

Introduction

When Melissa and I named our children, like most, we put a good deal of thought into it. We chose the name Philip for our son because we liked it but also because one of the twelve disciples bore the name. However, what was particularly important to us was the fact that Philip was the name of one of the first deacons, and he was known for being an evangelist. We chose the name Ariail because of the fact that it was Melissa's maiden name. In the Bible names are extremely important. Adam was so-named because he was the first man. Eve bore her name because she was mother of all humans. Abram meant "exalted father." The Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "Father of many nations." Zechariah was told to name his son John which means "God is gracious." Joseph was told to name Mary's son, Jesus. It means, "the Lord is salvation." All these are lovely names with rich and hopeful meanings.

There is a name, however, from the Old Testament which sticks out in my mind because it reflects the opposite of hope. It rather reflects sorrow and despair. It is the name Ichabod. It was a very sad day in Israelite history. The Israelites had experienced a resounding defeat at the hands of the Philistines. Some 4,000 Israelite men lay dead. The Israelites were in disbelief. "How could the Lord allow such a defeat?" they wondered. Their answer was to go to the tabernacle and bring up the ark of the covenant. The sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, came up with the ark and all the Israelites began shouting. Victory was now certain they thought. But they were mistaken. The Philistines were emboldened and rose up against Israel so that the Israelites went running from the battlefield. Thirty thousand Israelites were killed. Among the dead were Hophni and Phinehas. And worst of all, the ark of the LORD was captured and taken by the Philistines. The news was brought to Eli at Shiloh. It was bad enough that Eli's sons were dead. But when Eli heard about the ark, the ninety-year-old fell backward off his bench and broke his neck. When the pregnant wife of Phinehas heard the news, she went into labor and bore a son. Just before her own death, she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." The ark of the testimony of the Lord has occasioned the loudest and most exuberant shouts by its presence. It has also occasioned the most solemn expressions of sorrow and despair. We have observed the great solemnity and fear when Uzzah died after reaching out to steady the ark. We have seen the great delight and dancing of David and the Israelites when it was at last brought into Jerusalem. We know that it brought curses upon the Philistines and blessing on the house of Obed-Edom. Why is a golden box capable of such highs and lows? Because it is far more than simply a box with a lid. This morning I want us to consider the significance of the ark of the Lord. We will start with the text in which the Lord instructed Moses to have it made.

[Read text and Pray]

In our text this morning, we read about . . .

I. The Construction of the Ark

Here are several features of note.

A. First we notice that it is a box. That is the basic meaning of the word "ark." The Hebrew word that is translated ark is also used for the box or coffin into which the body of Joseph was placed after he was embalmed (Genesis 50:26). The word was also used of a collection box into which donations were placed for the purpose of restoring the temple (2 Kings 12:9). Interestingly, it is a different Hebrew word which speaks of the ark constructed by Noah.

Perhaps the most fitting English word to use to describe the nature of the ark is the word "chest." There are cedar chests and hope chests, chests of drawers and treasure chests into which we place precious items for storage. The ark of the covenant was such a chest. Items that are precious to the Lord were placed within. The Lord gave Moses precise dimensions for the ark—two cubits and a half its length, a cubit and a half its breadth and a cubit and a half its height. In our current day measurements, it was $3\frac{3}{4}$ feet long, $2\frac{1}{4}$ feet wide, and $2\frac{1}{4}$ feet high. It was a rectangular chest that was as tall as it was wide. Why was it this size? Well, my guess is that it needed to be this big and no bigger in order to put in it what needed to be placed in it, plus to fit appropriately within the holiest place of the tabernacle.

But this was an extraordinary box because of its composition. It was to be made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. Generally containers are important for what they contain. We store our Christmas decorations in plastic chests, but we store our fine china in a china cabinet. The style of the cabinet reflects the importance and character of what it contains. That must be the case here. It is a golden box, a golden chest. It is of the highest value. It was pure gold—no dross, no impurities, just like God and his law.

B. Into this chest was to be placed the testimony that the Lord would give. It would be the two tablets upon which the Lord would write the terms of his covenant—his law. The law of the Lord was his own holy treasure. His commandments are lovely and beneficial, and he intends his commands to be kept, to be preserved not just in this box, but certainly the people would keep the law and preserve it through obedience. Of course, perfect obedience to God's law is impossible for sinners. No matter how hard we try, we disobey. And no matter how hard we try we are covenant breakers by our disobedience.

C. Now this chest was to be covered with a lid. The ESV calls the lid a mercy seat. This lid would cover and protect the contents of the chest. On either end of the lid, cherubim were stationed facing each other with their wings meeting over the lid. These outstretched wings formed the throne of God while the ark itself was designated as his footstool (1 Chronicles 28:2). On the lid of that ark, atonement for sin would be made annually by the priest of the Lord. He would sprinkle the blood of the sin-offering there and sins—the breaking of the law of God—would be covered. The wrath and judgment of the Lord would be appeased at the seat of mercy.

Now it should be noted that the ark of the covenant is the first item related to the tabernacle for which the Lord gave Moses explicit instructions. And that tells us something of the priority of the ark. Another indicator of the priority of the ark is the fact that it was to be placed in the inmost chamber of the tabernacle. The veil was to separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place and the ark was to be set within the veil. The ark was not to be seen. So even when it was going to be moved, it was to be wrapped in the veil of the Holy of Holies.

II. The Significance of the Ark.

We are given an indication of the significance of the ark in a straightforward statement made by the Lord. Down in verse 22. He says to Moses, "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 the Lord."

A. The significance of the ark is that it was the locale from which the Lord would speak. It is the locale from which he would make himself known. He would make his commands known. He would express his presence.

Let's look at this further. Turn over in your Bibles to Numbers 10:35-36.

35 And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you." 36 And when it rested, he said, "Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel."

While on their journey from Egypt, the ark was going out as much as three days' journey in advance of the Israelites. And when it would go out, Moses would call upon the Lord to arise and scatter his enemies. And when the ark would pause, Moses would call upon the Lord to return to his people Israel. In the movement of the ark, Moses would see the Lord going out and coming in. The very presence of the Lord was identified with the ark.

In days to come, the people of Israel as a whole would gather to the ark in order to gather to the Lord. The ark of the Lord was identified with the manifested presence of the Lord. Nowhere else on earth was atonement for the sins of God's people made than right there on the mercy seat. Right there the invisible immortal and infinite God met visible, mortal, and finite man for communion and for worship.

B. There is further significance to the ark. It is significant because it manifested the presence of God but also for what it declares about the character of God.

And the first thing it says about the Lord is that he is holy, holy, holy. The chest was not to be touched or seen. It was to be transported only on foot by the appointed priests who carried it only by means of the poles which were inserted through the rings on its sides. Human beings are not to trifle with God or to take him lightly. They must not call him into question or think themselves able to inform him. They are not to presume worthiness to appear before him. We have emphasized this point previously as we considered the tragic death of Uzzah. So I will not belabor the point here. But certainly the ark of the covenant signifies that God is awesome and glorious in holiness.

Second, the ark of God signifies that he is a revealing God. As he said to Moses, "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim ... I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment." The Lord is not silent. He speaks. His commands are evidence of the mercy that he does not leave all people in the dark. His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Praise God that we hold in our very hands on our very phones and ipads and computers the word of God. It is more fundamental to life than is the food we eat. God is a revealing God.

And he is able to reveal with absolute correctness and full authority. He has made it so in the scriptures, all of which says Paul is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Jesus himself put his stamp of approval on the scriptures of the Old Testament quoting them with absolute affirmation and testifying that not the smallest particle would fail to be accomplished. Looking forward, Jesus testified that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles in their teaching. In the scriptures, we have a sure and certain rock of revelation from the one true God a part of whose character is to reveal truth and to reveal himself in the truth.

Third, and closely related to the holiness and revelation of God, the ark of the covenant signifies his righteousness. We see it in the law of the Lord expressed on the two tablets being placed in the golden treasure box. The law is treasured by God. His moral code is forever the same and forever embedded within the character of God. He is righteous. He is just. He is morally pure. So

compliance with his commands is something God also treasures. If you love God, keep his commands. If you desire to please God, then obey him.

Fourth, the ark of God signifies that he is a merciful redeemer of those who break his law. If everyone could keep the law of God completely, there would be no need for cover. There would be no need for mercy. But God is merciful and that is precisely what sinners need. We need atonement for our sins. The ark of the covenant teaches us that God is amazingly merciful. He provides the very atonement for sins that his righteousness demands.

Fifth, the ark communicates to us that God is a sovereign ruler. According to 2 Samuel 6:2 he is above the cherubim and according to David in 1 Chronicles 28:2, the ark itself is the footstool of the Lord. Footstools belong to kings who sit on thrones. Such is the picture in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah sees the Lord in the temple. He is seated on a throne. The God who reveals himself through the ark displays himself to be in control. He possesses authority over the universe; he calls the nations to account. He is Lord over all. He is Lord over circumstances. He is Lord over his enemies. He is Lord over his own people. David would write Psalm 103 which in verse 19 says, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens and his kingdom rules over all." Psalm 115:3 declares that "our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."

Finally, the ark of God declares that the LORD is a covenant-keeping God. He makes promises and he keeps them. He makes covenants and he keeps them. It is the ark of the covenant, also called the ark of the testimony, after all. The problem for us is never that God does not keep his promises. Our problem is that we do not keep our promises and we do not keep his word. We break the conditions of the Lord's covenants and he keeps his word. The New Testament reiterates this point. Paul assures Timothy, even "if we are faithless he remains faithful."

With these aspects in mind, we can see why there was such a loud roar of rejoicing and such a display of dancing when David led in bringing the ark into Jerusalem. Here is the true God and he is not like the gods the nations have contrived in their heads. He is holy, righteous, revealing, redeeming, ruling, and he is faithful. All the gods of the nations are idols but the Lord created the heavens and the earth. He is worth serving. He is worth loving. He is worthy of worship and praise.

III. The Replacement of the Ark.

People will ask, "Where is the ark today?" A movie was made about this back in 1981. Remember Raiders of the Lost Ark? The premise of the movie is that the ark had been captured by the Egyptians, but that is doubtful. The final time the ark of the covenant is mentioned in the scriptures is when Josiah ordered that it be brought back into the temple that Solomon built (2 Chronicles 35:1-6). It would appear that when Nebuchadnezzar raided and destroyed the temple some 40 years later that the ark was included in the devastation he wrought. But that is conjecture.

Here is what we do know. Turn over in your Bibles to Jeremiah 3:16. It reads as follows:

And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again.

Jeremiah was in the midst of a hopeful promise when God's people would have good shepherds and when Jerusalem would be called the throne of the Lord. That would be a day in which the ark would be no more. The people would no longer be enamored with the ark. They would no longer flock to the place it resides. And in those coming good days, they will neither think about or miss the ark,

and it will not be made again. Why do you suppose this might be? Might it be because a day was coming when the ark would no longer be relevant? A day when something, or shall we say Someone, would render the ark of no ongoing importance? It would be overshadowed by a replacement far greater.

The ark which once was a center of worship and unity and rejoicing has indeed now been replaced. Someone better has come. His name is Jesus. And he is now our center of worship. He is now the One around whom God's people unite. He is the substance of which the ark was a mere shadow. The ark is now obsolete. It served its purpose. It revealed God to us and it showed us Christ Jesus. But it was a shadow. Jesus is the true ark. Let me count a few ways.

1. Jesus is God's treasure box. He is a living breathing treasure box in whose heart and in whose being the law of God is treasured. He always lives to do the will of God. He has always obeyed and with complete perfection, without one spot of imperfection. His is obedience with heart and soul and mind and strength. He delights in the law of God. Jesus is the perfect Son of God with whom the Father is well-pleased. He is purer than gold though he is now flesh and bone.

Jesus is worthy to be OUR treasure box as well. The one we love, whom we treasure, and in whom we delight. Because in pleasing the Father he is precisely the one whose righteousness we need.

2. Jesus is the seat of mercy. He is the covering sinners need. His own blood was brought to the mercy seat. His own blood atones for sins. By his stripes are healed those who will trust in him.

3. Jesus is our covenant. He is God's promise kept. All the promises made by God are fulfilled in Christ.

4. Jesus is our communion with God. It is through him that we draw near. Once there was a veil that separated the people from God, but with Christ's gift of himself, the veil is torn in two, and we may enter directly into God's presence through him. To commune with Christ is to commune with the Father.

5. Finally, Jesus is God's king. John writes in the Revelation, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." Of him the Apostle Paul writes the Ephesians, that the Father "seated him at his right hand far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1:21-23)

Who wants an ark when you can have Jesus. He is everything to which the ark points us.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with this. Not only is Jesus the end of the ark for those who trust in him. He is the end of the tabernacle and of the temple themselves. The scriptures reveal to us that the tabernacle was just a copy of the real heaven. God gave the tabernacle and then the temple to give us a glimpse into the actual heaven. The writer of Hebrews recounts the tent as the earthly place of holiness along with the temple furnishings. And then he says in chapter 9, "according to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper ... But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the

greater and more perfect tent (that is not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places ... by means of his own blood thus securing eternal redemption." You see the other things were copies of the heavenly things. But Christ entered not the copies but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf ... once for all to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:9, 11-12, 24, 26)

Each of us has trounced the law of God underfoot. We've lied, stolen, murdered, lusted, dishonored parents and authority; we have coveted. We have worshiped other gods and entertained false notions of God himself. We have uttered blasphemies. When God looks at us, he sees the law as broken as were the tablets of stone when Moses threw them down at the foot of Mt Sinai. The law violated is our dread. But the law in Christ Jesus is completely honored and fulfilled. If you are not in Christ, the broken law cries out for your eternal judgment. Flee to him by faith today and he will be for you God's law fulfilled and judgment no more. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The saints of Israel's olden days recognized the ark of the covenant of the Lord. They spoke of it. They loved it. They thought of it. They visited it. They made much of it. It was on their hearts. And rightly so. But it is not on ours, and rightly so because Christ is the true ark. So, let us recognize him. Let us speak of him before all. Let us love him and draw near to him. Let us think of him. Let us commune with him. Let us make much of him. Let him continually be upon our hearts!