God strikes down Uzzah for touching the ark we are told, "*Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah*" (6:8). The Lord "breaks out" like a deadly tsunami not just on his enemies but also on all who do not treat his presence with due reverence. A friend told me of someone he knew who a few years ago presumed he could walk through an electrical substation. He was ignited, horribly burned and disfigured and lost one arm. But make no mistake, the consequences of treating God's presence with presumption are far more horrendous.

It takes tragic circumstances to instill in David that fear of the Lord which must grip each of our hearts. David, now appreciating the holiness of God, acknowledges his own comparative worthlessness and asks, "*How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?*" No longer does he think that because he is such an important person, the king, that God will necessarily and automatically back him.

Today the Lord's presence is not associated with a wooden box. It is found in "jars of clay" - in our fragile bodies. How can it be that the Lord's presence should ever come to dwell in you and me? What wonder should fill our hearts that the unthinkable has actually happened! It was never possible in Old Testament times for God's presence to indwell the lives of his people. But the Spirit of Jesus, the Presence of God, now indwells each and every true Christian. When the ox stumbled all Uzzah saw was a box that needed handling. When the life that carries us along is jolted is that how you see your own life; is that how you see the life of your Christian brother or sister - just like something that needs proper handling? Do you fear the Lord? Are you conscious that your life and that of other Christians houses the very presence of God? Remember too that the Lord's presence especially indwells the church community. So be very careful that your possibly legitimate grievances against the church do not lead you to treat the church as though it is just a human institution. It is not. It is imperative that each of us relate to the church, with all its faults, as those who fear the Lord.

At the beginning of Chapter 6 David assumes God will automatically back his plan to link God's rule with his own rule. The Chapter closes with David's estrangement from his wife, Michal. She is called the "daughter of Saul" because she shares her father's idea of kingship, one that is radically different from David's. For Saul being the king was absolutely central to his self-identity and he was prepared to do anything to hang on to it. In 2 Samuel 6 David learns that his role as king does not define his core being, who he is. Michal despised David when she saw him leaping and dancing before the Lord. She explains sarcastically: "*How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!*" "You are the king of Israel", she is telling her husband, "So you should be distinguishing yourself, showing everyone how important you are." Then she continues, "But you are not behaving like a king but like a vulgar or common slave."

That, by the way, is the significance of David being clothed in a linen ephod. When Muslims go on *hajj*, that is, pilgrimage to Mecca, they all wear white robes. When you look at another Muslim among all the millions there you cannot tell anything about that person's status in life, whether he is a wealthy business executive or whether he is a poor villager. The white robes are meant to indicate that human status means nothing in the eyes of Allah. All Muslims are but Allah's slaves.

In 2005 King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Saud was buried. He was one of the richest men on Earth. As a young man he often gambled away millions of dollars in one night. King Fahd belonged to the Wahhabi sect of Islam, the same sect to which Osama bin Laden belongs. This sect of Islam emphasises the equality of all Muslims in death. Accordingly, King Fahd's funeral involved no pomp and ceremony. He was simply wrapped in brown robe and transported to the cemetery in an ambulance where he was buried in an unmarked grave amidst hundreds of other anonymous dead. Once again the idea is that before Allah his status as king is of no meaning. All Muslims are

but Allah's slaves. David dresses and acts not like a king but like a slave. David recognised that in the presence of God he is nothing, he is but a slave.

The only way you and I can properly deal with the pride that so insidiously seeps into our souls is by developing a healthy fear of God and humbling ourselves in the presence of God. David now possesses such a healthy fear of God that he recognises his need to ensure that he thoroughly deals with any sins that might arouse God's anger. In Old Testament times it was through the offering up of animal sacrifices that forgiveness was effected and David suitably ensures that after each six steps taken by the priests carrying the ark on poles there was a sacrifice offered up to God, plus additional sacrifices when the ark was set up in a tent in Jerusalem.

Let's take a leaf out of David's book. Make sure this week you spend significant time in God's presence and as you do this don't centre this around mystical feelings, but around the knowledge that the perfect sacrifice for sin has been offered up for you by Jesus. Picture your life as a house and the different areas of your life as rooms in that house. Don't assume that because you feel close to the Lord that your house is in good order. Make sure there are no locked doors. For example, if the Lord was to enter the recreation room of your life how would you feel? Present every area of your life afresh to the Lord as a "living sacrifice"; don't assume because you feel OK that the Lord rubber stamps everything that's going on in your life. Another key to ensuring we do not take the Lord for granted is to present to him a continual sacrifice of thanksgiving - to consciously and deliberately thank him for each and every blessing he bestows upon us. May each of us enjoy the Lord's full support in all we do!