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Conducted by  
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**“If God can forgive sinners, why did he not just forgive Uzza instead of killing him when he tried to steady the ark of the covenant from falling from the cart?”**

The sister who put this question finds it difficult to understand why an instinctive act of love and concern on the part of Uzza for the ark of the covenant should have provoked God to exercise such a summary act of fatal retribution. Surely, she reasons, God would understand what had motivated Uzza to touch and hold the ark, and could have forgiven him as He forgives sinners when they repent and are obedient to Him. Well, I suppose there is no gainsaying that; God could have acted in the way our sister suggests, but He didn't, and therefore we must conclude that He had a very good reason for acting as He did.

The incident is recorded in 1 Chron. 13, and we should turn our attention to that scripture for a moment. There we see that our questioner is in exalted company, for it is recorded that even David did not quite understand. In v11 we read, **“And David was displeased because the Lord had made a breach upon Uzza.”** David, we are told, was afraid of God that day; so much so, in fact, that he would not take the ark into the city, but left it in the house of one Obed-edom, a Gittite. It remained there for three months, and during that time, we are told, **“the Lord blessed the house of Obed-edom, and all that he had.”**

#### The Nature Of God

We must remember — and I cannot reiterate this too often — that we are not speaking of a god, but we are speaking about the God of the universe. Isaiah exhorts the people to forsake their wicked ways and to seek the pardon of God, for, concerning God, he says, **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** Isa. 55. This statement comes in the midst of an important Messianic prophecy.

The revelation of God has come through acts, words, prophecies, etc., and latterly His self-expression in the Incarnation. What we know of God **He has told us**, and it is wrong for us to dilute His Omnipotent Will by the paucity of our understanding; there are enough people doing that today without we Christians joining the silly chorus. His ways will **always** be greater than anything we can conceive of, but sadly some people don't like to acknowledge that fact, and so in their finite egoism they try to bring God **down to their level**. That in itself is an indisputable act of rebellion, but it is not new; throughout the ages people have responded in the same way toward God, and they have suffered punishment because of that; perhaps one day we shall learn the lesson that God acts, and has always acted, in the way that He does because **He is God**. We should not elevate our thoughts above His, but we should prostrate our minds to His will.

#### The Presence Of God

To come into the presence of God is an act of such astounding privilege that it can only be possible by divine fiat. Shortly before God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai He gave these instructions, **“Thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death. There shall not an**

hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live.” Ex. 19:12, 13. The important point to remember here is that God was to come down upon Mount Sinai, therefore, because of God’s presence upon the mount, even the **mount itself** was not to be touched by the people. God spelled out quite precisely what would happen if His instructions were disregarded; whether it was man or beast, that which touched should not live.

Turning now to the ark of the covenant, we find in Ex. 25: 10-22 that precise instructions were given by God regarding its construction. Over and upon the ark was to be the mercy seat made of pure gold, each end of the mercy seat should be made into cherubims, whose wings were to cover the mercy seat, and who were to face each other across the mercy seat. In the ark was to be placed the testimony that God would give Moses (the Tables of Stone), and from above the mercy seat and between the two cherubims, God would come to commune with Moses. Therefore, the presence of God would make the ark an extremely important feature in the life of the nation. Just how important is illustrated in 1 Sam. 4. The record here says that Israel went out to do battle with the Philistines; they were smitten that day and lost four thousand men. The Elders response was to bring the ark of the covenant from Shiloh. When the ark was brought into the camp the people shouted with a great shout. The Philistines heard the shout, and understood that the ark of the Lord was come into the Israelite camp. **Their** response was quite significant; they were afraid and said, **“God is come into the camp.”** It is also very significant, I believe, to understand the reaction of Eli when he heard the news that his two sons, Phineas and Hophni, had been killed and that the ark had been lost to the Philistines. It would seem from the record in 1 Sam. 4 that it was not the news of his sons’ demise that caused Eli to fall from his seat and break his neck, but rather significantly, the scripture says, **“And it came to pass, when he (the messenger) made mention of the ark of God, that he (Eli) fell from off the seat backward . . .”**

Now, perhaps, we might begin to understand why Uzza was killed. In Num. 4 are recorded various duties concerning the dismantling and transporting of the tabernacle when the camp moved forward. The duties of Aaron and his sons are explicit, and then in v15 it is recorded that when Aaron and his sons had finished covering the sanctuary and all the vessels of the sanctuary, that **“the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die.”** It is quite obvious that God determined who should touch and handle the holy things, especially the ark and the mercy seat where God communed with Moses. It is equally obvious that the ark had a central place in the life of the people, as pointed out previously; unfortunately they forgot the significance of God’s presence with them except when they were threatened and needed His help. What has changed in the 20th century?

We see, then, that God designated who should tread Sinai and who should handle His most holy things. God makes unalterable decrees; His counsel is immutable; Uzza acted in direct contradiction to God’s decree, therefore he had to die. That is what God had said. It was not a question of forgiveness.

#### **‘Let’s Get It Right’**

I mentioned earlier that when God smote Uzza, David was afraid and left the ark at the house of Obed-omen. 1 Chron. 15 records that David, probably on reflection, **“prepared a place for the ark of God, and pitched for it a tent”** (v1). He then went on, **“None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them hath the Lord chosen to carry the ark of God, and to minister unto him for ever”** (v2). He then assembled the children of Aaron, and the Levites, and apportioned duties concerning the transporting of the ark. He then addressed the priests and the chief Levites in these words, **“Ye are the chief of the fathers of the Levites: sanctify yourselves, both ye and your brethren, that ye may bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel unto the place that**

**I have prepared for it” (v12). Then crucially, in my opinion, he said, “For because ye did it not at the first, the Lord our God made breach upon us, for that we sought him not after the due order” (v13). It seems to me that what David is saying is this: “Well this time, let’s get it right and do it the way God wants it done, and then there will be no mishaps.” The clear message is that not only does God want things **done**, He wants them done **His way**. The nation of Israel, and people all down the ages to the present day, have at times forgotten that important directive; they have paid for their mistake, and will continue to pay until ‘they get it right.’**

The Church of Christ — perhaps in an arrogant way — has always prided itself in ‘getting it right’, but we must never forget that punitive and retributive measures are God’s province and His alone. We must always remember that ‘getting it right’ has many facets; we must preach and teach clearly and uncompromisingly, but that does not mean arrogantly and without love; preaching the truth in love remains an indispensable scriptural principle. Every man has the right to his own point of view; some are right, some are wrong. What we have to do is to exercise our minds to **learn the right**, and **then** to preach and teach it. It is not in our province to tell people that they are wrong; that only erects barriers. Let us seek the truth, with tears if necessary, but rest assured that when we have ‘got it right’, **the truth** will expose the error. The rest we must leave with God; and even though we were created in His image, it is well for us to remember that we are **the created** and not the creator.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 20 Costessy Way,  
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