

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

Joshua #5

Sermon Summary #5

The Ark of the New Covenant

Joshua 3; 1 Samuel 4-5

No matter how badly conditions may deteriorate, no matter how cynical people may become, *there will always be praise*. We live in a world saturated with praise. Had you been with me last week on Sunday afternoon, watching the Masters golf tournament, you would have heard me praising the incredible accomplishment of Bubba Watson as he won his first green jacket. If you had been with me yesterday in Norman for the OU spring football game, you would have again heard me praising the efforts of certain players. And of course, one of the primary reasons we gather on Sunday, as we have today, is to praise God, to sing of his glory and grace and goodness to us in Jesus.

There is simply no escaping the fact that *people by nature praise what they enjoy and love and admire*. We live in a world of worship. Sadly, though, worship can be as *divisive* as it is *delightful*. There are strong feelings in the Christian world about worship: whether it should be long or short, free or formal, ancient or modern, somber or celebratory. We're going to talk about worship today, but not in the way that you might expect. Let me explain.

In our most recent study in the book of Joshua we looked at the experience of the Israelites as they crossed the Jordan River into the promised land. Among the many things that stood out in this narrative, one could hardly miss *the centrality of the ark of the covenant*. Joshua issued this command: "As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it" (Joshua 3:3).

Crossing the Jordan was no small endeavor. The prospects of walking into the waters of that river at flood stage must have been daunting. Knowing this, Joshua said to them, "Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you" the many nations that occupy the land: "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan" (Joshua 3:10-11). Did you make that connection? Here, says Joshua, is how you know God is present and will work powerfully on your behalf: the ark is there!

Sure enough, as we saw in Joshua 3:15, "as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water," the river parted and the children of Israel passed over on dry ground.

What was it about this object called the "ark of the covenant" that gave it such prominence in the story of Israel crossing over into the promised land? And what does this "ark" have to do with praise or with worship? And why are we spending this entire message today looking into this subject?

After all, it was *only a box*, and not a very big box at that: 47 inches long, 27 inches in width and height. Granted, it was overlaid with gold, but it was still *only a box*. Granted, there were two golden angelic figures, called cherubim, that overshadowed the ark on either side, but it was still *just a box*. Inside it there had been placed a golden jar with manna, Aaron's rod, and the tables of the 10 commandments. But it was still *just a box*! So why all the fuss and bother? And what does it have to do with how and why we worship God today?

In order to answer that question and demonstrate to you how relevant to your own experience this "box" actually is, I need to take you on something of a historical journey. I need to tell you *the history of the box*. And the place to begin is in **1 Samuel 4**.

The Story of the Box

We read in 1 Samuel 4:1 that when "Israel went out to battle against the Philistines" she suffered a crippling defeat, as more than 4,000 Jewish soldiers died on the field of battle. They decided that the solution to their problem was to bring the ark of the covenant into the camp, believing that its presence would guarantee victory. But because of their sin and idolatry, the Philistines defeated Israel once again. This time more than 30,000 Jewish soldiers died. Worst of all, *the Philistines captured the ark* and in the process *killed the two sons of the high priest, Eli*. All in all, not a good day for the people of Israel, to say the least!

When news reached the 98-year-old Eli that Israel had been defeated, that 30,000 soldiers had died, that the ark had been captured and that his sons had been killed, the shock was simply too much for him. We read in 1 Samuel 4:18 that as soon as the messenger told Eli about the ark, "Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died."

In the meantime, the Philistines took the ark to the city of Ashdod and placed it in the temple of the pagan deity *Dagon*. What happened next is not only shocking; it's downright funny. The only way to do justice to the story is to read it as it appears in **1 Samuel 5:1-5**.

"When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day."

Now it gets really ugly. God's anger against the people of Ashdod for putting the ark in the temple of Dagon took a bizarre turn. We read in **1 Samuel 5:6** that "the hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with *tumors*, both Ashdod and its territory."

The precise nature of these “tumors” is uncertain. Many argue that they were the result of an outbreak of *bubonic plague*. Others suggest they were *hemorrhoids*. Needless to say, in either case it was extremely unpleasant!

The men of Ashdod immediately reacted, saying, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god” (1 Sam. 5:7). So they all gathered and said, “***What are we going to do with this box?***” They decided to send it to Gath, another city of the Philistines.

It would be a little like if the ark had first been taken to Stillwater where all the people were struck with “tumors,” and they said, “Hey, let’s get that box out of here and send it down to Norman!”

Well, *guess what happened in Gath?* Yes, that’s right, we read in **1 Samuel 5:9** that “the hand of the Lord was against the city [of Gath], causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.”

So what did the people of Gath do? You guessed it; they sent the ark to the city of Ekron. *And what happened in Ekron?* You guessed it, according to **1 Samuel 5:12**, “the men who did not die were struck with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.”

The Philistines didn’t know what to do with this incredible box, so they *sought counsel from their religious leaders*. They were told, “Don’t simply send the ark away. You need to make an offering to the God of Israel.” O.K., said the Philistines. What kind of offering did you have in mind? The answer they got was nothing short of amazing. “You must make five golden images in the shape of your tumors, along with five golden mice!” Perhaps I should simply pause and let you think about that one for a minute.

In any case, that is precisely what they did. They made five golden images in the shape of their tumors and five golden mice, stupidly thinking that this would pay for their sins and the God of Israel would no longer judge them. They then returned the ark to the Israelites by taking it to the city of *Beth-shemesh*.

The men of Beth-shemesh in turn took the ark to the town of *Kiriath-jearim*, where it was placed in the house of Abinadab. ***And there it stayed for 20 years!***

By the way, it was at some time after this that Israel defeated the Philistines, which led Samuel to set up a stone as a reminder and memorial to the victory that God had given to his people. This stone was called “**Ebenezer**,” which literally means “stone” (*eben*) of “help” (*ezer*) [the odd word found in the hymn, “Come Thou Fount”] (1 Samuel 7:12).

As I said, *it wasn’t until 20 years later, once David had become king over Israel, that efforts were made to bring the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem*. They built a new cart on which to transport the ark and brought it back to Jerusalem. Along the way, a man by the name of *Uzzah* stretched out his hand to steady the ark, as it appeared as if it was about to fall off the cart onto the ground. We read in **1 Chronicles 13:10** that “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark, and he died there before God.”

This terrified David, as you can well imagine. In fact, David was so scared and so angry at God for killing Uzzah that *he refused to bring the ark to Jerusalem*, but took it instead to the house of Obed-edom, where it remained for three months.

Finally, after this somewhat tortured history, *David prepared to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem*. Here is the description of the *preparations* that were made and the *festive parade* that accompanied the ark into Jerusalem:

“David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy. . . . So David and the elders of Israel and the commanders of thousands went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the house of Obed-edom with rejoicing. And because God helped the Levites who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams. David was clothed with a robe of fine linen, as also were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and the singers and Chenaniah the leader of the music of the singers. And David wore a linen ephod. So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, to the sound of the horn, trumpets, and cymbals, and made loud music on harps and lyres” (1 Chronicles 15:16, 25-28).

Why? What is it about this box that could possibly justify all that we have just seen? The answer is found in several texts of Scripture that begin back in **Exodus 25:21-22** –

“And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel (Exodus 25:21-22).

If you wanted to meet with God, you had to come to the box! If you wanted to hear God speak, you had to come to the box! Other texts make this same point:

“So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is *enthroned* on the cherubim” (1 Samuel 4:4a).

Do you remember what happened when Eli found out that the ark had been captured by the Philistines? Well, after Eli’s death, his daughter-in-law, the wife of one of Eli’s sons who had also been killed, reacted strongly.

“Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law [Eli] and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.’ But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, ‘The glory has departed from Israel!’ because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, ‘The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured’” (1 Samuel 4:19-22).

By the way, what a horrible thing to do to your child! It's one thing to name your child after an event in biblical history or in memory of a great person. But to name him *Ichabod* is almost unforgiveable. Imagine every time this poor man had to introduce himself to others: "Hello, my name is 'the glory has gone'!"

What this narrative is telling us is that ***the ark of the covenant was the place where God's glory resided!*** The ark, the box, was ***the place of God's personal, powerful, manifest presence with his people! The majestic glory and power of God Almighty resided with the box!***

Thus, for Israel during the time of the old covenant, the power, strength, blessing, salvation, deliverance, and victory that God provided were all linked with the ark of the covenant. That is why when the ark finally made its way back to Jerusalem, the people responded with such exuberant joy and celebration and dancing and singing.

The ark of the old covenant was the place of God's presence. It is where he would come to meet with his people and speak to his people. Thus, when the tabernacle was constructed, and eventually the temple built by Solomon, *the ark of the old covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies, behind the veil.* Listen to what happened when the priests brought the ark and placed it in the Holy of Holies:

"Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. . . . Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. . . . And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD" (1 Kings 8:1, 6-7, 10-11).

If you are wondering what happened to the ark, I assure you that, contrary to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, it is not stored in some warehouse in Washington, D.C.! In all likelihood it was captured by the Babylonians in the sixth century b.c. when Nebuchadnezzar invaded the holy land and destroyed both the temple and the city. My best guess is that they melted down the gold and destroyed the ark and the rest of its contents.

The Ark of the New Covenant

So, where does God dwell today? Where does his glory reside today? Where is his power to be found? Where is the place of his presence? Or to put it more pointedly, if we've just heard the story of the ark of the **old** covenant, is there an ark of the **new** covenant? Yes! But it isn't a box. It isn't a hand-made container 47 inches by 27 inches by 27 inches. My aim today is to show you the ark of the new covenant:

It's right in front of you. It's to your left and to your right and directly behind you. It's closer than you can possibly imagine. You, my Christian friend, are the ark of the new covenant! *You individually*, as a believer in Jesus Christ, are the ark of the new covenant. *We corporately*, as the body of Christ, are the ark of the new covenant.

No, we are not overlaid with gold. No, there are no visible angelic cherubim hovering above our heads. No, if you touch me or anyone else or even yourself, you will not die, as did Uzzah. But you are assuredly the ark of the new covenant. Why do I say this?

“Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and *we will come to him and make our home with him*’” (John 14:23).

“*The glory that you have given me I have given to them*, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:22-23).

“Do you not know that *you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you*?” (1 Cor. 3:16).

“So then you [believing Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into *a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*” (Eph. 2:19-22).

What was in the ark of the old covenant? Three things: **(1)** A jar filled with manna (Exod. 16:33-34). This served as a reminder of God's provision in the wilderness. **(2)** Aaron's rod that budded (with “buds and blossoms and ripe almonds,” Num. 17:10), which was a sign that God had given to Moses and Aaron the authority to lead and to rule. And **(3)** the two tables of the law, the 10 commandments (1 Kings 8:9).

Now listen carefully. These items were but a foreshadowing of what was to come. They were but symbols or types of something far more spiritually substantive. Let me explain:

(1) The manna sent by God to sustain the Israelites physically was a type or symbol or foreshadowing of the true bread of life, the true heavenly manna that has come down to give us eternal life. And that true bread of life is Jesus. And it is Jesus who now lives in us! See John 6. In the old covenant, the manna resided in the box. In the new covenant, the true manna resides in us.

(2) Aaron's rod was a symbol of his authority as high priest, he who alone could enter the presence of God once a year. But now we are all priests of God and we live in his presence and his presence lives in us through the Holy Spirit!

(3) The law of God no longer comes to us written on stone tablets. It was Jeremiah who prophesied of the coming new covenant.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a **new** covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.** And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

There is still one more thing that proves my point. *In the old Mosaic covenant, on the Day of Atonement, the blood of the sacrifice would be sprinkled by the high priest on the mercy seat of the ark, between the two angelic cherubim.* But now listen to what the author of Hebrews says is true in the new covenant:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, *with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience* and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Our “hearts” are sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice of Jesus (see 1 Peter 1:2). ***All that the ark of the old covenant represented, all that was found within it, we now are! We are the place of God’s presence. We are where his glory resides. We are those in whose hearts he has placed his law. You don’t have to go to a temple to meet and speak with God. You are that very temple! God doesn’t dwell in buildings made with hands or in boxes covered in gold. God dwells in his people! We are the ark of the new covenant!***

There is, then, a sense in which every gathering of God’s people in corporate assembly to worship and pray and sing and study God’s Word is *the equivalent to the return of the ark to Jerusalem!* The Israelites celebrated and sang and praised and danced and sounded the trumpets and bowed low and cried aloud and prayed fervently because when the ark came home it meant they were in God’s presence.

We today do the same, not so much because we are in God’s presence, although that is true. Rather, it is because God’s presence is in us! Your heart is the ark of the new covenant. This body of believers called Bridgeway is the ark of the new covenant. This church is the residence of the divine glory!

This accounts for why *the Sunday gathering* of God’s people is so important! This is not just a meeting or a social gathering or a place where we connect. This is, you are, the embodiment and expression of the very presence of God in all his glory!

How should this affect our understanding of worship and how we actually do it? Before I answer that question, let’s never think that only our singing is worship. ***All we do is worship:*** our prayers, our reading of Scripture, your listening to the sermon, our fellowship and mutual encouragement, the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, these together with everything else we do in the name of Jesus is worship.

That being said, we must remember that in the OT David clearly insisted on *singing* as the primary expression of our praise. See 1 Chron. 16:9, 23; 6:31-32; Psalm 100:2; 101:1. No fewer than 85x does the OT call upon God’s people to “sing” their praise. See especially Psalms 96:1-2; 98:1; Isa. 42:10-11.

Here, then, in closing are five things that are affected by the realization that we are the ark of the new covenant (and the list could easily extend to fifty!):

(1) This truth explains why our time of singing and praise is so *special*. It is not a mere prelude to preaching, as some have suggested. Neither is it a showcase for musical talent. It is a celebration of God. Do you actually think that my urging you to be punctual on Sunday morning is because I'm an obsessive-compulsive control freak? Dear friend, to be habitually late and flippant and casual and unconcerned about the state of our hearts as we enter this auditorium each week reveals that there is something seriously wrong and deficient in our understanding not only of who God is but of who we are as the ark of his abiding presence.

I'm not a legalist. But listen to me closely. When we gather as the body of Christ in corporate assembly to lift our hearts and hands and voices to God, his glory is manifest and put on display, his power is at work, his presence is among us and in us, far and way above the degree to which that may have been true in the Old Covenant when that box was brought to Jerusalem. We are the ark of the new covenant, and if that isn't more important to you than sleeping in on Sunday or playing golf or drinking one more cup of coffee or eating a dough-nut or a having a conversation with someone that could easily wait until tomorrow, then nothing more I say is going to have any impact.

(2) This accounts for why we devote as much time to corporate worship as we do and why we are never at a rush to bring it to a close. Worship, in all its many forms and modes of expression, is not simply *one part* of the Christian life. It is *the point* of the Christian life. And not just for an hour on Sunday, but throughout the course of every minute of every day of your life.

(3) This accounts for why there is such a *freedom of expression*: whether by sitting, standing, the raising of hands, dancing, kneeling, shouting, singing, lying prostrate on the ground, etc. There is no set standard or mandated posture for worship at Bridgeway. We simply encourage whatever posture most effectively and sincerely facilitates the devotion of your mind, heart, soul, spirit, will, affections, and your body to God.

(4) Biblical worship is where we both sing *about* God (1 Chron. 16:8b, 24, 31) and *to* God (vv. 8a, 9a, 23, 28-29).

We see here again the difference between third person praise and second person praise. Yes, we must sing about God: we must declare that **he** is great; we must extol **him**. But we must also sing to God: **you** are great; I love **you**; **you** are awesome and beautiful and my hope is in **you**; **you** and **you** alone are the one I adore and in whom I have put my trust.

(5) Finally, on that day when the ark returned to Jerusalem, David commanded the people not only to *extol* God's glory and presence but to *experience and enjoy* it as well (1 Chron. 16:10-11). We must "boast" in God but we must also be "glad" in God! See also 1 Chron. 16:27, 30-33.