

# DANCE OF THE GOD-STRUCK

by Mark Buchanan

*There's something about worship that can drive even a king to strip down and leap up!*



# BE Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION

## *David Dances*

Death looms on one side, barrenness on the other, and between them, in that steep narrow place, David leaps, twirls, shimmies wild-limbed on the air.

He is close to 40. Maybe his wound-haunted flesh—trained for war, hardened through exile-dwelling, borderland skirmishes, and Saul-dodging—has in these later years softened. He doesn't have to get his bread by begging or brigandage anymore. He doesn't have to bully the neighbours, hide in caves, fake insanity. He's lord of the land. He's king. Years of wiliness and austerity and hardship have given way to a long season of prosperity, luxury, ease.

And maybe his body feels it. Maybe on cold mornings his limbs have a stiffness like wood splints on the joints, and his tough supple body gathers a heaviness, a fleshy

sediment: the wound of idleness and indulgence.

But today he dances, near naked, with all his might, undignified.

He did this once before, months ago, and a man died. It was Uzzah, a priest. As David danced, there was an accident: an ox stumbled, a cart lurched, the ark of the covenant riding on it tottered, slid, threatened to tumble to the ground.

Uzzah's instincts were razor-sharp and lightning-quick. He was ready for just this kind of thing, vigilant, hands hovering in anticipation. When the moment of crisis came, Uzzah was there, prepared, saving the day. He touched the ark, and God smote him dead.

On this day, David's dance will end in a domestic battle, a bitter fight with his wife. Michal, Saul's daughter and David's first wife, is unimpressed with David dancing. She is, in fact, disgusted. Grown men shouldn't carry on like that. Certainly the king shouldn't. Kings should conduct

themselves with proper decorum, in a manner befitting their stature. It is irreverent, grotesque even, these wild flailing calisthenics. It is what common people might do.

God struck Michal barren.

Between death and barrenness, David dances. His motions are both natural and desperate: a bird flying, a man drowning, the thing he was born for, the thing he'll never get used to. Choreographed by yearning and wonder, this is the dance of the God-struck, the God-smitten. This is the dance of the one who dances in fire, at cliff edges, on high wires, in the midst of mortal peril, between death and barrenness.

Uzzah watches with tense worry, and dies. Michal watches with brittle scorn, and dies childless.

David dances, alive, fully alive.

This is an odd story (2 Samuel 6:5–7, 16, 20–23), and startling. It is a story with a

*"A close walk with the Spirit of God should be like ballroom dancing, the female's movements reflecting the leading of the male in perfect union, their wills one—filling the room with grace and beauty. Oh yes, dancing can be serious stuff!"*

**"HIS WIFE HATH MADE HERSELF READY" REV. 19:7**

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wrenching undertow of menace and violence. It is a story too seldom remembered in context. Most of us retain only a thin polished fragment of it: the image of the happy, leaping king. Lately the story has been used to justify physical expressiveness in worship—from hand-raising and hand-clapping to liturgical dance to mosh pits.

But it is a story with a darkly textured backdrop: death looming over there, barrenness skulking over here. It begins when David wants to make the ark of the covenant a symbol of his royal authority. David, after seven years of court intrigue and brutal civil war against the house of Saul and the northern kingdom, has finally been crowned king of both north and south, Israel and Judah. Now David has breathing room. It's time to turn his abundant energy toward other things: civic development, cultural initiative, scientific inquiry, political fence-mending, worship. The ark of the covenant baptizes David's political daring and novelty with ancient authority. It gives David the imprimatur of Mosaic legitimacy. Such might well be David's political motive in bringing the ark "home." But David, who is not above shrewd political calculation, almost always transcends it. So the ark coming to Jerusalem is not primarily a political gesture. It is primarily worship. By this, David makes a powerful statement: God is king in this kingdom, lord of this land. The king acknowledges the King beyond him, above him, to whom he owes all fealty. For whom he dances.

So the ark is taken out of cold storage. It's been moldering, a dangerous neglected relic, for three or four decades. In all the tumult of the early kingship, it was easily forgotten. Maybe for some it's become an embarrassment, a relic of old folkways, a hoary religious symbol, a primitive war talisman from before the days of kings and standing armies and modern weaponry.

But David hasn't forgotten. For him the ark is a living symbol of a deep reality: Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders build in vain; unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen watch in vain. So David brings the ark to Jerusalem. And as it comes, David dances. His dance is a kinetic outburst of sheer joy. It is a pantomime of trust and surrender. Offer your body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, for this is your spiritual act of worship. David does. David dances. But things go tragically awry. A man dies, struck down by a fiercely angered God.

Why? Uzzah simply tried to keep the ark from tumbling to the ground. He tried to keep the flag from touching the dirt. This is what any of us would do under similar constraints: the right thing to do, the noble

thing. But God killed him for it. Why?

Here's my guess. Uzzah is a strange hybrid, an iconoclastic bureaucrat. He's a rule-flouting stickler, a nitpicking maverick. He makes radical breaks with convention, then rigidly adheres to his own conventions. Uzzah's willingness to carry the ark on an ox cart was in clear breach of divine command. God had given detailed instruction about how the ark was to be transported: slung on poles and hefted by priests. Freighting the ark on an ox cart was a Philistine notion. It must have seemed to Uzzah—maybe it was even his idea to bring it over from the Philistines—more convenient, efficient, elegant. The latest fashion in worship accoutrements. Why didn't God think of it? Well, we'll amend that. It was always the hankering of the Israelites to be like the other nations. It's always been the hankering of the church, too. If everybody's doing it out there, it must be an improvement on what we do in here.

Rodney Clapp has written a book on the distinctiveness of the church, *A Peculiar People*. Clapp argues that the strength of the church exists primarily in our peculiarity: that we're neither for culture nor against it. We're simply different, a new thing altogether, inexplicable under any of the standard categories. We're the odd man out. We're—yes—peculiar.

But our peculiarity has also been our burden and embarrassment, the backwoods twang in our speech we want to lose in the city, the britches we barter for a zoot suit. So we're prone to Philistine innovations and refinements. Whatever keeps us current, that's the thing.

The Bible doesn't say this, but I think Uzzah was a novelty hound. That in and of itself doesn't appear to be the main problem. This is: He was also a tradition monger. He had, a Pharisaical disposition: to contrive or embrace the innovation, and then insist on it, kill or die for it. So Uzzah gets an ox cart, and fusses so painstakingly over every little detail. He makes such a binding tradition out of his newfangled innovation that he forgets the one thing needed: worship. This was supposed to be about worship.

Here is where Uzzah gets me. I'm a pastor. I am "responsible" for the church's worship. I am paid to make sure it all glows and flows and steps on no one's toes. And, frankly, it's hard to preside and participate at the same time. It's hard to lose myself in the presence of God when I'm the one appointed not to lose my head. Somebody's got to make sure the songs move in the right thematic flow, in the perfect emotional key of elation or exhortation or solemnity. Is that guitar's B string a half-note flat? Why are they doing another song when I told them the offering had to be

taken before half-past? What if the ox stumbles, and the ark falls off? Who will reach out a hand to steady it? Who will protect God? Somebody's got to pay attention here. Not everyone can dance.

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## *Dead...*

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Uzzah, at great personal cost, teaches us a valuable lesson about God. God is not safe. God is not a household deity, guarded in our keeping. Our role on this Earth, be it prophet, king, priest, or bank teller, is not to keep the Almighty from mishap or embarrassment. He takes care of himself.

It is, the writer of Hebrews says, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. He's dangerous, not safe at all. And yet there is something far more fearful and dangerous than to fall into his hands: not to fall into his hands. But perhaps the most fearful and dangerous thing of all is the sin of Uzzah: to think that our job, should God stumble, is to ensure he falls into our hands.

The safest thing to do with a God like this is not to play it safe with him. It is never to get so caught up in keeping the traditions or hastening the innovations that we forget to throw ourselves headlong into his brusque and tender embrace, not to get so busy with protecting God that we fail to take refuge in him. And that we forget to dance. Uzzah was struck dead by God. But in ways that matter most, he had been dead already.

Three months later, David tries again. So the procession starts again—this time, the Philistine innovation's lost, and the divine prescription's restored—and David dances again. This time, all goes well.

Sort of. This time, a messy argument erupts in David's household afterward. Michal has decided to stay home today. Maybe she had a headache or a backache. Or maybe—and the text hints at this—she is making a statement. For Michal commits the principal act of those who disapprove: she merely watches, distant, judging. "Michal daughter of Saul watched from the window. And when she saw the king leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart" (2 Sam. 6:16).

David, not knowing this yet, comes home exhilarated. He is exultant, radiant, extravagant in generosity. He returns home "to bless his household." But he barely gets in the door before Michal, cold with contempt and hot with scorn, stands him down and tears him up: "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would" (2 Sam. 6:20).

Michal seems to believe that the chief end of humanity is to uphold its own

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reputation and guard it forever. Religion is fine, in its place. It keeps the servant girls from stealing the silverware. As long as it does not lead to antics and gibberish and hollering and other unrestrained emotional displays common among the lower class, it is to be tolerated, even welcomed. But worship? Worship is a dicey thing, because modesty and moderation are Michal's watchwords and worship always threatens them, always wants to push beyond them.

There's something about worship that can drive even a king to strip down and leap up. Michal is one of those people who think you should never jump off the deep end. If you're going to jump, jump off the shallow end. Better to go through life maimed and paralysed than embarrass yourself by thrashing about in some desperate panicky state, needing rescue. But better still, just don't jump. Don't even wade. Sit way back from the water, and avoid those noisy, bratty children who kick and flail and splash you. Better yet, stay home, and watch from the window.

Here is where Michal gets me. Frankly, it is often hard to sort out exactly how a pastor ought to distinguish himself in this assembly. After all, if I do lose myself in worship, if I get overemotional and overly physical in worship—well, what kind of example is that, anyhow? People will feel uncomfortable. They'll be embarrassed. They'll think that I'm not being loyal to my Baptist heritage. They'll question my ability to lead. And somebody's got to make sure everything is done in an orderly fashion around here. Somebody's got to set the tone. Somebody has to safeguard the propriety of worship.

What if the other pastors start falling on

their faces or dancing in the aisles? What if people start jumping off the deep end? Who will protect the dignity of those assembled? Somebody's got to keep their distance, watch with a critical eye, make sure no one gets carried away. Not everyone wants to dance.

## Barren...

Michal, at great personal cost, teaches us another valuable lesson about God. God is not the safe-keeper of our reputations. God is not some priggish domestic deity, a heavenly Miss Manners intent on prescribing the etiquette that maintains polite society, aghast by any outbursts of fervour. And our role on this Earth, be it prophet, king, priest, or homemaker, is not to keep ourselves from embarrassment. We must come before the King, dignified or undignified, robed or dis-robed, in the presence of the elite or in the company of slave girls, and worship with all our might. Michal was struck barren by God. But in ways that matter most, she had been barren already.

And David dances, through mordant anger, past mortal danger, between death and barrenness.

Occasionally we get glimpses of Deepest Reality, intimations of what remains after all else has been shaken out and burned up. This is the reality that earthy things sometimes hint at, sometimes hide. A priest in his liturgy might do either. A wife in her domesticity also. And a king, half-naked, whirling and leaping, also.

Glimpsing it, that Deepest Reality, can make you do funny things. You can become stony still. Or giddily happy. Or chokingly afraid. It can calm you with uncanny peace,

or disrupt you with implacable dread. It can make you, simultaneously, not yourself and fully yourself. It can make kings dance. We have a repertoire of ways of dealing with Deepest Reality when it starts to break in. We resort to bureaucracy or play the Pharisee. We pull back into aloofness or lash out in scorn. We become puffed up with self-importance, or shrivel up in false humility.

## Or we dance.

There is a lady in my church who dances. No matter how bad the music is, no matter how flat-voiced or squawking or mute with disapproval those around her are, no matter how hard things in her life are, she worships with all her might, her face upturned and radiant, her arms spread angelic, cruciform, an instinctive gesture of relinquishment and acceptance, her body alive with God hunger. Some people see God's bigness when everyone else trembles at the sight of giants and armies. Some see God's kingdom come when most others see only mad rulers issuing murderous decrees. Some render praise when others just do their duty or pass their judgments. Some behold God where countless others look and don't see at all. David was that kind of man. Where his fretful priest and his scornful wife could only see a gilded box and frenzied crowd, he could see God. The temptation is to think men like David, at such moments, are half-crazy, not fully engaged with reality. The truth is that precisely at such moments they are the ones who truly see. Hasn't the king distinguished himself?

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# THROUGH HEAVEN'S EYES

A single thread in a tapestry,  
Though its colour brightly shine,  
Can never see its purpose  
In the pattern of the grand design.

And the stone that sits on the very top  
Of the mountain's mighty face,  
Does it think it's more important  
Than the stones that form the base?

So how can you see what your life is worth  
Or where your value lies?  
You can never see through the eyes of man.  
You must look at your life,  
Look at your life through heaven's eyes.

A lake of gold in the desert sand  
Is less than a cool fresh spring;

And to one lost sheep, a shepherd boy  
Is greater than the richest king.  
If a man lose ev'rything he owns  
Has he truly lost his worth?  
Or is it the beginning  
Of a new and brighter birth?

So how do you measure the worth of a man,  
In wealth or strength or size?  
In how much he gained, or how much he gave?  
The answer will come,  
The answer will come to him who tries  
To look at his life through heaven's eyes.

And that's why we share all we have with you,  
Though there's little to be found.  
When all you've got is nothing  
There's a lot to go around.

From "The Prince of Egypt"  
soundtrack as sung by Jethro.  
Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz



No life can escape being blown about  
By the winds of change and chance;  
And though you'll never know all the steps  
You must learn to join the dance.  
You must learn to join the dance.

So how do you judge what a man is worth?  
By what he builds or buys?  
You can never see with your eyes on earth!  
Look through heaven's eyes.

Look at your life,  
Look at your life  
Look at your life through heaven's eyes.

# LORD OF THE DANCE

Author of the hymn,  
Sydney Carter writes...

"I see Christ as the incarnation of the piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern which is at the heart of our reality... I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus.

Whether Jesus ever leaped in Galilee to the rhythm of a pipe or drum I do not know. We are told that David danced (and as an act of worship too), so it is not impossible. The fact that many Christians have regarded dancing as a bit ungodly (in a church, at any rate) does not mean that Jesus did.

The Shakers didn't. This sect flourished in the United States in the nineteenth century, but the first Shakers came from Manchester in England, where they were sometimes called the "Shaking Quakers". They hived off to America in 1774, under the leadership of Mother Anne. They established celibate communities—men at one end, women at the other; though they met for work and worship. Dancing, for them, was a spiritual activity. They also made furniture of a functional, lyrical simplicity. Even the cloaks and bonnets that the women wore were distinctly stylish, in a sober and forbidding way.

Their hymns were odd, but sometimes of great beauty: from one of these (*Simple Gifts*) I adapted this melody. I could have written another for the words of 'Lord of the Dance' (some people have), but this melody was so appropriate that it seemed a waste of time to do so.

'Lord of the Dance' is a dancing kind of song, the life of which is in the melody as much as in the verbal statement."

From *Green Print for Song*, published by Stainer & Bell (1974)

I danced in the morning  
When the world was begun,  
And I danced in the moon  
And the stars and the sun,  
And I came down from heaven  
And I danced on the earth,  
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

*Dance, then, wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,  
And I'll lead you all,  
Wherever you may be,  
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.*

I danced for the scribe  
And the pharisee,  
But they would not dance  
And they wouldn't follow me.

I danced for the fishermen,  
For James and John -  
They came with me  
And the dance went on.

*Chorus*

I danced on the Sabbath  
And I cured the lame;  
The holy people  
Said it was a shame.  
They whipped and they stripped  
And they hung me on high,  
And they left me there  
On a Cross to die.

*Chorus*

I danced on a Friday  
When the sky turned black—  
It's hard to dance  
With the devil on your back.  
They buried my body  
And they thought I'd gone,  
But I am the dance,  
And I still go on.

*Chorus*

They cut me down  
And I leapt up high;  
I am the life  
That'll never, never die;  
I'll live in you  
If you'll live in me—  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

*Chorus*

# PSALM

Silence is praise to you,  
Zion-dwelling God,  
And also obedience.  
You hear the prayer in it all.

We arrive on your doorstep sooner or later,  
loaded with guilt,  
Our sins too much for us—  
but you get rid of them once and for all.

Blessed are the chosen! Blessed the guest  
at home in your place!  
We expect our fill of good things  
in your house, your heavenly manse.  
All your salvation wonders  
are on display in your trophy room.  
Earth-Tamer, Ocean-Pourer,  
Mountain-Maker, Hill-Dresser,  
Muzzler of sea storm and wave crash,  
of mobs in noisy riot—  
Far and wide they'll come to a stop,  
they'll stare in awe, in wonder.  
Dawn and dusk take turns  
calling, "Come and worship."

Oh, visit the earth,  
ask her to join the dance!  
Deck her out in spring showers,  
fill the God-River with living water.  
Paint the wheat fields golden.  
Creation was made for this!  
Drench the plowed fields,  
soak the dirt clods  
With rainfall as harrow and rake  
bring her to blossom and fruit.  
Snow-crown the peaks with splendour  
Scatter rose petals down your paths,  
All through the wild meadows, rose petals.  
Set the hills to dancing,  
Dress the canyon walls with live sheep,  
a drape of flax across the valleys.  
Let them shout, and shout, and shout!  
Oh, oh, let them sing!

— From THE MESSAGE

The psalms of David, the proverbs of Solomon, the stories that are woven through Scripture, the hymns that have enriched the church and the colours that surround our existence all speak of a God who revels in beauty. But if we pause long enough we may also see His tremendous caution in reminding us to differentiate between ends and means. He warned us not to make a graven image because the object soon replaces the subject and the means can easily become the ends. — RAVI ZACHARIAS

"I will dance, I will sing  
To be mad for my King  
Nothing, Lord, is hindering

The passion in my soul;  
And I'll become even more  
undignified than this!

(Some would say it's foolishness but ...)  
I'll become even more undignified than this!  
Na Na Na Na Na Na (Hey)! ..."