

An Ox Cart Won't Work In Troubled Times

Last Sunday I shared some thoughts with you about how to get through the tough economic times. I told you then to Cast your cares upon the Lord, Commit your ways to the Lord and then Chill out and rest in him – to be still and know that he is God and he is going to take care of us according to his mercy, his grace and his good plans.

This morning I again want to share some thoughts with you from God's word concerning how to get through the tough times. We are approaching the presidential election this Tuesday. I trust you have made plans to vote in this election. These are critical times and there are critical issues we are dealing with and all of us need to participate in this election process and prayerfully cast a ballot for president.

As surely as we all need to vote and be involved in the political process, we must also understand that no candidate, no particular political party can fix the deep problems and issues we are facing in this nation. The problems go deeper than a financial crisis or military crisis or addressing terrorism. Our problems stem from a moral and spiritual crisis – to put it simply – we as a nation, as a people, are in rebellion against God and his word and the path we've chosen leads to destruction and judgment. We are a nation of violence and greed. We abort the unborn and cast aside the weak and elderly, we ignore the plight of the poor and the alien, we've divorced ourselves from the knowledge of God, we've even tried to cleanse the nation from even the awareness of or the acknowledgment of God. No wonder we are in the mess we're in.

It's interesting that people from every political party can quickly agree with that statement and then defend their position as to why their candidate and their party's position is actually the moral high-ground. We all have our opinions don't we? But God's word issues a call to us – a call for a particular response in a troubled time. I want to share a story from the Old Testament and then point out some things we need to remember in difficult times like these.

Turn with me to 1 Samuel 4. I'm not going to read the story, but allow me to tell the story and direct you to the various passages where you can read and study the passage for yourself.

The time was about 1050 b.c.. The Israelites were at war with the Philistines. 1

Samuel 4 records a stinging defeat by the Philistines at a place called Aphek. It is several miles northeast of modern day Tel Aviv. The Israelites began asking why they lost the battle and decided it had something to do with the absence of the ark of the covenant. They said **“Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.” 1 Samuel 4:3.**

In case you don’t know, the ark of the covenant was a special box or case that contained the tablets of stone that God had given to Moses with the Ten Commandments written on them. The cover of the ark consisted of what was called the mercy seat, this place where God’s presence was made manifest, where God’s mercy came between his people and the law that condemned them. God said it was from above this place, this position of mercy that he would speak with Moses. You can read about it in Exodus 25:10-22. The ark resided in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and was not to be touched because it was made holy by God’s manifest presence. It was to be moved only by the priests and they were to carry it with long poles so as not to touch it.

Over the years the ark came to symbolize the presence of God. It symbolized the covenant God had made between himself and Israel and it symbolized the blessing and favor and presence of God. It reminded Israel of God’s miraculous provision, protection and presence. It represented God, his power and his mercy.

Unfortunately, over time, it seems the symbol of God’s presence became more important to Israel than the real and actual presence of God. Israel compromised their walk with God. They began to live in rebellion against God’s law, the very law that was encased within the ark. They began to have idols in their homes, they built shrines on the high places in Israel and made sacrifices to other gods.

1 Samuel 2 tells us that sin had even come into the priesthood. Eli the Priest’s sons were sinning against the Lord and God was judging Israel for their idolatry and rebellion. God spoke to Eli and told him what was about to happen. It was time for housecleaning – time for change in Israel.

As I said, over time Israel had come to place more value on the ark, the symbol of God’s presence, than on their relationship with God. It would be the equivalent of us relying upon our church attendance or our church membership to save us and

commend us to God, even though we live in rebellion to God's word and willfully sin. That's what Israel was doing. They figured, "We don't obey God's word, but we do have the ark, the symbol of his presence that we respect. Surely everything will be all right." So when in Samuel 4 they find themselves losing a battle with the Philistines, they simply said, "Let's bring the ark up from Shiloh so that "it" may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies. It's what we've done in the past and God has saved us, why not try it again?"

Notice they said, "Let's bring 'it' – referring to the ark – so 'it' can save us". They were viewing the ark like it was a magic box, an idol, a charm. It wasn't the ark that could help them, it was the One who spoke to them from above the mercy seat of the Ark. A wooden chest covered with gold can't save you but if you cry out to a mighty God, He can.

I've watched people do the same thing with religious words and symbols. Israel thought by having the symbol of God's presence in their camp they could win the battle. Never mind that they worshiped other god's and were guilty of immorality and violence and all kinds of sin. I've seen people do the same thing counting on their association with the church. "I grew up in church. My momma goes to church and prays. I'm still on the membership roll so why is all this stuff happening to me? Why won't God help me?" All the time while they ignore God and refuse to live by His word. They go off into sin of all kinds and then wonder why their life is troubled and messed up. The bible says the way of the transgressor is hard, that's why.

I've seen people do the same thing with the word of God – without a relationship with God, without living a holy life of obedience to the lord, they take up this idea of "just speak the word and "it" will work for you." They are trying to make the word of God work for them like it is a magic incantation – "say the magic word." The problem is, God's word is tied to relationship. God's word isn't just idle words, it reveals who he is. God's word isn't just a book of promises. He gave us his word to reveal himself and his nature and character to us so we can be rightly related to him through His Son, Jesus Christ. You can quote the word and confess the word all day long, it sure won't hurt anything, but if you are refusing to repent of your sins and your rebellion – if you are refusing to submit your life to Christ and surrender to him and his will – if you are

refusing to obey God's word and walk with him in obedience – you can't enjoy his fellowship, his favor or his blessings. Jesus was talking about this in John 15:7 when he said if you abide in me and my words abide in you – then you can ask and it shall be done.

We can be guilty of this same kind of thing, honoring the symbol without knowing and reverencing the substance. We do it with the bible. We have a copy lying in the back window of our car, one on the coffee table in our home – we have the bible with us, we just don't read it or do what it says to do. We have it, we just don't live by it. We go to church on Sunday so we can feel secure with a symbol of God's presence in our lives. We don't pray, don't obey God, but we try to show up on Sunday morning. We need more than Christian symbols and rituals in our life – we need a vital, life giving relationship with the living God. We need more than church attendance – we need his presence in our lives! We need more than new translations of God's word, we need to live it and obey it.

Relying on the symbol, rather than the presence of God, Eli's two sons carry the ark into the battle and are quickly killed and the ark is captured by the Philistines. The word comes back to Eli and to the Israelites that the ark is gone and the glory of God has departed from Israel.

It's interesting to me that Moses told God in Exodus 33:15-16, "if your presence doesn't go with us, don't send us up from here. For what else, besides your presence, your glory, will distinguish us from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

Moses knew that Israel was called to be a separate – a set apart people – set apart from the world and set apart unto God. But now, the symbol of God's presence is gone from Israel. The thing that distinguished them from everyone else on the earth is gone from them.

Now look at this (1 Samuel 8:4-5). Do you see a connection? God's presence has departed and now the people say, "We want to be like all the other nations of the earth." They had lost their distinctiveness – that which set them apart. They stopped valuing the very thing that made them different from everyone else – God's presence among them. They lost their way without God's presence. They said "give us a king to rule over us so we can be like other nations." God warned them what would happen if

they had a king. In fact God told Samuel, **“Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.” 1 Samuel 8:7.** They insisted that they be given a king. **“We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” 1 Samuel 8:19-20.**

May I tell you, we are in trouble when the people of God start wanting to be like the world instead of like Jesus! We lose our way. We find ourselves compromising, living by the world's standards and values, making the world's priorities our priorities. Too often there is just as much greed and avarice and lust and pride and disregard for God's word among the church as there is in the world. We've become like the world, just like Israel desired to become like the godless nations around them. We've rejected God as our king and started looking for another king.

No wonder Israel was defeated and no wonder the church gets defeated as well. It's time to seek God and repent. It's time to stop trying to live like the world and start obeying God with all of our heart and soul and strength. It's time to seek for the presence of God in our life and not just hold on to symbols or rituals alone. It's time to make Jesus our king and submit to him and not to another. These are troubled times. We've got more problems than we can deal with and the last thing we need is empty symbols. We don't need to just be going through the motions of faith and service, we need to be surrendered to God. We need the presence of God at work in our life and in our nation. We need God's help. No one else can save us.

So what happened to the ark? The Philistines captured it but it brought them nothing but misery. Their idols fell in the presence of the ark and finally all the people were afflicted with a plague and so they figured out a plan to get rid of the ark. You can read about it in 1 Samuel 6. They had no idea what the ark was or how God said it was to be moved, so they tried to be as respectful of it as they could, thinking it was an idol of some kind. They built a new cart, hooked it to two cows that had calved but had never been yoked, put the ark on the cart and sent it on its way.

The ark returned to Israel, but problems arose after it arrived at Beth Shemesh. They rejoiced when they saw the ark returning but they were still only interested in the symbol, not the reality of God's presence. Nothing changed in their hearts and in their

relationship with God. As a consequence of their disobedience concerning the ark, 70 of them died. They no longer wanted the ark in their town, it was too dangerous. So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took it to Abinadab's house on the hill where it stayed for the next 20 years.

The men of Beth Shemesh treated the presence of God with irreverence. They treated it casually. The presence and glory of God is not something to be trivialized or played with. Our God is an awesome God. He is to be loved, honored, revered, embraced, worshipped, but he is not to be ignored or trifled with.

The bible tells us that for 20 years the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim. David became king and in 1 Chronicles 13:3 he tells the people, **“Let us bring the ark of our God back to us, for we did not inquire of it during the reign of Saul.” 1 Chronicles 13:3**

That's a great plan. We can commend David for wanting to bring the ark back to Jerusalem and to begin to once again call upon the Lord, however, there was a problem. David conferred with his officers and commanders about how to move the ark, but he didn't inquire of the Lord. He did the same thing for which he condemned Saul. He failed to inquire of the Lord. He failed to look at God's word, at God's instruction for how the ark was to be moved.

What did he do? The bible says, **“They moved the ark of God from Abinadab's house on a new cart, with Uzzah and Ahio guiding it.” 1 Chronicles 13:7.** He had learned this where? From the Philistines. That's how the Philistines had moved it and sent it back to Israel, but this wasn't how God had instructed his people to move the ark. We're in trouble when the world starts telling us how we should relate to God and honor him.

They must have thought God would be impressed with their brand new cart, their brand new method for transporting the ark. They had a new cart that had never been defiled by hauling anything unclean in it. So with their best band playing and their finest dancers dancing, all of Israel celebrated as they started back toward Jerusalem with the ark of God riding on an ox cart.

It was a fine tribute to their ingenuity, their best design, their finest idea, but God isn't impressed with our best ideas. Our wisdom is foolishness to God. What were they

celebrating? Their ingenuity? Their creativity? Surely God must be pleased they were bringing the ark back, but they still didn't understand it's about obedience to God and his word, not just hollow actions. David thought he could solve Israel's problems by bringing the ark back to Jerusalem, but he decided to do it his way, by his efforts and his ingenuity, his plan instead of obedience to God's plan and doing it God's way.

You know the story. As they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark because the oxen stumbled and God struck him down and he died. No one was to touch the ark. The bible says in 2 Samuel that God struck Uzzah down for his "irreverent act."

David stopped the procession and the bible tells us he was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah. He was angry at God, at the outcome of his efforts, but the truth was, if David wanted to be angry at anyone, he should have been angry at himself. It was his error, his mistake to ignore God's word and try to bring the ark back the Philistine way instead of God's way.

This has been a long story to get me to this point I want to make. There is only one way to fix the problems David and the Israelites faced and that was with the presence of God in their midst and on their side. And the way to see that happen was to obey God and do what he had commanded them to do.

We are facing all kinds of problems in our nation and there is only one way to fix the problems before us. John McCain and Sarah Palin can't fix it. Barack Obama and Joe Biden can't fix it. Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid can't fix it. Our brightest and our best efforts won't fix it. You see, it's a sin problem, a heart problem.

Trying to fix it ourselves is like David trying to move the ark back his way. It will lead to frustration, to death, to judgment. Trying to fix the problems in this nation without God in the equation will lead to frustration, to greater division, to judgement and death. We can try our best, putting our best solutions out there, but it will be like putting the ark on our best designed cart. Something or someone will stumble and destruction will come.

There is only one answer. It's what David did. In 1 Chronicles 15 David called the priests in and told them to consecrate themselves and get ready to bring the ark up to Jerusalem. He told them, **"It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up**

the first time that the Lord our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way.” 1 Chronicles 15:13.

We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way. We just tried to do it in our own ability, in our own way. What did God tell his people in 2 Chronicles 7? **“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14**

Do you want to know how to fix what’s wrong with America? It starts right here, as we humble ourselves and pray and repent and turn from our own selfishness and wickedness and seek his face and decide that we are going to obey and do it God’s way instead of going our own way.

I’m not as worried about who wins the election as I am about whether the church, God’s people, will really turn to the Lord with all of our hearts and pray. Politicians are famous for making promises they don’t intend to keep, but we have a promise made by the faithful God. If we will humble ourselves and pray, he will heal our land.

Do it the world’s way, do it our own way and we’ll only face more trouble. But if we will do it God’s way, we can expect God’s presence, God’s direction, God’s help, God’s favor.

We need his help. We need to turn away from our sin and turn to the Lord. It’s the only way to make it through troubled times. Do it God’s way with God’s help.

Perhaps you’ve been trying to do it all your way. You’ve been trying to fix some of the problems in your life, in your home and marriage, in your family, in your finances, you’ve been trying to fix it your way, in your own strength. You’ve been building bigger and better ox carts to fix the problem but you realize today, it’s time to stop building ox carts and start inquiring of the Lord. It’s time to turn it all over to him. It’s time to repent, to humble yourself and pray and seek the Lord’s direction. Seek his help. Surrender to God and agree to do it God’s way instead of your way. Blessing comes with obedience and full surrender.

An ox cart won’t work in troubled times. There is only one way to do it and that is to seek God and to do it his way. Surrender it all to Him!

Tonight we are going to gather for a time of prayer for our nation. We are going to ask God to help us because we realize the problems are bigger than what we can fix on our own. But this morning, if you've got problems bigger than what you can fix and you've been trying to do it on your own, I'm going to ask you to surrender it all to Jesus. Turn it over to him. Agree to do it his way.