

“God In A Box”

1 Samuel 4:1-22

August 21, 2016

SI: We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel.

It traces some of the most turbulent years of Israel’s history
as the nation transitioned to a monarchy.

It’s a book that shows the failure of men, the power of God
and what it means to live by faith.

INTRO: When I was in high school this friend of mine called me and said:

I've just seen the most awesome movie!

It's about the ark of the covenant and the Nazis, it has Harrison Ford!

I'm going to see it again and you've got to go with me!

So I went to see *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and as a 17 year old,

I thought it was the best movie ever made.

1 Samuel chapters 4-6 is the original *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Chapter 4 is about the loss of the ark by Israel.

Chapter 5, next week, about the triumph of the ark over the Philistines.

Chapter 6 is about the return of the ark to Israel.

Bible scholars lump these three chapters together and call this The Ark Narrative.

Some people think it was written as a separate story and circulated around Israel, and then whoever wrote 1 Samuel incorporated it into his history of Israel.

There's no way of knowing if The Ark Narrative was written separately or not.

We do know that the writer of 1 and 2 Samuel used sources—he tells us so later.

One of the arguments that this might have been written as a stand-alone story is that Samuel himself is not mentioned in The Ark Narrative.

Verse 1 of chapter 4 says, And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Then he disappears and is not mentioned again until chapter 7 after ark returned.

Some people think that's a clue this was written by somebody who at the time didn't know about Samuel.

But others have noted that leaving Samuel out of the ark story could just as well be a deliberate device by the author.

By removing Samuel all attention is focused on the ark and the Lord whose presence the ark represents. He teaches Israel some pretty powerful lessons about the sort of God he really is—lessons they needed to learn.

After being humbled by those lessons, Israel is finally ready to listen to Samuel.

This marks a crucial spiritual and national transition for the people of God.

We need to hear those same lessons.

Lesson of this chapter is that you can't put God in a box.

Let's see what that means and what happens if you try to do it.

This is a complicated story, so let's look at it under three headings:

1. A good question
2. A bad answer
3. An ugly outcome (with a bow to Clint Eastwood)

MP#1 A good question

The Israelites and the Philistines met in battle and 4,000 Israelites were killed.

Who were the Philistines?

The Philistines were a small nation of people who lived on the Mediterranean coast of the land of Canaan. The Israelites lived inland and up in the hills.

Between the coastal plain where the Philistines lived and the hill country where the Israelites lived was a band of rolling countryside that both nations claimed and that they clashed over a lot.

Whoever controlled that middle territory controlled the trade routes in the region. That's why the Philistines tell each other that they have to win this battle or they will be subject to the Hebrews.

If the Israelites win, the Philistines will be hemmed in on the coast and it will be economically devastating for them. But if they win, they will keep the Israelites hemmed up in the hills, dependent on Philistines for trade.

So that's the economics and the politics of this conflict. But it went deeper. Philistines were culturally and technologically more sophisticated than Israelites. You could think of it this way. Philistines had iPhones, Israelites had land lines. Later in 1 Samuel some of those technologies will be mentioned.

The Israelites envied those things the Philistines had they didn't. Feared them. That set them up to also be attracted to Philistine values and way of life.

Over and over the Lord used this conflict with the Philistines to test and sometimes punish and judge the Israelites.

There was a higher divine purpose behind these battles with them.

So it's encouraging, at least initially, when the Israelites return after losing the battle and the elders of Israel ask:

“Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?”

That's a good question. It shows some deep theology.

They affirm that it was ultimately the Lord who brought this defeat.

The sovereignty of God. They know God is the one they are dealing with. And their theology goes deeper than that.

They didn't ask: Why did God bring this defeat upon us, but why did the LORD? Notice it's in all capital letters. That means in Hebrew it says Yahweh.

Why did Yahweh bring this defeat upon us?

Yahweh is God's name of personal relationship with Abraham and his descendents. It's his covenant name.

Why did Yahweh, the God of our father Abraham, the God who brought us out of Egypt, the God who gave us the Promised Land—

Why did the LORD bring this defeat upon us?
That's a profound question because it implies that the LORD brought this defeat because he wanted some kind of personal response from Israel. He was looking for something in them.

Some deeper trust. Some heartfelt repentance over a particular sin.
Some more thorough, loving obedience.

That means there was a merciful purpose for this crisis.

The Lord was giving them a foretaste of what would happen if they continued down this particular path. He was giving them a loving warning.

When the Lord brings some defeat on you, it's not always clear what he's communicating. But sometimes it is.

Sometimes defeats and disasters touch the very thing Lord concerned about. A Christian man once told me that it wasn't until he had a financial disaster that he realized how much he love and trusted money.

A spiritual wake-up call. The Lord telling him he wanted his full love and trust. It was a mercy to him because it impressed on his soul that wealth is transitory. It reminded him that wealth would leave him but Jesus was with him forever.

Sometimes it's not so clear as that.

Maybe you ask sincerely: Lord, why have you brought his defeat on me?

But nothing specific is revealed.

Maybe the most you get is the realization that the Lord is God and he does whatever pleases him in the lives of his children.

He wants you to keep trusting him and obeying him and loving him.

That's a merciful crisis too.

Because can build that life-giving relationship with the Lord.

It is clear in this situation, though, what the Lord wanted.

First three chapters of 1 Samuel have spelled out the corrupt, immoral worship in Israel that was epitomized by the priests Hophni and Phineas.

The Lord defeated them to get their attention. So they would repent.

So they would listen to the words of Samuel, this new prophet the Lord had raised up and who was preaching the message of repentance and grace.

The elders of Israel asked the right question: Why has the Lord done this?

Their answer should have been: The Lord wants us to listen to his word.

But they didn't. That brings us to the next development.

MP#2 A bad answer

Their answer was: We need to get the ark of the covenant and take it into battle. What was the ark of the covenant?

It was a wooden box, about the size of a cedar chest. It had a decorative lid with two angels, two cherubim, and whole thing covered with gold. Inside the ark were the law of God written on stone tablets, a couple other things.

The ark was the most sacred object in Hebrew worship.

We don't have time to point out all the symbolism attached to it. It's full name is given in verse 4.

The ark of the covenant of Yahweh Almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim. It represented the glorious presence of God in the fullness of his grace and holiness. At a few key point in Israel's history God had commanded that the ark be carried before Israel as a sign of his presence. One of those times was Jericho. When Levites marched with ark around the city and the walls came down. This is probably what the elders of Israel were thinking about.

So their answer to the question: Why has the Lord allowed defeat?

Was not—The Lord wants something from us. He wants us to repent. Their response was: We've got to get God on our side so we can win.

What can we do to obligate God to give us this victory? Let's carry the ark into battle and God will have to help us.

Everybody thought it was a great idea. In fact, they got so fired up when Hophi and Phineas brought it they cheered loud enough for Philistines to hear. We've got God with us now and we're going to tear those Philistines up.

I went on Amazon.com and in the search bar I put the phrase "in a box." Here are some of the products that appeared.

Curious George Jack in a box

Sock Monkey Jack in a box

Clown Jack in a box

Birthday Party in a box

Basic Jewelry Repair in a box

Photography Studio Lighting Tent in a box

Hideaway Guest Bed in a box

Birth Pool in a box

Lipo in a box

(I thought it was going to be a surgical vacuum for sucking your own fat, but it was actually heavy duty, reinforced girdle for holding it all in)

The marketing appeal of the phrase "in a box" is that it sounds so handy.

Whatever you need for whatever situation, it's right there.

Need to entertain little kids? Jack in a box

Tangled necklace? Basic Jewelry Repair in a box.

Body image issues? Lipo in a box.

It's all right there at your service.

You just open it up and put it to work and when you're done,
you close it up and put it away until the next time you need it.

The Israelites didn't think God was actually in the box.

But they thought that if they took the ark of the covenant into battle

God would have to show up and give them victory.

Even thought that might sound strange at first, when you think about it,
it's a pretty common way of thinking about God.

It's the idea that if you do certain things or say certain things that will obligate
God into doing things for you that you want or need.

If I pray this prayer, if I perform this ritual, go to service, give this money—
then God is obligated to help me.

It's exchanging religious rituals or feelings for an honest encounter with God.

At least a half a dozen times over the years total strangers have stopped by the
church in a full-blown crisis and tell me they want to start coming to church.

I always tell them, that's fine. Would love to have you. 9:00 Sunday morning.

But attending church isn't going to twist God's arm. Have to get right with him.

Remember specifically a young man out on bail, facing prison time for drug charge.

Doing every religious thing he could so God would make things go his way.

I tried to explain that the Lord is real and wanted his heart but he wouldn't listen.

He even wanted me to meet and pray with him.

Like the pastor's prayers are a lucky rabbit's foot or something.

I did pray with him but I prayed that if it was God's will he went to prison

he would meet Jesus there. He didn't want me to pray that way.

As Christians the way we mostly do this is we think that if we've obeyed God
in a particular area of life, then he must give us success—

in my marriage or my children or my finances or my ministry. Big with pastors.

We might not put it that bluntly,

but we sure get angry or disappointed when God doesn't come through.

I ordered God in a box from Amazon, paid good money for it,

and then when I pulled it out, it was joke. It didn't work as I expected.

I wish we could say that Israel listened to the Lord and returned to him,

but they didn't. Brings us to the last episode of the story . . .

MP#3 An ugly outcome

Israel substituted religious rituals for an honest encounter with the Lord.

If they had gone to him after that first defeat, would have lead to repentance

and a different ending to this chapter.
But they tried to manipulate God and the result was devastation.

The ark was captured. The Israelite army crushed and scattered.
Hophni and Phineas, the priests of Israel, killed.
Eli fell over in shock at hearing the news and broke his neck. .
His daughter-in-law, Phineas' wife went into premature labor and died.
With her dying breath she named her child Ichabod—
which means “the glory has departed.”

What do we make of this grim ending? A couple thoughts.
First, God is more than willing to have his own religious symbols disgraced
in order for his people to see that their sin matters and that he can't be
manipulated by our religiosity.
If we want the glories of external religion
without spiritual authority in hearts,
If we want the power and victory of God's blessing
without the pursuit of God's holiness,
If we want to experience God's deliverance and triumph
without repentance and dependence on him—
The Lord won't let us get away with it.
He would rather allow his church and his people to experience a devastating
defeat for a season in order for us to realize we can't have him on our terms.

Second related thought: We must never mistake religious fervor and excitement
for the presence and power of God.

When the ark came into the camp oh they shouted. Things were rocking.
Religious zeal can feel profoundly moving—and it can be totally disconnected
from real connection with the living God.

No amount of outward strategizing or manufactured zeal can provoke
the presence of God. And attempts to do so, if there is no repentance,
usually end in spiritual devastation, and sometimes institutional devastation.

Many a church has whipped up a religious froth of excitement at the expense of
repentance and then has fallen apart and members scattered.

So, is that it. Thanks, preacher. That's a cheerful chapter.

No, that's not it. It's a grim ending but that's not the end of the story.

The last word from a human perspective is Ichabod, the glory has departed.
But God's glory has not really departed. God is still at work.

And from the ashes of defeat, hope is already starting to rise.
We'll see it the next couple of weeks as the Ark Narrative continues.

In the next two chapters, the Lord, without any help from Israel, uses the ark of the covenant to devastate the Philistines and their gods. He so thoroughly defeats them that they return the ark to Israel with gifts and the Israelites don't have to lift a finger.

So the ark comes back, but that doesn't change hearts.

Over the years the Israelites keep repeating this same mistake.

They keep trying to manipulate the Lord through religion.

They don't want to deal with him honestly through repentance.

So finally God's glory departs again. Ezekiel describes it in his vision.

The ark remains but this time God's glory really does depart.

He won't stay with a people who continue to try to manipulate, refuse to repent.

But that's not the end of the story either. Despite their hard hearts, he brings back his glory again without them lifting a finger. He does so by sending his Son.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.

We behold the glory of God in the face of Christ.

What did Jesus do? He took all our sins—even all the ways we manipulate religious symbols and manipulate worship and use our religiosity to avoid repentance, even the way we try to put God in a box and obligate him—even all of those sins Jesus took on himself.

And he dies on the cross for them.

And it seemed when he died that the glory had departed.

But on Easter morning he rose from the grave.

And if you trust him, that resurrection life is yours.

Ultimately, what God has promised and what Christ has secured is an eternal glory that can never pass away, and a life with God in which all our manipulation and avoidance is removed and we enjoy a perfect communion with him.

That's what we were made for. Not God in a box. Not a genie in a bottle.

But a covenant making and keeping God who wants us to know him and trust him.