

Who's Touching the Ark?

Leonard Ravenhill:

In the second book of Samuel, chapter six, we read from verse one:

"Again David gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand.

"And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims. And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was at Gibeah, accompanying the ark of God: and Ahio went before the ark.

And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and cymbals. And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God."

Israel had never had any covering in the sense of a tabernacle. They had been nomads. They had no priests. They had the heavens for the ceiling of their church. And now, suddenly, they are contracted to a small space that has been called the tabernacle in the wilderness. And God gives specific instructions to this amazing man Moses about the building. It's very interesting that he had no choice in this. He obeyed every commandment God gave to him. He had no more choice in the thing than Noah had the choice of what kind of a rainbow he wanted.

And it says in verse eight of the twenty-fifth chapter of Exodus,

"Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle..."

Come down to verse seventeen:

"Thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold... and the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings. And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee. And there I will meet with thee."

That's the first piece of furniture mentioned as regards the tabernacle. This ark was roughly fifty-four inches long, three feet high, and three feet wide. And it was a visible presence of an invisible power. It was a kind of a earthly resting place where God put His power between those awesome cherubims. Remember how often the Psalmist cries, "Oh, Thou that dwellest between the cherubims shine forth"?

Now, here is the ark, it's measurements, and verse twenty-two says, "There will I meet with thee."

AND THAT WAS THE SUPREME DESIRE OF GOD.

IT'S THE SUPREME DESIRE OF GOD TODAY:

THAT WHEN WE COME TOGETHER,

WE MEET WITH HIM.

As I usually ask people somewhere in a meeting, "Did you come here tonight to meet God or did you come to hear a sermon about Him?"

I talked with somebody today, an internationally known figure, who said,

"You know, I'm realizing how little I know of God". And, I've offered someone a writing, talking about Jesus laying His glory by and being wrapped in our clay, the most profound thing I've ever heard, and this person said, "I feel as though I don't want to preach anymore." I said, "Well, that's how I felt when I heard it and the depths that this man has." Oh God, pity us. We are so commercialized, so regulated by circumstances. We get up with the clock, the clock runs our lives, we lose sight of eternity. We lose sight of the wonder of God's salvation.

The whole tabernacle was marvelous. There's to be a place in it, a holy place, not only a holy place but the Holy of Holiest, and this ark was put in the Holy of Holiest and it had the chief place in the Holy of Holiest. Inside of it you have the rod that budded, and a sample of the manna that fell from heaven, and also the tables of stone. This testimony of God had to be preserved. And the ark was an abiding place for God on earth - that is, He manifested Himself there.

You see, this isn't some little bit of furniture that's tucked away in a corner that has no meaning. It's the abiding place, it's a seat, it's a dwelling place. You have the ark and on top of the ark you have the mercy

seat.

The Salvation Army never used to talk about coming to the altar. I can remember that years ago, sixty, seventy years ago, the Army used to sing ,

"Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel,
Here bring your wounded heart, here tell your anguish,
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal."

There is a mercy seat, a blood-sprinkled mercy seat.

Look now in the first book of Samuel chapter five. The Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God they brought it into the temple of Dagon and set it by the image of Dagon. Now, when Ashdod rose up early in the morning the idol Dagon had fallen upon his face on the earth before the ark of God. And they took Dagon and set him on his place again. They rose early in the morning, and he was fallen on his face again, and his head and his hands had broken off. Now you see, here the peril of toying or playing with holy things.

There's a verse that talks about the iniquity of holy things. Now that's something to really turn over, isn't it? How in the world can you have the iniquity of holy things? These people have captured the ark of God. They thought it would do them good. Instead it did evil. They put it at the side of their god, this monstrous god Dagon. The upper part of his body was a man, and the lower part a fish, something like a mermaid we would say today. And there the idol stood in a temple where people worshipped him... but as soon as they put the ark of God there, without anybody doing anything, Dagon fell down on his face. So they stood him up again. They went in the next morning and he was worse off. See what happened further in the chapter,

"When they rose early in the morning, behold Dagon was fallen upon his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off, upon the threshold, only the stump of Dagon was left to him. Therefore, neither the priests of Dagon nor any that came into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon to this day!"

You see, just that one visitation, that one movement of God, terrified them... in a sense Dagon had to go out of business. Verse six,

"The hand of the Lord was heavy upon them of Ashdod and he destroyed them and smote them with emerods... And when the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, The ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us, for his hand is sore upon us and upon Dagon, our god." Going to the end of the eighth verse they carried the ark of the God of Israel to Gath,... "and so after they had carried it out, that the hand of the Lord was against the city."

Now, here you are again, you see the peril!

I want to emphasize this:

The peril of having these holy things and misusing them.

This peril is, obviously, the opposite to the power. If we touch it with unholy hands it will bring destruction to us.

Remember the children of Israel? In one of their marvelous escapades, they walked round the city of Jericho seven times. What did they do? They carried the ark of God. To them, that was the very presence of God. Can you imagine people on the walls looking down and saying, "Who are these lunatics?" I mean, what were they doing? They walked round in silence. They were not allowed to speak... that must have been tough on some of them. "What do they have there? Is it a coffin? What is it? It's a casket." When Moses was sharing out some of the property of Israel, he gave various things to various people, but the sons of Kohath were not allowed to have any cattle or any of the possessions: They were separated to carrying the ark of God.

Second Samuel six and verse six, "When they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it for the oxen shook it, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah."

Why? Because they'd made a new cart for it. God said the ark never had to be on a cart. But they made a new cart. And these people thought they were doing God a favor by modernizing this thing. Now, isn't it really awesome? They didn't decide to paint it another color. They didn't decide to put a second deck on it. They didn't disfigure it in any way. The man didn't go in front of it and start blaspheming. The man somehow thought he'd do God a favor... "Oh, look! The ark is going to topple over! Oh I'll hold it."

Somebody once asked Mr. Spurgeon if he would join a society for the defense of the Bible. He said, "You don't usually walk before a lion with a sword". Why do you need to defend the Bible?

All this man did was to put his hand up to stay the ark and immediately he was smitten! What do you think we are doing with the gospel today? Dressing it up? Painting it up?

Someone told me this week of a Christian group, a rock band. Christian rock band!? But anyhow, whatever they are, they go around. And now they've got sequins on their coats. Well, why not? All the other guys have them. I mean, if the world could have them, can't we? Glitter? I mean, if we've no other glitter, we might as well stick it on the outside. It's not on the inside anyhow.

We try to steady the ark of God.

We are trying to put some improvement on the ark of God. We try to do that with the translations we make of the Word of God. We try to make some of those words just a little bit easier. We better go back to Bible language and call sin what it really is!... But the anger of the Lord was kindled against this man and not only smote him but killed him!

Come on, in God's name, what are we doing with the gospel today?

Isn't it getting more emasculated?

Isn't it getting more Hollywood-style?

DON'T YOU MISS THE PRESENCE OF THE GLORY OF GOD?

THAT'S ALL WE NEED!

There's an old hymn that says, "God's presence and His very self, an essence all divine". I'll ask you again, I've asked you before, When did you last go out of the sanctuary on tiptoe because God had revealed His holiness and His majesty? We go out very much as the way we came in. We go out, we say, "Hey, I like your dress!" Or some other trivial thing that's got nothing to do with eternity and nothing to do with God.

Notice in verse five now. David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord in all instruments made of fir wood, harps, and psalteries, and timbrels, and cornets, and on cymbals. Now there's his ecstasy! Now come down to verse nine. This same David was afraid of the Lord that day. He said, "How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?" That's a big switch! He's excited they're having the band music and having a whale of a time, and then suddenly God intervenes. And suddenly his whole emotional life does a somersault. He realizes what an awful God he serves. What a God of majesty! What a God of glory!

Do you know the ark was the only thing taken out of the original tabernacle that went into the temple of the most high God? God's presence. That's what it matters. What it's telling us is that God makes there a place for his habitation. This is awesome. This is breathtaking. You can say,

God's presence is there.

He's there in his holiness.

He's there in his majesty.

He's there in his glory.

Be careful how you handle this thing.

Well, we don't need an ark. Why? Because it says: "You are the habitation of God." There's only as much of God's holiness in this meeting as you and I are filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, of God, the pure Spirit of God. He doesn't dwell in temples - oh, you can make Him a thousand crystal palaces like they've done on the west coast there, so what? You can't sanctify a building in the Old Testament sense. Even Solomon realized it. I guess he built the most expensive building, the most extravagant building ever made. He used gold more easily than we used cement. He built the altar, and he had the priests. Yet, when he had made his intercession to God, he said, "Look, I've put up this building, I've done everything according to Your commandment. We've got an altar. We've even got a sacrifice on the altar. Now, what's missing? Nothing, except the fire of God. What good is a house that I've built, if God's presence isn't there? What's the good of making a showpiece and saying we've got the best choir, we've got the most brilliant preacher. We've got this and that. So what? In God's name, does it matter?

Don't you think we are putting our hands on so many things? You've got to start this way and finish that way and do something else. We are getting so mechanical. Since when did the gospel need trimming up?

I had to go to a meeting. There's a five-piece band there.
Oh, how they swerved and jazzed and whatnot.

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Isn't it incredible that these people who knew God in such an intimate way, these people had gone round a city without a gun? This people, inspite of the mocking, the despising, went round one day, round another day, another day, another day. On the last day, they went round seven times. In total, thirteen times they went round. - That's pretty unlucky isn't it? - And they kept dumb and they stood all the criticism of the people that were watching. And all they had to do the last day was to "shout with a great shout." Why? Because God was there.

God says, I want a tabernacle and there at the mercy seat will I meet with thee.

God wants me to meet with Him. It's more than me preaching for Him. It's more than me being a missionary for Him. He wants to meet with me. He wants to reveal Himself to me. He wants to talk with me. He wants to come in and work in this being of mine!

A lady called me from the border of Mexico today. She was weeping and said,
"God has called us here. God has really blessed us, but oh, we want to be great soul winners." And she went on. I said, "My dear, look the first commandment. Is not, Thou shalt be a soul winner. The first commandment is, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength." There are lots of missionaries that don't love God. There are lots of missionaries that should have returned from the field six months after they got there. They're doing the thing mechanically. And it's hard to endure that kind of burden when they are doing it mechanically. But when they do it under the anointing of God. When they do it with the love of God... Oh, it is so different.

Can you imagine the procession accompanying the ark of the Lord? They had harps, and psalteries, and timbrels, and cornets and they're having a great time. And suddenly, death came. You wonder that David was afraid? And he said, "How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?"

Do you ever wonder if you've gotten insensitive to what God's trying to say to you? Do you ever wonder when a certain thing has happened that somewhere in your nervousness, you put your hand up to steady the ark, and somehow the sensitivity went, and the compassion you had went, and the concern you had went... All this man did was try to steady the ark of God. Oh mercy, how we're trying to steady the ark of God these days. We don't just want to steady it. We want to do some new thing.

We'd paint it.
We'd put a musical box inside of it.
We'd put the priest in some new garments.
We'd try to make it more acceptable!

The power and the presence of God were resting on that tabernacle. And while they were obedient, they had success. Are we steadying the ark of God in the way we are presenting the gospel these days?

The gospel is still the power of God unto salvation to all who believe. I heard somebody say, "Well, you know, there's a different approach today". Is there? Is there really? Is there any difference between the grief of somebody who's heartbroken today and the grief of somebody who lived three thousand years ago? We say, "Human nature is changed". Human nature has not changed! Human nature is still a sinful nature. Human nature still needs God. It seems though, God is trying to check us, but we won't take the checking. We won't take the warning. And again I say to you, the most distressing area, I believe, is the area of the church itself. We are trying to steady the ark.

We don't want God Almighty to govern the whole thing.

We want a little bit of flesh in it.

We want a little bit of humanism in it.

We want a little bit of organization in it.

We want some of our skill in it.

And God holds off.

The word of God says, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God." Oh, I'm aching on the inside to see somebody that really, really, really has no confidence in the flesh.

Isn't it horrible when we try and subsidize God's cause with a few dollars here, in a collection there, and something else. Now, either God is God, or he isn't. As I've said before, this book is either absolute or it's obsolete. There is no middle course. It either has all the answers or it has no answers. I've got to get to the place where I say, "Lord, you can strip everything else away from me, and, 'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand'". I'm not going to steady the ark. I'm convinced God is going to do a new work. I've talked the last few days with a brother I love very dearly, and he's at a crossroads in his life, and I know others who are men that you think are at the top of the tree. You think they should be satisfied with what they've got. And they're not. They are men who don't try to steady the ark by organization and saying you must do it this way and you must do it that way. They are suddenly realizing there is a new dimension that God wants to bring to our generation. A new revelation. A new unfolding of the Word of God.

Before long, you remember, that David went and slew the oxen and they took the fatlings, and they made a sacrifice to God. And then he danced before God. Why? Because he got rid of many of his obstructions. The Lord is very merciful. Do you know how merciful he is? He's so merciful, He'll strip us right down to the place where we haven't a thing to stand where we haven't a thing to lean on - the place where we are in nakedness and in despair.

You know the church that was rich and increased with goods? That's where the church is today. She's rich, she's increased with goods, she's in need of nothing. Which church was it Jesus spewed out of his mouth? "I would rather that you were hot or cold so then because thou are neither hot or cold, I'll spew..." (He didn't spew the cold one out of his mouth, it had never been in.) It was His church that He spewed out of His mouth. It wasn't a heathen religion, it was His church. They were neither hot nor cold. They were kind of midstream. And because they were neither one thing nor the other, He vomited them out. He didn't vomit the cold church out. He didn't bother with it. God will not stand for mediocrity.

Some eager, keen, young seminary fellows, were asking after a meeting, "Well, what's the secret, the real secret of abounding in the Christian life? What's the secret of not being a failure? What's the secret of not letting your branch get withered up?"

Some of them call today for prayer. I'm sorry for some of the situations they are in, but it's the only way they'll grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. They've been leaning too much on what they have, and now God's going to dry up their source so they only have God on whom they can lean. They've had so much flesh, they've had so much ability, they've had so much organization, they've had so much security that God says, "Well, let me pull it all away". Doesn't the word say, "Trust ye in the Lord forever, for in the Lord is everlasting strength?"

I think one of the shocks in eternity will be to discover how little we've ever used of the available power of God. Not for our own mean, silly self! There's a world out there that's dying. Does God have resources to meet this generation? Come on! I learned to my horror while I was just in Brooklyn from a man who is a professional in his realm, a very fine Christian man, he said that last year the churches in America spent close to two billion dollars on radio and TV preaching. Two billion! Do you know how many people they've reached? Less than 4% of the national family! Less than 4% of Americans listen to the gospel. Can you imagine how many mission stations that would have built? How many churches that would have built in some other country? I think we are putting our hands on the ark.

We are rather afraid that we might go a bit overboard, you know. Doctrinally, someone comes up and says, "Well, steady a minute" and he hardly knows he's putting his hand on the ark. We're just afraid, it seems, of some new revelation, some new demand that God will make upon us, not just individually, but collectively. Again, I was shocked to realize that this man, Uzzah, did not smash up the ark, he didn't tell all the people to rebel, he didn't tell the priest to do it. All he did was steady the ark thinking he was doing God a favor. All he did was disobey. Is that all? Well, that's all that Adam did in the garden; all he did was disobey. He didn't curse God. And it seems the hardest thing that we have to learn in our lives is to learn how to obey in the very, very, very simple things that God challenges us with.

I still say, you know, if I were a kind of a Protestant pope, I'd close every church down for a month. We're preached to death. Why do we keep going to conferences? You can't handle the lot you've got, why do you want some more? The next conference you go, whether it's this weekend, or next week... you'll have more light!... and therefore more to answer for at the judgment seat. Haven't you got enough to answer for? Aren't there areas in your life where you still have not obeyed?

"It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God," the Word of God says. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "I only know one thing worse, and that's when you fall out of the hands of the living God". And that happens.

There comes a time when God says to a nation, "All right, you've been putting your hand on my truth. You've been withholding my truth". You say, "Well, we've given money to missions". So we have. But you know, we had a National Day of Prayer last week. No. We didn't have a National Day of Prayer. We had a national suggestion! If we would have had a National Day of Prayer, the president would have said, "Every factory is closed down. Every school is closed down. Every shopping mall is closed down,. Everything is going to stop. It's time we listened to God. It's time we humbled ourselves before God." But when God wants it that way, which He does, we put our hand on the ark, and say, "We'll steady it and make it a little bit more convenient". Dear God. There was a time they were so concerned about revival they even put sackcloth on the animals. If you wore a sackcloth they would think you were a crackpot! If you don't think so, get a potato sack and cut a hole in the top, pull it over your head, get your wife to cut some holes so you can put your arms in and go to church like that. And say, "This is an outward sign of an inward sorrow I have. I don't care about the style of my clothes".

I don't care what you think or anybody else thinks. We've got to have revival. We've got to have a move of God. And we haven't had it after all our financial efforts and all our genius of evangelism and all the other things. We get so far that we put our hands on the ark. There's going to be a conference shortly and I'm not in any way troubled that I wasn't invited. They're going to meet and go through a rigmarole again. Workshops, workshops, workshops. There's a workshop for this and there's a workshop for that. The hardest work in the whole world is prayer! And there're no workshops on prayer!

The ark is falling. We're going to steady it. We've got a new idea. Every magazine I pick up now, Christian magazine, is how to make your church grow. I'm looking for one that says how to take your church deeper! Somebody said to a preacher, "You've the biggest church in... How big is your church?" He answered, "Three miles wide and an inch deep". I think that's true of a lot of them. Three miles wide and an inch deep. And while it's humorous, it's tragic! Are we going to change the style? Are we going to keep steadying the ark? Are we going to say, "No, no, no. We are not going any further like this. We are not going with this cart you've got it on. We are going to do it God's way". And it looks silly to carry it on your shoulders. It looks silly to walk around when you could mechanize the thing, or organize the thing, or make it more attractive.

How can you make God's presence more attractive?! That's about the height of insanity! ISN'T GOD HIMSELF AND HIS HOLINESS ATTRACTIVE?

Do you know what we need to do? We need to do what David did. We need to take all the implements. We need to take the cart and break it up and we need to get hold of the bullocks and chop them up and have one big Holy Ghost bonfire and say,

"Lord God, I am going to live on the stretch for You from now until I die. Whether I die tomorrow or ten years from now, I'm going to meet with You as I've never met with You before. I'm going on the stretch for You as I've never been on the stretch before."

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