

Desiring the God who desires sinners
2 Samuel 6:1-11

Whatever else the Bible teaches us, it teaches us that God wants to live with men and women, boys and girls. He desires to enter our lives, our homes, and our hearts and to dwell with us.

Why else did He make our world and us? Look at Him in the Garden of Eden, visiting with Adam and Eve, regularly walking and talking with them. He loved doing that.

And even when they sinned and ran away from Him, He sought them out, found them, and announced a way He was going to recover the situation and make them His friends again (Gen. 3:15).

Time and again throughout Genesis we find God seeking out sinners, drawing near to them, walking, talking, and living with them. He's saying repeatedly, "I want to share your life and I want you to share mine."

In Exodus, God made the clearest statement yet of this desire. He orders the construction of a Tent-palace in which He would dwell. And in a special holy section of the tent, at its center, would be a golden throne, a gold-covered box (4x2.5x2.5 ft), with a heavy golden lid, also known as the mercy seat, bracketed on either side by golden cherubim looking towards the mercy seat.

This golden throne was called the Ark of the Covenant, partly because it contained a written copy of the covenant arrangements in the box, but mainly because it was the central expression of God's covenanted commitment to dwell with men on the earth. It was the place God specially dwelt, often demonstrating that presence through a bright fiery cloud that hovered above the mercy seat, between the cherubim.

This is how God puts it in his building instructions: "You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim" (Ex. 25:21-22).

And that's the phrase that greets us right at the beginning of this chapter (2 Samuel 6:2). David and multitudes of people decided one day to go and bring back to Jerusalem the "ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelt between the cherubim." They desired the God who desired them.

The theme of this chapter and of this sermon is: "Desiring the God who desires sinners."

1. Desiring God (vv. 1-2)

a. A Lost Ark

Why was the ark not in Jerusalem? Well, about 65 years previously, Israel lost the Ark because of their sin. In 1 Samuel 4, when the backslidden Israelites had tried using the Ark as a kind of lucky charm in battle, the Lord gave the Israelites over to the Philistines, who also took the Ark. A modern-day equivalent might be Islamic terrorists capturing the Liberty Bell, or perhaps taking the British Queen's crown. But remember, Israel had lost far more than just a patriotic symbol; they had lost God's throne, God's dwelling place, the way God lived among them.

b. A Lost Desire

You would think that Israel would try to recover the ark at the earliest opportunity. However, they didn't seem to be that bothered. Though God desired to live with them, they really had no desire to live with God.

But God continued to express his desire to live with the Israelites by chastising all the heathen who came into any contact with the Ark. So much so that eventually the Philistines and others got rid of the ark, sending it back to Israel where it arrived in the house of Abinadab of Kirjath-jearim. And there it stayed for 20 plus years, about 7-8 miles NW of Jerusalem, and virtually no one enquired after it (1 Chron.13:3). Few if any desired God. What

an indictment of Israel! God desired to live with them, God ensured the Ark's return among them, but virtually no one wanted God to live with them nor they with God.

c. A Renewed Desire

This poor state of spiritual affairs clearly vexed David, as we can discover in Psalm 132. His first thought, therefore, after his enthronement was the enthronement of God above the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chron.13:1-4). He gathered 30,000 of the best men in Israel and marched to Kirjath-jearim to the house of Abinadab to bring back the Ark of God. God is at work stirring up in David and in others a desire for God

God's Story of Redemption

The Ark was a picture promise of what God was going to do on an even bigger scale. Old Testament believers looked at the Ark and hoped for something more, something even closer, something even more accessible, something even more personal, something even more beautiful.

Jesus is the fulfillment of that picture promise; the satisfaction of that Old Testament faith and hope; the ultimate, emphatic, and enthusiastic expression of God's desire to live with sinners. He was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

Your Story of Redemption

1. Respond to God's desire for you with desire for Him. Many Israelites came to faith through believing the message of the Ark. Priests and prophets and other believers would point fearful, guilty sinners to the Ark and say "Look, despite all that you are and all you have done, God desires to live with you. He sits on a mercy seat and promises to meet with you there." What an encouraging sermon! Who could not but respond to that with desire for God?!

But we have an even louder and clearer message. Jesus said He was greater than not just the Ark, but greater than the whole Temple (Matthew 12:6). He is our throne of grace and mercy to come to in our time of need (Hebrew 4:15-16). Respond to God's desire for you with desire for Him.

2. Re-ignite your desire for God by meditating on his desire for you. Perhaps you used to desire God. But now your heart has grown cold. You've neglected and ignored Christ for too long. You don't have much appetite or longing for God. How can you re-ignite that? The same way that David and the Israelites did after decades of neglect. Back to the Ark! Re-ignite your desire for God by reminding yourself of God's desire for you, Christ's desire for you, the Holy Spirit's desire for you.

2. Disobeying God (vv. 3-5)

The Ark's homecoming was a great moment in Israel's history. There were great numbers (30,000); they had a great aim (restoring God's throne among them); they had a great motive (the glory of God), and they had a great zeal and joy. But then there was a great spanner thrown in the works.

As the ark is being brought back to Jerusalem on a new cart, the oxen stumble, and the ark begins to fall. Thankfully, Uzzah, one of Abinadab's sons, is nearby and he reaches out his hand to steady the ark; he grabs it, and saves it from falling and being damaged. But just before everyone makes Uzzah a hero, and thanks God for his quick-thinking, God strikes him dead on the spot. We read, "Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God" (v. 6).

The procession stops, the instruments are silent, the choir is stunned, and the people are terrified. Why has it all gone so terribly wrong?

Despite the great numbers, the great aim, the great motive, the great spirit, the great zeal, and the great sincerity, there had been a great sin. It was not up to David or anyone else to decide how the ark of God was to be handled and moved. God had given very specific instructions about this. It was to be covered (Num. 4:5,6); it was not to be touched by human hand (Num. 4:15); it was to be carried on poles (Ex. 25:15) on the shoulders of the Kohathites (Num. 7:9). Dale Ralph Davies summarizes: “No touch, no look, no cart.” It was a holy throne and to be treated as such (rather than be treated like an ordinary piece of furniture on a cart). None of these things were in place. As David puts it later in life as he reflected on this day: “The LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order” (1 Chron. 15:13).

David was usually very careful about this kind of thing. For example, in the previous chapter, he enquired carefully of the Lord concerning the battle against the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:19, 23). But here, it seems that David’s enthusiasm got the better of him, and God reminds David that He is a holy God whose laws are not optional but rather to be followed to the letter (Heb. 8:5; Ex. 25:40).

God’s Story of Redemption

God is teaching David and Israel that although he desires to live with us, it must be on His terms. Good aims, good motives, a good spirit, etc., on David’s part are not good enough.

As Israelite believers reflected on this incident and hoped for a greater exhibition of God’s desire to live with sinners, they would be reminded that God remained God, no matter how close He would come to mankind.

God was encouraging them to desire Him, but not to disobey Him. No amount of passion and love for Him could substitute for obedience to Him. Or as Jesus put it, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Your Story of Redemption

It’s wonderful to desire God. May we all have more and more of it. But may we ever remember that it’s **God** we are desiring. It’s **God** that we are longing to live with. No amount of passion and sincerity can make up for disobedience, for not seeking Him in the proper order.

Jesus dwells in believers by the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit can be grieved and quenched by our sin.

3. Despising God (vv. 6-9)

David’s reaction to this divine intervention was to go off in a huff, to crawl into a corner in a bad mood. “And David became angry because of the Lord’s outbreak against Uzzah; and he called the name of the place Perez Uzzah to this day” (v. 8). Notice he doesn’t call it, “The place where we disobeyed God,” but rather “The place of outburst against Uzzah.” That’s right, David views this incident as an unjustified outburst of God’s anger upon poor Uzzah.

Then his anger against God develops into a terror of God. “David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, “How can the ark of the Lord come to me?” (v. 9). No longer rendering the respect of a son to a father, he now adopts the fear of a slave towards a tyrannical master. “God’s impossible to please. There’s no point in even trying to serve Him. I’m obviously just way too sinful for Him.”

Instead of blaming himself for his sin, he blames God for His harsh character. Instead of this chastisement driving him to God, it drives him from God.

Effectively, he despises the chastening of the Lord (Prov. 3:11; Heb. 12:5). He does not agree with it, he does not accept it, he thinks it's too much, and, for a time, he wants nothing to do with this God.

Your Story of Redemption

Does David's story sound like your story? You were trying to live your life for the Lord, trying your best to serve Him, not perfectly but better than most. Then God intervened in your life in a very painful way. And you can look back on a place or a time or a relationship or a decision and you call it "Perez-David" or "Perez-Julie" or whatever. It's the place or time where there was an unjustified outburst of God's anger in your life that caused you huge pain.

Then that pain mutated into anger against God and eventually into a really ugly fear of God. And you eventually started thinking, "Well there's no point in even trying to serve this God. How can I ever satisfy Him. He's impossible to please..."

My dear friend, you are despising the loving chastening of the Lord and you are fainting under his rebuke. How would you feel if your child reacted like this when you tried to correct him and change him for the better?

There's no good end to this. It's not doing you or anyone else any good. See this for what it is. A sinful, self-defeating, over-reaction to the disciplinary hand of your loving heavenly father.

4. Dwelling with God (vv. 10-11)

So David's in an angry and fear-filled mood. But what to do with the Ark? Well we're told that they took it to the side of the road to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite (v. 10). That's right, a Philistine from Gath, same city as Goliath!¹

Now the Philistines had a history with the ark, remember? The last time it was in Philistine hands, in 1 Samuel 5, it had resulted in a plague and many deaths in Ashdod, Gath, and then Ekron. Eventually, they had a national meeting and decided: "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven" (1 Sam 5:11-12). So, historically, Philistines plus Ark are not a good combination.

And today an Israelite has just been killed for touching the Ark.

And the Ark is on your doorstep. Now we don't know how it got there. Did it just happen to be the nearest house? Or did they look around for the nearest immigrant's house? Or was Obed-edom part of the procession, and offered to house the Ark. I happen to think the latter.

From what we know of Obed-edom, it seems he was a true believer who had come to live in Israel. It's the only reason a Philistine would choose to do that – for religious reasons. But still, he knows the history of the Ark with

¹ Everyone else called a Gittite in the Bible was from the Philistine city of Gath. Although there are other places with Gath in the name, they are obscure and would normally only be used with further explanation. Also his name meant "Servant of Edom: which would be an odd name for an Israelite.

the Philistines and he knows an Israelite has just been killed. Maybe he even saw it. And yet, he agrees to house the Ark of God, to receive it into His own home.

What amazingly courageous faith. Here was a man that understood what the Ark represented and demonstrated. Here's a man who knew the meaning of the Ark. Here's a man who knew the Ark's distant and recent history. And yet here's a man who has the faith and courage to say, "I'll take it."

Can you imagine the first minutes and hours of that experience? What a risk! What danger! But the time passes and he's still alive and his family. In fact the Lord begins to bless Obed-edom and all his household over the next few weeks and months (v. 11, 12) and the blessing is "because of the ark of God" (v. 12). We don't know all that this means, but surely it means, at least, spiritual blessings. God was dwelling with that little family in a very special way. God was teaching them to meditate on the message of the Ark. Maybe neighbors were coming in and Obed-edom was teaching them: "You know, God desires to live with us all. He's a Holy God, yes, but He sits on a seat of mercy. And you know, just as with all the pictures, prophecies and promises of the Old Testament, this is telling us about something God is going to do in an even more wonderful way. I don't know everything but I believe God will yet dwell on the earth in an even more incredible way. And yes, he'll even extend his offer of indwelling to Philistines and other Gentiles. I think my little house is a little prophecy of the coming Messiah's person and work."

News of the Lord's blessing spread and eventually reached David, rousing him out of his angry fear, and motivating him to complete what he started (v. 12). The blessing of this Gentile provoked him to holy jealousy. Next week we'll look at the last step in the Ark's return to Jerusalem.

But I just want to add one more thing about Obededom. He doesn't just disappear from the biblical account. His name and his sons appear in the list of Temple porters (1 Chron. 15:18). It would appear that he and his family took up a position of lowly service in the Temple when the Ark was located there. I look forward to meeting Obed-edom in heaven and asking him about that most blessed three months of his life.

God's Story of Redemption

God dwells with Philistines. God blesses Philistines who receive Him in faith. What a message of grace there is in this story! What a mini-picture of the great day when the offer of the Gospel would be sent out to all the nations. When Solomon built the Temple, he exclaimed, "Will God indeed dwell with men on the earth?" Yes, Solomon, and in a far greater way that he ever did in the Old Testament. And not just with men, but with the worst and least deserving of men. There's a place for Philistines in the heart of God and in the service of God. And we pray that the ingathering of such Gentiles will provoke the Israelites to jealousy (Rom. 11:14).

Your Story of Redemption

What a blessing awaits those who desire God and dwell with Him. What a blessing awaits our families when we step out in faith and courage to welcome God into our lives and homes. May you be enabled to share the Gospel with your family, pointing them to the mercy-seat where God dwells and forgives sin. May God open your heart to receive Him in all His fullness – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.