CHAPTER 6
Reverence Required
Don't Imitate Uzzah

King David established an innovative tabernacle on Mount Zion and staffed it with singers and musicians.[1] He transformed the spiritual atmosphere on earth for generations to come with a consensus of praise, fortified by nonstop music. This audacious venture triggered a radical season change, one that set a bold precedent for entering God's presence.

Announcing the start of a New Testament rendition of David's Tabernacle, James restates God's will to connect with all people everywhere.[2] Quoting the prophet Amos, he declared:

> *'After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that* ***the rest of mankind*** *may seek the Lord, and* ***all the gentiles*** *who are called by my name,'* (Acts 15:16-17 NAS)

Under the influence of night and day thanksgiving and praise, unbelievers are awakened to seek the Lord. Enlightened by the knowledge of the truth, they recognize God, realize His worth, and respond with informed reverence.

When David came to power, the spiritual climate needed to be changed. Foreign gods polluted public venues and giant warriors threatened national security. Decisive action was in order. Circumstances begged for a spiritual breakthrough into God's presence. Israel needed this breakthrough just as individuals, families, ethnic-groups, and nations need it today.

David became King during a season of spiritual and political transition. His predecessor, Saul, proved to be a royal failure. Plagued by insecurity, Saul accommo-

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[1] 2 Samuel 6:1-11 and 1 Chronicles 13:1-14

[2] Amos 9:11-12

dated a culture of superficial religion and disobedience. Tolerating foreign idols, compromised God's favor and invited His wrath.

Connecting firsthand with God's presence continues to be a rare event. Many individuals ponder the possibility of a divine encounter but few experience it. Some pretend by putting on a good-looking front. Others suffer from spiritual amnesia; they fail to remember divine encounters from the past.

In one way or another, we all long to connect with God more fully. Secondhand connections are inspiring but inadequate. Extending our index finger toward our Heavenly Father and almost touching Him (as Michelangelo's Fresno depicts on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) does not qualify as a reliable encounter. We desire a consistent connection with spiritual reality—with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. David's Tabernacle facilitates this reality.

The Ark of the Covenant

When David ascended the throne, he consulted royal advisors for expert opinions. A national consensus emerged to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. David sought to establish God's presence in Israel's capital city as a convenient connecting point for all to experience.

The Ark of the Covenant displayed God's invisible presence with visible glory focused on the Mercy Seat between two cherubim statues. Before Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king, Philistine forces captured the Ark in battle while killing 30,000 Israelis.[3] After seven-months in captivity, the Philistines used a new cart drawn by dairy cows to return the Ark back to Israel. It arrived at Kiriath Jearim and remained there for twenty years as national mourning set the tone for seeking the Lord.

After David replaced Saul as king, he instigated an aggressive breakthrough into God's presence.[4] David enlisted 30,000 choice men to participate in this historic effort. He did not choose the young men, fighting men, elders, or priests but an group of exclusive individuals equal to the number killed when the Ark was lost. Thousands of families experienced both honor and inconvenience to accommodate this cause.

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[3] 1 Sam 4:10

[4] Context and details taken from C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, translated by. M. G. Easton, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984; reprint ed.), vol. 3, 1 Chronicles 13:2, p. 196.

David was a decisive commander-in-chief. He took the initiative to accomplish what the whole assembly had agreed to perform because, *"it seemed right to all the people"*.[5] David acted quickly and energetically to advance this consensus driven plan. Without consulting God or considering His ways and means, David commanded a breakthrough into His presence—as speedily as possible.

Connecting with God using a Synthetic Method

Propelled by impulsive ambition, David employed a new oxcart (just as the Philistines used) to carry the Ark approximately ten miles from Abinadab's house to Jerusalem. Abinadab means my father is willing or noble. His sons Uzzah and Ahio drove the Ark down the hill from Kiriath Jearim, which means City of the Woods. David and all Israel celebrated before the Ark with all their might, singing and playing musical instruments. Uzzah drove the cart while Ahio navigated the route. *Nahag*, the Hebrew verb drove, means forcible herding as one drives a chariot or cart, or as the Lord drives the wind.[6]

Similar to Israel's archenemy, David employed oxen to pull the presence of God. Though stronger, faster, and more robust than dairy cows, the oxen stumbled causing the Ark to drop off at the threshing floor of Nachon. Uzzah put out his hand and instantly connected with God. He clutched the Ark to literally seize or take possession of it. Suddenly the anger of the Lord erupted, striking Uzzah for his "*irreverence*" (from the Hebrew word *"shal"* used only once in the Bible). The Lord did more than patiently watch and wait. He intervened directly by tearing Uzzah's life from his mortal body. Uzzah means strength.

Discussing Uzzah's death, Eugene Peterson advocates a warning sign for our safety: "Beware the God". In "Leap Over a Wall", Peterson writes, "It's especially important to have such a sign posted in places designated for religious worship and learning."[7] After waiting thousands of years, God brought the presence of Christ to earth with deliberate patience and perseverance. David's mad dash to cart God's presence into the city violated 400 years of divinely specified legal precedent.

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[5] 1 Chr 13:4 NIV

[6] 2 Sam 6:3-4. From R. Laird Harris, ed., Gleason L. Archer, Jr., assoc. ed., and Bruce K. Waltke, assoc. ed., Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 2 vols., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 558.

[7] Eugene Peterson, Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians, Harper San Francisco, 1997, p. 150-151.

This elite entourage raced down the hill with reckless confidence in their leader and careless enthusiasm for his method. They were set on a collision course with public failure. Human strength proved insufficient for their novel plan and noble desire. The lesson is clear: good intentions driven by fervent passion does not guarantee success in our attempt to connect with God.

Why did this venture fail? A man after God's own heart conceived a sensible plan to bring God closer. His advisors approved and the public endorsed it. Why did the God of Patience execute harsh judgment? Normally He is slow to anger; why didn't He demonstrate tolerance and intervene with words? Was it necessary for the God of Mercy to interrupt their parade and resort to road-rage?

God's wrath broke-out severely against Uzzah and his strength because Israel did not sufficiently honor God's presence or protocol. David connected with the advice of his staff and the opinion of his nation. But he failed to connect with God's counsel. More importantly, Israel underestimated the importance of revering God's presence. They failed to respond with appropriate veneration. Disregarding the sacred process, they attempted to bring God's presence into the city without the worship and respect that He deserves.

God's presence is not a cargo hauled around in a box to suit our own whims. Consecrated priests were responsible for carefully preparing themselves to shoulder the weight of the Ark.[8] Instead, David showed the son of an elite nobleman undue favoritism for this assignment. Uzzah forcibly drove the Ark using a man-made method once employed by the enemy. Blinded by excessive enthusiasm he raced down a hillside in the woods.

Human ingenuity, fueled by the strength of man and beast, missed the mark. The consequence of this sin was severe. The Ark associated with the presence of the Lord *"fell off"* due to the stumbling of an ox driven by a careless young man.

Looking down from heaven, God watched those who ignored Him. Apparently, Israel had forgotten how their emancipated predecessors replaced God in the wilderness with a golden calf. Once again, a beast served as an illegitimate source of strength for connecting with God. Oxen are an especially impotent breed of beast; by definition they cannot reproduce because they are castrated males.[9]

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[8] 1 Chronicles 15:12-13 NAS

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ox (accessed 5-20-13)

In a futile attempt to bring God closer, Israel ignored Torah protocol. They disregarded the wisdom of His ways and the strength of His means. Eugene Peterson paraphrased Paul's insight as follows:

> *God's angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to put a shroud over truth. …What happened was this:* ***People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God****, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life.* ***They traded the glory of God*** *who holds the whole world in his hands* ***for cheap figurines*** *you can buy at any roadside stand.* (Romans 1:18-23 MSG)

Treating God as God

David and Israel failed to respect the truth about God. Though celebrating with exuberant praise and sincere gratitude, they did not demonstrate adequate reverence. In this case, reverence proved to be essential. By diminishing His attributes and abbreviating His accomplishments, they underestimated the value of God's worth. Overlooking the honor and respect that He deserves, they failed to respond with appropriate homage.

Gestures of worship are conspicuously absent from both biblical narratives describing David's Tabernacle. In fact, the word worship only appears once in one account as an obscure exhortation. David appointed *"Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord, even to celebrate and to thank and praise the Lord God of Israel"*.[10] He assigned Psalm 96 to Asaph and his relatives for giving thanks to the Lord.[11] This psalm contains a brief exhortation, "*Worship the Lord in holy array*".[12] Holy array means splendor or beauty of holiness from the Hebrew words *qodesh hadarah*. Except for this phrase, neither narrative describing David's Tabernacle mentions a gesture of worship. The parallel account in 2 Samuel 6 does not even mention the word worship. Notwithstanding, this is the first time in the Bible where praise and worship are cited together in the same context.

The God of enduring patience did not endorse David's irreverent behavior as they sprinted down the road. Permission to carry the Ark belonged solely to consecrated priests rather than favored noblemen. Without exception, touching this

[10] 1 Chronicles 16:4 NAS

[11] 1 Chronicles 16:7 NAS

[12] 1 Chronicles 16:29 NAS

holy article was strictly prohibited. God noticed Uzzah's knee-jerk reaction as he forcefully drove the Ark then reached out to seize control of it when it fell. God watched, judged, condemned, sentenced, and executed Uzzah, obliterating his strength. Consequently, Israel's goal of connecting with God's presence failed to occur—at least not without another period of waiting.

After Uzzah died, David reacted with anger (Hebrew, *charah*)—not awe, repentance, or facedown reverence. This anger was similar to the anger (Hebrew, *charah*) that God expressed toward Uzzah.[13] Divine rage had literally broken through David's irreverent behavior. David was not aiming for this type of breakthrough into God's presence. Nor did he anticipate the Lord's fury against his well-intentioned but ill-informed and mal-performed plan. In distress David said, *"How can I bring the Ark of God to me?"* This cry expressed the yearning desire that griped his heart. He longed to connect openly with the presence of God and he longed to help others connect. Because of a fundamental lack of reverence, David was unable to fulfill this dream or accomplish God's will.

David's failure marked a dramatic leadership crisis; it confirmed his weakness apart from God. Not connecting with God's presence has disturbing consequences. David's legitimate desire appeared out of reach. He named that place the Breakthrough of Strength (Perez-Uzzah) or the Breach of Strength.

God literally broke the power of Israel's strength because they were attempting to do the right thing, the wrong way. The Psalmist wrote, *"In the course of my life he broke* [weakened, NKJ] *my strength; he cut short my days."*[14] The Lord ended Israel's pride parade. He brought *"weakness into their hearts"*.[15] Divine opposition erupted to break their stubborn *"pride of power"*.[16] David underestimated the penalty for connecting amiss with God's holy presence.

For three months, the Ark of the Covenant remained at the house of Obed-Edom, which means serving Edom [i.e., Esau]. Obed-Edom was a Levite priest, either of the house of Kohath or Merari.[17] He likely guarded the Ark as a doorkeeper, carried the Ark as a porter, and/or ministered as singer-musician.

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[13] 1 Chronicles 13:10-11 NAS

[14] Psalm 102:23 NIV

[15] Leviticus 26:36 NAS

[16] Leviticus 26:19 NAS

[17] Exodus 6:21; 18:16; 1 Chronicles 26:1-16 or 1 Chronicles 15:17-24; 16:38