

I want to begin this morning by playing a game that many of us played when we were children: *Simon Says*. By a show of hands, how many of you know how this game works? Let's begin by having all of you stand to your feet.

I regret to inform you that that if you stood to your feet just now, then you're already out; I didn't say, "Simon Says". As for the rest of you, Simon says, "*Stand to your feet.*" Simon says, "*Put one hand in the air;*" now, "*put the other hand in the air.*" You're catching on, my instructions need to be preceded by "Simon says". Simon says, "*Stand on one leg;*" Simon says, "*Clap your hands once;*" Simon says, "*Lick your finger and stick it in your neighbour's ear.*" I've been looking forward to saying that all week.

You can go ahead and sit down. Simon says, "*You can all sit down.*"

Simon Says is a game that tests our ability to listen closely and follow instructions. It's relatively easy to do within the boundaries of a game but much more difficult in the rest of our lives. We tend to have selective hearing, listening to what we want, to what's easy; we tend not to follow instructions, unless it suits our purposes.

In John 14:6, Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" As a noun, the word "*way*" refers to a destination. Jesus is the **way**, but to where? He is the **way** to God; the **way** to eternal life. As a metaphor the word "*way*" describes the means by which we get to the destination. How do we get to God? Jesus said, "*Follow Me.*"

We're about halfway through our series in 1&2 Samuel, and each week we've been asking the question: *What does it mean to have a heart after God, or, to follow in His way?* For instance, *what does it*

look like to trust God in difficulty? Or to honour Him in our relationships? Or to walk with Him through grief and loss? David's life is a fascinating study in blessing and hardship—not unlike our own lives. The goal of course is to invite Jesus into every contour of our lives—every pursuit, every passion, every decision, and relationship.

This morning, as we look at a 7 year period in David's life, we see both darkness and light. In particular, we are going to see the interplay between the temptation of power, the holiness of God, and the call to worship. Throughout David's kingship, these three—power, holiness, and worship—shape him in significant ways. At times David walked in darkness and at other times in the light; this morning were going to see David with a foot in both realms.

At this time I want to invite you to turn with me to 2 Samuel 3; that's page 241 in the Blue Bibles. Last week, we looked at David's grief in the face of Saul's death. We might have expected that with Saul's death, David would be quickly crowned the next King of Israel; instead, David waited another seven years. David was anointed King of Judah (in the South), while one of Saul's sons, Ish-Bosheth, was anointed King of Israel (in the North).

Now reading from 2 Samuel 3, "*The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker. 2 Sons were born to David in Hebron: His firstborn was Amnon the son of Ahinoam of Jezreel; 3 his second, Kileab the son of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; the third, Absalom the son of Maakah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur; 4 the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; 5 and the sixth,*

Ithream the son of David's wife Eglah. These were born to David in Hebron."

There are two things to note here. (1) One, David's power was on the rise, while the power of Saul's family was diminishing, and (2) Two, David had embraced one of the empire-building-strategies of his day.

David was growing stronger in terms of military might and influence but the problem with power and influence is that no amount of it is ever enough. For kings in the Ancient Near East, multiple marriages were a core part of building one's empire. An alliance through marriage made a possible enemy into an economic partner and military ally.

If you remember, before David fled Israel, he was married to Saul's daughter, but when he became a fugitive, his wife Michal was left behind. Not long afterwards, Saul married Michal off to another man—Paltiel. In the meantime, while still on the run, David took two other wives: Ahinoam and Abigail. And as I just read, after becoming King of Judah, he took four more wives, including Maakah, daughter of Talmai, King of Geshur.

Geshur was a nation state bordering the north of Israel; by marrying the princess, David was securing Israel's northern borders.¹ David wasn't marrying for love; this was about consolidating power. Now one might argue, "*It's just good business—expand your influence,*

¹ Paul S. Evans, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1-2 Samuel*, 332.

² Deuteronomy 17:14-20; Psalm 20:6-9.

³ Cf. 1 Samuel 18:20-21.

protect your interests." The problem is that David was doing what God had expressly forbid the kings of Israel to do. To put one's trust in wealth, or foreign alliances, or military might was to drift away from dependence on God.²

Later in chapter three, once again, we see further evidence of David succumbing to the temptation of power. Though Ish-Bosheth was sitting on the northern throne, it was his military general—Abner—that was the real decision-maker. When Ish-Bosheth challenged Abner, Abner decided to broker a deal that would hand the northern kingdom over to David.

In exchange for the kingdom, Abner demanded to be David's premier military general. David agreed but with the provision that Abner deliver Saul's daughter, Michal—David's first wife—to him. By this point, Michal and David have been separated, with Michal married to another man, for at least 10 years. Why did David demand her return? Was it for reasons of love, or, were the reasons born of power and politics?

With King Saul's daughter at his side once again, Michal added a sense of legitimacy to David's crown, and furthered his chance of being accepted by northern kingdom. Michal became a pawn in David's game in the same way that she was first a pawn in her father's game.³

Am I reading into things? It's possible. However, earlier in 1 Samuel 18:20 we are told that Michal loved David, but we're never told that David loved Michal. Further, in 2 Samuel 3:13-14, when David demanded the return of his wife, there is no mention of love. All David mentioned was the bride price he had paid for her.

Contrast this with the scene that follows in vs. 15-16. When Michal was forcibly taken from her home, her second husband Paltiel followed along behind her, weeping the entire way. His tears don't need any explanation; his heartbreak is the evidence of love. This expression of his love is made all the more stark in light of the absence of any expression of David's love.⁴

David was not above using people for his own purposes. Sadly, we see a pattern forming in the way that David misuses power in relating to women—first Abigail, then Michal, and in the future, Bathsheba. John Warden writes, “If you want to measure a person's character, grant them power.”⁵ We are most tempted to misuse power when we feel inadequate, when we lack accountability, when we fear losing something important, or when we've been hurt; some of these were present in David

All of us have some measure of power and influence, some more than others, but the question we must answer is, *what is power for?* To get what we want? To bend people to our purposes? To remove those who stand in our way? This is not the way of Jesus.

⁴ Evans, 333-334.

⁵ John Warden, “The Temptation of Power,” <https://reconciledworld.org/flourish/healthy-leadership-the-temptation-of-power/>

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *In The Name of Jesus*, 59.

In John 6 the story is told of Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of five thousand. When the crowd recognized His power, it says that they “intended to make Him king by force”. The crowd wasn't wrong, Jesus was a Great King, but He refused to be tempted by power or position; He knew what the Father had assigned Him to do.

In Mark 10:45, Jesus spoke about His calling saying, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In the end, Jesus did exactly that, He laid down His power and privilege, took upon Himself our sin and pain, and died on the cross that we might be reconciled to God.

Henri Nouwen writes, “What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, ‘Do you love me?’ We ask, ‘Can we sit [in the place of power] at your right hand and your left hand... (Matthew 20:21).”⁶ We all face this temptation—to choose power and privilege over love. In this regard, David and Jesus made different choices and their paths diverged. *Which path are we on? How are we using the power we have?*

At this point, we are going to leave chapters 3-5 behind and move on to 2 Samuel 6. So far I've been talking about the misuse of power, now I want to talk about the Holiness of God and the way of

worship. After the Northern and Southern Kingdom was consolidated under David, his army captured Jerusalem and David made it the capital city of Israel—a new king, with a new capital city.

After capturing Jerusalem, his next act was to call for the Ark of the Covenant to be brought to Jerusalem. If you're not familiar with the Old Testament, you may not know what the Ark of the Covenant was.

The Ark was a rectangular box, approximately four feet in length and two feet in width and depth. It was made of wood and covered with gold; its lid was made of solid gold with two sculpted angel-like figures at each end. The Ark contained three items: (1) the tablets of stone, on which the ten commandments were etched, (2) a jar of manna from the wilderness years, and (3) Aaron's staff that God has caused to miraculously bud.

The Ark itself, and the items it contained, were symbols of God's manifest presence. The tablets were a reminder that God was Commander, the manna a reminder that God was Provider, and the rod a reminder that God was Protector.⁷

The first few chapters of 1 Samuel describe the Ark's capture by the Philistines and its subsequent return, but for the next twenty years the Ark remained in Kiriath Jearim—in obscurity. Saul didn't have any use for the Ark because he didn't have any use for God; he was interested in God's protection and provision but not in His leadership. Often, we are not so different.

But when Israel was reunited under David's kingship, he immediately called for the Ark. Throughout his life, David was many things—shepherd, general, fugitive, and king—but in every season of life he was a worshipper.

In his younger days, while he was a **shepherd** of sheep, David went looking for the lost, he bound the wounds of the sick, and chased off predators. His everyday responsibilities provided the occasion for his primary vocation as a worshipper. A number of the Psalms David wrote came from this period of his life. Psalm 23, "*The Lord is **my** Shepherd, I lack no good thing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, He refreshes my soul.*"

When David became a **fugitive**, his primary vocation didn't change—he remained a worshipper. When surrounded by difficulty, many people blame God and turn away from God; David did the opposite—He prayed, sang, and trusted His Maker.

David wrote Psalm 57 while hiding from Saul in a cave: "*I cry out to God Most High, to God, who vindicates me...I am in the midst of lions; I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts—men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.*"

Running for his life, hunted like a dog, but in the midst of it all, David lifts his eyes to heaven, and raises his hands in praise. "*I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts—men whose teeth are spears and arrows...My heart, O God, is steadfast, my heart is steadfast; I*

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality For Everyday Christians*, 148.

will sing and make music. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.”

When David finally became **king**, his personal commitment to worship became a national priority. Jerusalem was David’s new capital, and bringing the Ark signalled that Jerusalem would not only be the place from which he ruled, but the place where God would be worshipped. David’s kingdom would be, in effect, the kingdom of God, with God as the High King in Israel.

But David’s plan, for the Ark to be brought to Jerusalem, was interrupted almost immediately. Reading now from 2 Samuel 6:3, *“They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart 4 with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. 5 David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.*

6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. 7 The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God...9 David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, “How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?”

⁸ Cf Exodus 33:20; Judges 13:22; Isaiah 6:5.

⁹ Paul S. Evans, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1-2 Samuel*, 355.

Most modern readers are disturbed by this story, by the swift action of God to punish Uzzah. It strikes us as unnecessary and unfair; wasn’t Uzzah trying to help? But as modern readers, we have so emphasized the love of God that we fail to take God’s holiness seriously; those who encountered God in the Scriptures knew better.⁸

Why did Uzzah die? The Mosaic Law gives clear instructions on how the Ark was to be transported—by poles, carried by priestly hands; the ark itself was not to be touched. Uzzah’s family had kept watch over the Ark for 20 years; perhaps familiarity led them to believe God’s instructions didn’t apply to them? Instead of carrying the Ark they opted for an ox cart and when the Ark began to slide, Uzzah touched the Ark for the first—and last—time.

God is holy, which is to say, He is other—perfect, righteous, and pure. Our sin is an affront to God’s holiness, like red wine staining a perfectly white cloth. Uzzah touched the Ark and died immediately; God’s judgement does not usually fall so quickly on the rest of us because God is patient, merciful, and loving.⁹

Uzzah’s death is a warning: a holy God is not to be trifled with; His instructions are not to be ignored. In worship, we come to God on His terms, not our own.

Eugene Peterson speaks about worship in the following way: “Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. Worship is the time

and place that we assign for deliberate attentiveness to God—not because he’s confined to time and place but because our self-importance is so insidiously relentless that if we don’t deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to him at all other times and in other places.”¹⁰

Three months after Uzzah’s death, a second attempt was made to transport the Ark. This time, God’s instructions were followed and the procession was marked by a large number of participants, sacrifices, and passionate worship. One author notes that it was a perfect day for every person in Jerusalem save one—Michal. In vs. 16 we read, “*when [Michal] saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.*”

To be honest, I can’t help but feel a measure of compassion for Michal. People who have been hurt, say and do hurtful things.

Saul tried to use Michal to manipulate to David, and when David became a fugitive, Saul married her off to another man. No doubt Michal heard the news that while on the run, David had remarried but here’s the thing—she was forced into a second marriage, David chose freely. Was she hurt that David moved on from their marriage? Hurt that 10 years later she was forced to leave her second marriage to come back to David? Hurt that by this time David had six other wives?

When the Ark came to Jerusalem, all of Israel was celebrating but she didn’t join in; there is no room for worship in a heart plagued by bitterness, anger, and hurt.

Her specific complaint (vs. 20) was that David was dancing around, half-naked, in front of the servant girls but it’s likely an exaggeration. Verse 14 tells us that David was wearing a linen ephod—a priestly garment—that was more than “decent” in terms of skin exposure. Michal’s accusation had more to do with David acting in manner she felt was unbecoming of a king.

Michal had grown up in a palace; David had grown up in a small town. She grew up in the presence of foreign dignitaries; he grew up looking after sheep. David’s response is telling, vs. 21: “*It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour.*”

Verse 14 tells us that when the Ark entered Jerusalem, David danced before the Lord with all of his might. This statement captures my imagination. I am the world’s most subconscious dancer. I wouldn’t dance with all of my might even if I was alone in the dark with no one to see me. But preserving his own dignity didn’t cross David’s mind; he wasn’t dancing for other people, his only thought was for the Lord’s glory.

Oh to be self-forgetful! To be more concerned with the Lord’s glory than with our own! A well-known Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte, once wrote, “Those who are deaf always despise those who

¹⁰ Peterson, 153.

dance.”¹¹ My dear people, are we more likely to dance or to despise those who do?

majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!”

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to point out that my sermon has been offered in two parts. In the first, we saw David tempted, and falling prey to, the misuse of power; he walked in the shadowlands, securing his kingship without embracing God’s way. But in the second, we saw David the worshipper, dancing before the Lord with all of his might.

So which is it? Was David a good guy or a bad guy? Was he walking in darkness or in light? We tend to think in binary terms—*in or out, black or white, good or bad*—but life isn’t that simple; the human heart isn’t that simple. Our hearts are like a field in which weeds and wheat grow up together.

Though the details differ, we are a lot like David; our hearts contain weeds and wheat, light and dark—we experience God’s forgiveness and yet remain in need of transformation. God isn’t finished with David, and because of His patience and mercy, He is not finished with us either. May the grace of God continue to draw us back to the place of worship, that we might behold His glory, dance like no one’s watching, and experience His transforming power.

Worship

Benediction: Jude 24-25, *“To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory,*

¹¹ Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters*, 172.