

Chapter Three

Doing it God's Way

It had not been a good day! The armies of Israel had been full of confidence that morning as they marched out against the Philistines; full of faith that Jahweh was with them and they could not possibly lose this battle. All the omens had been good, for a new prophet had risen in the land, God was in His place and all was well on Earth. Even the location was propitious for though the enemy had *a strong fortress* (meaning of Heb..*Aphék*), the armies of Israel occupied *Ebenezer* (Heb.-*the rock our help*)¹.

However, something had gone horribly wrong. As the blood-red sun sank beyond the hills and both battle-weary armies retreated to their respective camps, carrying their wounded and dying, an uneasy murmur ran through the ranks of the Israelites. An estimated four thousand of their comrades lay in the gory field, never to return to their homes and loved ones. The officers conferred together and, as men are prone to do when things aren't going their way, they began to question why the Lord had failed them. Surely the prophet should have foreseen these calamities! Surely the priests of Jahweh could have guaranteed victory! Surely our faith in Jahweh being with us should have brought the desired result!

"I have a suggestion." said one of the elders. "Why don't we send some men back to Shiloh to ask the priests to bring the Lord here to the battle fields? Maybe He is unaware of what we are going through as He resides there in the tabernacle."

It had been three hundred years since the tabernacle had been set up in Shiloh, a city of Ephraim, and many generations of priests had ministered there. Worship had degenerated until all manner of perversions were allowed within its courts. However, the people were aware that once a year the High Priest would enter into its holiest quarters so he could meet the Lord on behalf of all the people. They had lost all understanding of the significance or manner of this meeting and the other priests had no fear about entering that forbidden place. The common people, who had no right to enter the tabernacle itself, had developed all sorts of superstitious beliefs, encouraged by tales readily told by the priests. "There is a golden box called the Ark, standing in the holiest place, and the Lord sits upon this box between two golden angels." Just as the Samaritan woman who later met Jesus at the well, God was only to be found in a particular place, currently sitting between the cherubin in the shady confines of a tabernacle tent in Shiloh.

"God got us into this mess. Let's bring Him here so He can get us out! Send for the ark!" On the battle field of Ebenezer, the suggestion was eagerly received.

¹ 1 Samuel 4

The messengers found it easy to persuade Hophni and Phineas, sons of the old High Priest Eli, that they should bring the ark to the battle field. They even came themselves with the ark so that none may have any doubt as to their authority. As the ark was seen being borne on to the battle field, all the Israelites gave such a great shout that it brought fear to the hearts of their enemy. "Woe unto us," they cried, "for the mighty gods that slew the Egyptians and delivered the Israelites from bondage, have come among us!" They had more respect and fear of God than His own people, the Jews did!

As the Israelites resumed the battle with their presumption unweakened, the Philistines fought as men destined to die - and Israel was "smitten with a great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen." The ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli were slain.

When Phineas' wife heard of her husband's death, she delivered the baby she was carrying, dying in the process, but not before naming the child **Ichabod**, meaning *The Glory has departed*.

It would be a long, hard one hundred years before the ark - representing God's presence and His covenant promises - would be restored to its rightful place in Israel.

It had stayed among the Philistines only a few months before they wanted to return it, as there had been many deaths among them wherever the ark had been taken. As the deaths mounted, it became more than a sneaking suspicion that there was a connection between these deaths and the presence of the ark, so a plan was formed to both check out the suspicion and to get rid of the problem. Two cows were obtained which had just borne calves. They were to be harnessed together to pull a new wooden cart, something with which they were totally unfamiliar. The suspect box was placed on the new cart together with a 'peace' offering of golden ornaments, and the cows were pointed in the direction of the Israeli border. Their normal motherly instinct would be to seek out their calves, indicating that the Israeli god wasn't much interested in having his box back, and that the deaths in Philistia were a coincidence rather than a judgement. However, should the cows ignore their offspring and head straight toward Israel, it would be evidence sufficient to show that the Philistines were being wise in returning the box - and God - to His rightful place!

They were wise! The cows went straight to the Israeli border, neither turning to the left or the right, until they crossed into the fields of Bethshemesh. The people there rejoiced at seeing the ark, lighting a fire with the wood from the cart and sacrificing the two cows upon it as an offering of thanksgiving to Jahweh. The ark was taken by the local Levite priests and set upon a large stone where it became a spectacle for all the people, until there were some, more inquisitive than the rest, who lifted its lid to look inside. I'm sure they could have justified their actions. "We were only checking to see if Aaron's rod, the stones of the commandments and the pot of manna were still there!" they might have claimed. However, their voices are mute for immediately, they and over fifty thousand other men of that district died as judgement from God. He had been silent for many years while His tabernacle was being polluted by a corrupt priesthood; He had showed

Himself to be powerful when the Philistines paraded Him throughout their country; He showed Himself to be full of grace and mercy when the Philistines manhandled the ark onto a cart drawn by unclean cows; but He showed Himself awful in holiness when His own covenant people trespassed into irreverence.

The remaining people wept. “Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God - and to whom shall He go from us?” The men of Kirjath-jearim came and collected the ark, bearing it to the house of one, Abinadab, whose son they sanctified as priest to care for the ark. For many years it remained there, all of Israel mourning for its situation but fearful to do anything about it.

During that time the people demanded of the prophet Samuel, that he dedicate for them a king, so that they could be like the surrounding nations. “If God is not present among us, and the priesthood is ended, even though we have His prophet we need a king to govern us” they said. With God’s permission Samuel anoints Saul the first king of Israel - a man who stood head and shoulders above other men. Great in the eyes of men but one who proved to be weak before God. Truly, during his reign the people were ruled by human thoughts and not by divine wisdom. There was little anointing for God was not (active) among His people - and the ark remained at Kirjath-jearim.

Saul reigned for forty years before being replaced by God’s choice, David the giant slayer, David the psalmist. The ark has been hidden away for over eighty years when he ascends the throne and it is to be another fourteen years before he will attempt its restoration to Jerusalem, the new Shiloh. For almost one hundred years the faithful of Israel had mourned its absence.

“Come” said the king to a large gathering of his chosen men. “Let us go up to Kirjath-jearim and bring the ark back to its rightful place in Jerusalem.” “It has been away far too long and we must bring it back so that we may worship in the Lord’s presence again.” Who could argue with those sentiments? Everyone knew that the Lord would be pleased and would honour them in this venture. “How shall we carry it?” asked one of the more practical followers. Someone remembered the story of how the Philistines had sent the ark back to Israel on a cart drawn behind two cows, and suggested that that evidently was an easy method of conveying the ark. However, they are more wise than the Philistines so they have two trained oxen, rather than two milk cows. Soon they brought the ark out of the house of Abinadab and set it upon a new cart, a much improved version of the old Philistine wagon, attached the two oxen and started the journey back to Jerusalem. Oh how they celebrated! David and his friends danced and played upon their instruments, waved their hands in the air and felt ‘real good!’ The only one who wasn’t pleased was the Lord Himself! They had not gone far when the trained oxen slipped, the ark almost fell and an innocent priest reached out his hand to steady it - instantly dying at the hand of a holy God!²

² 1 Chronicles 13

Instead of being brought back to Jerusalem with joy, the ark was taken aside into the house of Obededom, a Gittite, where it was to remain for another three months while David sat at home in a sea of moodiness. At first he was very angry with the Lord and His apparent injustice. Then, as he began to meditate and seek the Lord he was led to read the scriptures of Moses regarding the ark, its making, its use and how it was to be carried from place to place. *“These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation”*.³

David then prepared a place where the ark should rest in Jerusalem, and prepared a people to carry the ark from the home of Obededom, as the Scriptures had said. The Levites of the family of Kohath were set aside and sanctified for the task of bearing the ark upon their shoulders, carrying it all the way to its designated resting place. This was not a task for oxen and cart - as the worldly Philistines had used - but a ministry determined by God Himself. Finally the people could rejoice, for the ark - symbol of the Lord's presence, His anointing - was once more among His people.

What can we learn from this story? Surely one thing stands out clearly, and is just as necessary today as it was in the days of Samuel, Saul and David. **When you want to do God's work, you had better do it His way!** He had given clear instructions to His people and they disobeyed at their own peril. The Philistines might experience His mercy as they acted irreverently with the ark, but God's people had no excuse so they could only experience His judgement.

So today, we are too quick to follow the ideas and methods of the world because they seem to work, while God withdraws His anointing, waiting for us to understand that He has already ordained His ways of working. He has appointed men and women to different roles in the church and has given them His charismata (from the Greek, meaning *Grace gifts* - holy abilities freely given).

There are many good leadership techniques applied by the world in its business dealings. However, having the secular ability to lead or rule does not mean that one has the charismatic gift of leadership⁴ necessary for ruling in the church. One can be trained to be a good (secular) teacher but this does not mean he is “apt to teach” - a requirement for eldership⁵. One can be highly qualified as a psychologist but that does not give him or her the ability to give Biblical counselling. I believe there are many in our churches that need psychiatric counselling, but such counselling can never bring healing to spiritual sicknesses.⁶

We are very good at planning all sorts of evangelical outreaches with our “4 Spiritual Laws”, “The Romans Road”, “Friendship Evangelism”, etc. while neglecting the method that Jesus laid out for us the night before He died.

³ Numbers 4:15

⁴ Romans 12:8

⁵ 1 Timothy 3:2

⁶ See my book *The Key in My Hand*

“Father, I pray for all those in (your church, your city) who will come to believe on me. I pray that they all may be one, as thou, Father art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me that they may be made perfect in one; that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast loved me.”⁷

Until we are serious about our Unity in the Body of Christ (not our uniformity nor our Lowest Common Factor serendipity doctrine), all our evangelism programs will be of human design with little reason why the Lord should pour out His anointing.

The Lord has set in His church the burdens, giftings and ministries necessary to build such a church that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against it. We change His purposes, imposing our own plans and programs at our peril and at great cost to this lost world.

⁷ John 17:21-23