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## The Ark of the Testimony

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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### **The Ark of the Testimony and its Progress Toward Final Rest**

Reading: 1 Chronicles 13:1-14.

In a very brief space I want to seek to cover a considerable amount of ground in connection with the chapter which we have just read, which chapter is the centre of a very great deal of history which was typical and symbolical of things for later times, even for our times. To gather up all that material and data very briefly, we may remind ourselves that there were three things in the main in view and related. There was the ark of the covenant of the Lord; then there was David, and thirdly there were the Philistines. We shall seek to see their significance and what they represented.

### **What the Ark Represents**

Firstly, as to the ark. When we have made our most comprehensive and exhaustive study of the ark, its components, its character, its place, its function, there is one thing which seems to me to embrace all of its meaning, and that is, that it is in the Old Testament meant to represent the greatness and the glory of the Lord Jesus; and that greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus as in the eye of God; for it was upon that ark that the eye of Jehovah continually rested. We may say that the ark was the focal point of the Divine attention, and that all the thought of the Lord was centred in that central object of the life of Israel as His elect people. And so the ark, which is so often referred to as the Ark of the Testimony, as well as the ark of the Covenant of the Lord, stood as a type of the Lord Jesus in His greatness and glory as in the eye of God. When we speak about "the testimony of Jesus," that is what we mean. What He is before God, as to the Divine thought, as to God's estimate and judgment. The greatness and the glory of Christ from God's standpoint, that is the testimony of

Jesus. And it is that thought of God concerning Him, and of course His work, which is represented in that ark and the mercy seat over it. That thought of God concerning Him is very jealously guarded by God. We know that over the mercy seat, which was upon the top of the ark, the cherubim were represented as spreading their wings and making a complete overshadowing; and the cherubim are throughout the Scriptures the representation of the custodianship of that which is peculiarly precious to God.

We meet them first in the book of Genesis where man, having sinned, was expelled from the garden, and the cherubim were placed with flaming swords to guard the way of the approach to the tree of life. That tree of life represented Christ again as the Life, and there is a way of life in Christ, and man was not permitted to receive that Divine life in a fallen sinful state, judgment must first be wrought out, and there must be provision made for the atonement for his sins, but the cherubim were given to safeguard that which was peculiarly holy unto the Lord; that Divine life which is in Christ. Then onwards, throughout the whole Old Testament Scriptures, the cherubim come into view, and it is always as those jealous sentinels of what is of peculiar value to God, and if man in the flesh ever ventures or dares to touch that, he immediately meets the judgment of God. We shall see that in another connection as we go on. So that the cherubim over the ark and the mercy seat are there to preserve the holiness of this thing before God, and even Aaron with all the ceremonial preparation and provision dared not come into that place before that ark, or into any kind of relationship with it, unless he comes by reason of shed blood for the remission of sins, for the word is concerning him: "that he die not." "Uzza... died before God" because he dared to touch that which, in the eyes of God, was so peculiarly holy and precious. The ark then, in brief, is the testimony to what Jesus Christ is as in the thought and mind of God. Now you can study the ark anew in the light of that, and, of course, you will find a very great deal of material. That is the first thing here, it is the testimony of Jesus in its fullness according to God's thought.

### **What David Represents**

Secondly, David; and to gather up David's life and David's work into one brief statement, as we have done with the ark, we shall see that David was an instrument especially brought in and raised up by God in relation to that testimony. God raised up David for the purpose of bringing that testimony to its final resting place. The end of David's life was the building of the temple and the bringing of the ark of the testimony to its final resting place in the Holiest of that temple. The temple represents the end of journeyings, a settled place, a place of finality, and the ark was brought to rest in the temple and found — typically — its full end there, in a settled position. David was raised up especially as an instrument to bring the ark of the testimony to its full and final and settled resting-place in the purpose of God. That is where we take him up in this chapter which we have read; David's exercise concerning the ark. That became the predominating feature of his life; the outstanding thing is this real heart exercise and concern for the ark. The one greatest desire and ambition of his life was that God should have a settled place of rest, and he related God to that ark. And so it was in his heart to build a house for the Lord into which the ark might come and be at rest, and it was for that end that God raised up David, and that became the chief feature of his life. The one great consummating word of David's life is in that heart expression: "Now, therefore, arise, O Lord God, into thy resting place, thou, and the ark of thy strength" (Psalm 132:8). That is like the parting word of this man which marks the close of his life work.

### **What the Philistines Represent**

Then, thirdly — the Philistines. The Philistines, as you notice, are peculiarly related to both David and the ark. They seem to be continuously in touch with both throughout David's life, throughout this

part of history. And again, as the ark is a type, and as David and his ministry are a type, so the Philistines are an Old Testament type of spiritual things. What do the Philistines represent? We know them in Scripture as designated frequently "the uncircumcised Philistines." If we carry that word circumcision over into the New Testament and seek for the Holy Spirit's explanation of it, we find that in Colossians 2:11: "In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." Christ in His cross is the explanation of Old Testament circumcision, that is, the putting away of the body of the flesh representatively.

Now the Philistines, known as the uncircumcised Philistines, stand in direct opposition to the meaning of the cross in its deepest sense, that is, putting away of the whole body of the flesh. We may say the Philistines will not have that, they stand against that; the Philistines will not have complete and utter separation unto God. That is this principle which is embodied in their history. Take up their history where you will, and you will find that in some way or another they are in opposition to the principle of Calvary which is the putting away of the body of the flesh, or absolute separation unto God.

Begin if you will, with Samson in the book of Judges. You know that Samson was a Nazarite. He was a Nazarite voluntarily, not by compulsion. A Nazarite was one who had upon him voluntary vows which could not be imposed upon anybody, but which vows represented a desire to be more utterly for the Lord than the average person. And Samson was a Nazarite, and he represented that uttermost, voluntary consecration, separation, abandonment to the Lord. While in that position he was impervious, unconquerable, and predominant over the Philistines. They could neither bind him nor hurt him, he was their master. But when he disclosed through Delilah the secret of his strength, his supremacy, his ascendancy, the secret in his vow, and they captured his secret and destroyed that which represented his absolute separation unto God, then he was in their hands as weak as water, they carried him away and put his eyes out, and we have in Judges 16, Samson making sport for the Philistines; but the most tragic thing is that they were crediting their god Dagon with this triumph. The flesh always leads on to the glorifying of Satan and that is why he likes to keep it going, it does bring him into the the place of Christ. The Devil takes the Lord's place of glory when flesh is in evidence.

That is true to history and there is a good deal of history bound up with that fact. You will find that the Philistines represent that continually; and we must deal with that from another angle almost immediately. What we want to keep in view is this, God raising up an instrument to bring the testimony of Jesus to its full and final place of rest and settlement. That is what is in view. He has ever been seeking to do that, and He is seeking to do that today, perhaps more than ever at this time, the Lord has His heart set upon an instrument by which the testimony of the greatness and glory of Christ, His Son, shall be brought to its finality of settlement. There may be just one stage further to go and then the end. It may be that we are, so to speak, on the last lap of God's effort to get His testimony in fullness settled. May it be so. But undoubtedly He is out to get an instrument for that purpose, to carry the testimony forward toward His ultimate end where in fullness it is settled, no more journeying, and no more in the variation of its history, but now fixed and settled in God. That instrument is what is in our hearts, as it is in the Lord's heart as the object of His peculiar interest at this time.

### **The Snare of Philistine Features**

If God is seeking such an instrument, that instrument must, as David did, stand completely and utterly in opposition to all that is represented by the Philistines. That instrument must be constituted and governed by those laws and principles spiritually, and morally, which are the opposite of the Philistines' laws and principles, and the things with which such an instrument will have continually to contend will be Philistine elements, Philistine features. The Philistines were the continuous menace of David's life one way and another, and that has its own significance here that they do represent that which would make impossible the realisation of God's end in bringing the testimony of His Son to its fullness and finality. So that David is introduced to us over against the Philistines and that bold embodiment of Philistine power and principle, Goliath. You remember the story without me going over it again; but here the whole Philistine power is represented in their giant, their champion. He in his very presence, bearing, and utterances betrays the Philistine spirit, nature, and meaning. David hears and sees, and is stirred mightily within; we may say he is moved by God inwardly in relation to the very thing that God has brought him in for.

But just as David comes in and is going in the Lord to meet that thing at the outset and commence his great life work which is to have this wonderful issue, a Philistine trap seems to come up secretly from behind, and Saul proposes a suit of armour, and provides it, and puts it on him, and that is a Philistine idea. There is that man out there who has all that. Shall David meet him with his own equipment?

Shall David make the weapons of his warfare carnal and not spiritual? That was the trap, the snare, the peril for the moment, and David, with a right kind of spiritual perception recognised that this was not the Divine provision.

When a man stands in a right relationship to the Lord what need has he of fleshly equipment, of worldly provision to fight the Lord's battles? And so David cast it off and went out; the Lord was his equipment. You see he stood at the outset in direct and distinct contradiction to the whole Philistine principle, and that was the way of his victory. Now again and again he was in danger of being caught in that trap. On one occasion he seems to have fallen into it. In a time, of trial, a time of rejection, a time when Saul was hunting him like a partridge among the rocks, a time when it did seem that his life purpose was not developing and the Lord was not bringing him to the place of which He had spoken: one day David's heart failed him and he feared because of Saul and his army, and he fled to Achish, the king of Gath, the Philistine, and took refuge in Gath. And he heard the lords of the Philistines saying to Achish: "Is not this David? Did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?" David heard it and he was afraid, and he feigned himself to be mad and scrabbled on the doors of the gate like a madman. What a pitiable state for an instrument raised up in relation to the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. You see he had been caught in a Philistine snare and it was his undoing. When he got on to Philistine ground he went out, was broken. You see how necessary it is for a vessel in this testimony to keep clear, to keep out, to keep off that ground.

Saul failed himself, he would not go out against the Philistine, and at last the Philistines took the initiative against Saul and cut off his head and put his head in the house of Dagon and said: "Dagon has done this," and the ark was then captured by the Philistines. When the Philistines brought the ark into the house of Dagon, Dagon came down on his face before the ark, they put him up again, but he came down again, broken. God is watching His testimony even when that which ought to be the instrument for its safety and preservation has failed Him. Now in the land of the Philistines, the Philistines have touched that ark and judgment has met them. It always does, touch that which is sacred to God in His Son with hands of flesh, with uncrucified natural life, and you meet judgment. Come into that which stands to represent truly, before God, the greatness of His Son, come into that

with natural judgment, with natural interference, with an unregenerate heart, the end of that will be judgment, God will meet that and there will be an awful reckoning with God; and God does not preserve us from judgment when the testimony of His Son is touched with fleshly hands. All the errors, all the false teaching, all the great systems of false doctrine which have come in have related to the person of Christ. The result has been always the outworking of judgment in divisions and loss of power, and God has never protected from that. It is always that way.

At length the Philistines were able to get rid of the ark and they put it upon a new cart and attached two milch kine and sent it in the direction of Beth-shemesh; and it went, the oxen lowing as they went. It was a right direction even for Philistines. Sometimes fleshly men when they are under judgment get some sense of direction and the Lord helps in the right direction. The Lord helps as far as He can when things are in a right direction even if not altogether according to His mind.

Then later David stirred up all Israel to bring back the ark of the Lord and again he was caught in a Philistine trap, a Philistine idea, snare; he made a cart (that is a Philistine idea), a new cart, put the ark on it — the result was judgment. Men in the flesh when they take a right direction under a sense of judgment may be helped that far by the Lord, but when the Lord raises up a special instrument for His testimony, He does not have half measures; that instrument must be kept to the utter conformity to God's thought, and so the Lord does not help David's new cart as He did the Philistines'. They knew no better; David should have known better, and because he was raised up for something so utter, God did not let him off with half an idea. If the Lord is out to get something which is toward the finality and fullness of His testimony, He will not adopt half measures, He will not let off with false ideas, He will not excuse the flesh in any measure or degree. And so the Philistine idea of a mechanical contrivance to carry God's ark, instead of a living priesthood, a consecrated company, brought the judgment of God, and Uzza died before God. And David was angry. The tragedy was, that that movement was arrested, was delayed, was put into a backwater, and there was a period without any progress of that testimony.

When the Lord's own principles are not recognised, and when the Lord's way is not observed, when flesh comes into that which is so sacred to the Lord, the whole testimony is held up and a long period of delay, suspense, ensues. That beautiful movement was delayed, stopped dead. During that time David doubtless had much exercise of heart, and in the Word of God discovered God's principles for His testimony, that that testimony was to be carried, not on a cart, but on the shoulders of wholly consecrated people. That is not the Philistine principle, that is the Lord's principle, that stands against the Philistine idea. There were two things which constituted the wrong in this case. One was the cart, the other was man — as such — in charge of the testimony. It may be just as disastrous for men to take the custody of the testimony of Jesus as for it to be committed to an organisation. That testimony must be borne spiritually and not officially or personally — that is as connected with a man or men personally — and when it is borne spiritually the Lord must be trusted to deal with such as would injure it, and He will. Man need not hedge it about or seek to protect it. If he does, then evils follow.

There are those who seem to think that the testimony is given into their OFFICIAL custody; and they are by this idea constituted doctrinal watch-dogs suspiciously sniffing and yapping at every approaching footfall. What is needed is that the testimony should be held in the Holy Ghost, and the Lord will look after the rest. When at length David re-discovered that principle, then the ark was brought up and eventually lodged in the House of the Lord and came to its place of finality and rest.

You see how hurriedly we have covered a large stretch of history, a large amount of Old Testament truth which has its abiding meaning, and peculiarly, I feel, for our own time. The Lord having an

instrument in relation to the greatness and the glory of His Son, that that testimony of Jesus as in the thought of God, should be brought to a place of settled finality and security and rest. But such an instrument must be conformed to God's thought, must have no Philistine element about it; and God's thought is, utter, complete, entire sanctification, separation, the cutting off of the body of the flesh by the cross, and His delays are very often related to a necessity to have that state of things brought about more fully, and His judgments are very often abroad because of a violation of that.

May we see what He is saying to us. If it is true that He is calling us into fellowship with Himself to be a part of that instrument at an end time to bring this testimony, it may be to the end of the last stage of its journey through the ages, may we be according to His own thought, constituted by His own laws, living on His basis, and all the time by the cross repudiating and rejecting any Philistine element of the flesh, the will of the flesh, the mind of the flesh, the desire of the flesh, the heart of the flesh, any kind of flesh — for His Name's sake.