

Don't put God in a box

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 June 2025

Preacher: Adam Penwright

[0 : 00] I wonder if you can relate to the feeling of being used by someone. It's not very nice to be used by someone. Maybe you know what it's like.

A friend who only ever gets in touch when they need something from you. Whether that's emotional support or help moving house or to babysit their kids. They seem to only call when they need something from you.

And maybe after a while it begins to get on your mind, is this a real relationship? Or am I just being used by you? Here's a slightly harder question.

Do we ever use God like that? Like God is there to fix our problems, but we only get him out when we need him. It's almost like treating God like my set of Allen keys.

Most of the time they live in my toolbox, in my cupboard. They're out of sight and out of mind. But occasionally when I get in a problem, I think, Oh, what I need here is my Allen keys. So I get them out, use them. It's very helpful.

[1 : 03] And then I put them back away. Out of sight, out of mind. But when we use God like this, we are presuming on him.

Which is a key problem in our passage today. And when we use God like this, we reveal something about the God that we believe in. That he belongs to us and he fits in with our lives just how we want.

You might say metaphorically, he's a God in a box. You pull him out to help you, to affirm you, to support you. But put him away again, out of sight, out of mind when it doesn't suit you.

The danger of using God like that is that we have put God in a box. And a God who fits in a box is too small. Certainly too small to be your Lord, to be your Saviour.

And we've been reading this book of 1 Samuel over the past few weeks. And we've seen that God's people are in a place of spiritual rot. And now they are facing a geopolitical crisis.

[2 : 04] So what will they do? Well, they have a God they think they can use. But we'll see what happens when they try to use God. And we'll see how God will respond.

And first thing we're going to see, trying to keep God in his box. And our story opens with Israel on a battlefield. And I just want to say at this point, before we go any further, that obviously this story and talking about it, will bring all kinds of connections to mind from things we've seen in the news in the Middle East this week.

And I want to say this Bible passage is not all about Israel's war with Palestine or Iran today. And so this is not going to be a sermon of political commentary. We're continuing this series through the book of 1 Samuel, which we had planned a long time ago.

And we're reading these stories about ancient Israel because we can believe that they can teach us about our relationship with God as we read about these ancient people's relationship with God.

And so while I'm aware that there will be all kinds of echoes and perhaps painful echoes with contemporary war, I hope we can see this morning that it can teach us about how we relate to God and not necessarily how we relate to the modern state of Israel.

[3 : 20] But our story does open with a war, a war between Israel and the Philistines. And the first battle in the passage is over very fast. Did you see that? Almost straight away, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 of them on the battlefield.

And reeling from the shock of defeat, the elders of Israel ask a decent question. Verse 3, why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

See, their instinct is not bad, but their solution will be all wrong. But what they decide to do is get the Ark of the Covenant. Now, for us, the Ark of the Covenant seems quite strange.

But did you know, I actually saw it three weeks ago. You would never believe this and you might ask where on earth I saw it. And the answer was in Milton Keynes. If you go to the National Film and Sci-Fi Museum in Milton Keynes, they have the movie prop from the movie Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, if you've ever seen that.

But I think it highlights something for us, that the Ark of the Covenant is something very strange. And to be honest, most of our knowledge about it might come from an Indiana Jones movie, which I think is actually not a bad movie.

[4 : 32] But anyway, but what was the Ark of the Covenant really? Well, it was a golden box looking something perhaps like this, which God instructed Moses to build.

And it did three things. This was what God told them. The first is that it would be storage. Storage because it held the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, which represented the covenant. That's maybe why you build a box, to store something inside. And so this storage was a constant reminder to the people of God's holy law and his covenant promises. Actually, we thought about his covenant a bit earlier.

The second thing, it was for sacrifice. And the lid was the place where on the holiest day of the year, the high priest of the country would sprinkle blood on the Day of Atonement to cover the sins of the people.

And third, it was a seat. In fact, the top bit was often called a mercy seat because it was understood to be the place where God's glorious presence dwelt among his people.

[5 : 35] So storage, sacrifice seat. It represented God's covenant, God's righteousness and God's presence. And maybe as Israel think in this story about bringing it out, they're thinking about the story of Jericho, which maybe some of you are familiar with, where the people bring this special box and march behind it around the city.

And God brings the walls of the city down. That's the story. And maybe they're thinking like that. Oh, probably God will work the same way this time. If we just bring it out to battle, he'll help us out. But there's something in the story which highlights the problem, the rottenness.

And that is verse four. Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. If you were here two weeks ago, we saw that these rotten priests in chapter two were men who were greedy and abusive and had no regard for God.

But if you almost were blind, you'd think that they were doing all the right things because they bring out the holy priests to bring out God's holy box. And actually, when they do bring out the ark, at first it seems positive.

The whole Israelite camp erupt in a massive shout. They think God is with them. And at least God, kept in his box, working on their terms, is with them.

[6 : 57] But we'll see the result of the second battle in verse 10. So the Philistines fought and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent.

The slaughter was very great. Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas died.

It is catastrophic. Not 4,000 dead this time, but 30,000 dead. The leading priests are killed.

And worst of all, the ark of God is captured by the enemy. See, they had this superstitious plan. They would bring out their lucky charm, presuming that if they did so, God would be with them. But it has not worked. And the thing they thought meant God was with them is now captured and taken away by their enemies. Do you see, they are trying to use God, trying to force him to work on their terms.

[8 : 02] They ignore the fact that it is rotten priests who carry him out and presume that God will support them. In World War Two, Nazi Germany committed some of the worst atrocities that have ever been known.

They invaded countries around Europe and then rounded up and executed all who didn't fit in with their vision of a good society. Political opponents, black people, disabled people, Jewish people and more.

But on Nazi uniforms, you would be able to see this inscription on the belt buckles. And say this, got mit uns or in English, God with us.

It's very painful to think about. We can all imagine political parties or even nations or groups who would presume that God is with them, that they have God is with them.

And that is very dangerous. And it's dangerous for any group or individual to claim divine approval for their own agenda. It is terribly dangerous in what license it might think it gives them to do, as well as dangerous for their relationship with God, for the nation or the political party or the individual.

[9 : 21] If you presume that God is with you, if you try to keep God in his box, try to force him to play by your rules. If you treat God so small that you control him, then he will not play by your rules, as this passage says.

In fact, he will not be with you. In our chapter, as Israel presume on God, they are left defeated and alone. To be honest, I found this a very hard sermon to prepare.

And you might know that I've been preaching this month through June. I found it hard because it's a very heavy, heavy story. I found it hard because it connects to all kinds of things we read about in the news.

I found it hard because I think it's actually quite hard to understand, too. And I, as I was first reading it through, I thought it's a story just all about superstition.

They bring out their lucky charm. There's a primitive people who have a magical golden box. And I think they're being superstitious. How stupid. How good it is that I and we are nothing like them.

[10 : 26] But I don't think it's all about superstition for two reasons. The first is because saying it's simply about superstition doesn't really account for how powerful the ark is described to be in chapters around.

And secondly, because I think we're in danger of saying if the problem is simply superstition, then we're off the hook. St. John's is not a very superstitious place.

And say even England or the UK as a whole is not a very superstitious place. And so we might just think they are primitive, but we are educated and so we're fine.

I think the sin of the passage is presumption. The presumption that God is on our side, that he works for us, that we can manage him, that metaphorically or literally we can keep God in his box and consider us as the ones in control.

And so we're going to think about just briefly how we can make the same mistakes. The danger is presumption and we can do the exact same thing.

[11 : 34] I've got four dangerous ways we can do that. The first is we presume on God's blessing. Do you see, Israel had a formula.

They had an army plus priests plus an ark equals God will bring victory. But having that kind of formula for God reduces God to being a gizmo with inputs and outputs.

And yet we might have our own formulas for God. We think I read my Bible every day. I go to church every week. I give financially to the church. Therefore, I get a comfortable life.

We presume that if we have the right set of inputs, we can demand the right set of outputs. God's blessing. But that is presuming how God works and making him smaller than us.

And so we don't love God, but we manipulate him like he's just a cosmic maths equation. Second, we presume on God's agreement.

[12 : 35] Do you see, Israel had this plan and yet they never consulted God's word in Scripture or God's word in Samuel, which you see just in the very first verse.

They presume God agreed with their big idea. And we do this when we act like our politics or cultural preferences are God's will without any kind of humility.

I suspect if you're more conservative, we presume that God must hate everything we hate. Or if you're more liberal, we presume God must love everything we love.

But either way, we presume on God's agreement, making him just a hype man for our own political ideas. And third, we presume on God's approval.

Do you see, Hophni and Phinehas, they're the right kind of guys. They might, you might say they're wearing the right uniform and yet their hearts were rotten. They presume God approved of them because of their office or maybe even because they could say the right doctrinal statements.

[13 : 43] And we can presume that we have God's approval because we go to the right church, the right kind of evangelical church, or that we have the right kind of ideas or looks.

And therefore that God doesn't care about the anger or lust or greed in our hearts. We think that God is going to be impressed with our titles and associations or correct understanding and yet ignore that our hearts are corrupt.

And fourth, we presume on God's salvation. When I was a teenager, I totally presumed that because I was fairly nice and had a church going family, that God must like me and God must be saved with me.

Even though I had no relationship with God at all, nor was living for him, nor was invested in my faith at all. I presumed that because of my culture and my family, I was fine.

But looking back, I wasn't fine. I was in danger because just like Israel in this passage, I was presuming and presuming is very dangerous. I say to you, our confidence cannot rest on a vague association with Jesus.

[15:03] But we need a living personal trust and faith in Jesus. I'll say to you, if you have mixed feelings about where you stand with God, or perhaps aren't used to things like coming to church, I'll say to you, this story is a loving warning.

That being a fairly nice person is not actually enough. But to check that you are not presuming upon God and instead see that real peace and forgiveness and come from trusting in him and the salvation he offers through Jesus.

For all of us, whichever of these four perhaps particularly connect with you, 1 Samuel 4 is clear. If you presume on God, treating him like you're in control and he just belongs in his box, that God will not play along.

If we presume with God, but are using him rather than loving him, he will leave. Israel presumes that God will work on their terms, that he will bless and agree and approve and save them no matter what.

And yet presumption is very dangerous. So after two battles, Israel are utterly defeated. Worst of all, the Ark of the Covenant is captured.

[16:20] And if you were there that day, you would think it looks like an absolute catastrophe. It doesn't only look like your army lost, but it looks like your God has lost.

And yet we'll see in the rest of the passage, God doesn't fit in a box. His plan is not limited to how the Israelites presume of him.

But instead we see that through the defeat, God has an amazing plan. In verse 12, we get a messenger. That same day, a Benjaminite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the Ark of God. Just later, Eli asked, what happened, my son?

Verse 17, the man who brought the news replied, Israel fled before the Philistines and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also, your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead.

[17:24] And the Ark of God has been captured. When he mentioned the Ark of God, Eli fell backwards off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man and he was heavy.

He had led Israel for 40 years. It is an altogether tragic scene. But actually, as we read it, this should not surprise us, nor should it surprise Eli.

Because in chapters 2 and 3, God promised very clearly that the response to Eli's son's arrogance and greed and abuse of others, and to Eli's family's dishonoring of God would be judgment.

And here we see clearly, God is in control and he will stick to what he promised would happen. Do you notice the text gives us a brutal and specific and maybe slightly humorous little detail that Eli died because he was old and heavy.

Now, it's not just insulting an old man, but actually the ancient Hebrew word for heavy and for glory are almost identical.

[18:32] You might say like this, God's glory is weighty. And maybe you're aware of this. In April 1989 was the worst sporting disaster in UK history.

At the Hillsborough football stadium, 97 Liverpool supporters tragically lost their lives. And now every year in April at a Liverpool match, they'll have a minute silence to remember this.

It is a very weighty moment. I reckon it is the best respected minute silence in football. And now imagine if during that very weighty minute silence, someone started shouting jokes or trying to get the crowd to cheer for them.

It would be outrageous. They would get kicked out instantly. They would be trying to steal the weightiness of that moment for themselves. And this is what Eli and his sons have been doing their whole lives.

Very weighty things. They have been making it all about themselves. And so their weight becomes a physical symbol for their crime. They are stealing food from God, sure, literally.

[19 : 43] But more than that, he's a man who made himself heavy with stolen glory, dishonoring God and scorning his sacrifice. And the end result is kind of poetic.

Eli is brought down by his own glory or his own weight. You see, God keeps his word. He won't be trifled with. We see in the story, God doesn't fit in a box, but he is in charge.

And actually, we see that in the final little bit of the chapter about Phineas's wife. Phineas wife is pregnant. And on hearing the terrible news of her husband and brother-in-law and father-in-law die, she goes into an early labor and the pains lead to her death.

And as she was dying, verse 21, she named the boy Ichabod saying, the glory has departed from Israel. It is a terrible scene, tragic again.

The ark of God has been captured. There's deaths in her family. And she's right in what she says. I love the quote from one Bible scholar who says this.

[20 : 52] She taught more theology in her death than Phineas had done in his whole life. It's kind of funny. You get this woman who we never hear anything else about really, say something incredibly profound.

And yet, why has the glory departed? It's not actually because God is defeated. He's still in control. And we'll see next week just how much he is still in control.

But the glory has departed because God chose to leave Israel. Why? Because he will not be used as a mascot for a corrupt, presumptuous people.

God would rather orchestrate his own defeat than be tied to sinners who will presume he's with them. He is a God whose holiness and glory is more important than that people always think he's victorious.

And yet, the idea of a God who chooses defeat is deeply unsettling for us. As I've reflected on that this week, it's made me reflect on another story in the Bible.

[22 : 05] When Peter is trying to stop Jesus going to the cross. When Jesus tells his disciples that he must be handed over, suffer and be killed, Peter is horrified.

He pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him and says, Never, Lord. This shall never happen to you. Peter is saying, I can't let you be defeated. It will be embarrassing.

It will be awful. But for Peter, just like in 1 Samuel chapter 4, the defeat of God, while it might look disastrous, while it might look to us like God has lost and abandoned us, is actually incredibly important.

That even though this is not a God who fits in our logical box of what a victorious, sovereign, powerful God should do, he does something even more amazing.

This is the God we need. A God who chooses his own defeat. That is the God we most amazingly need. Do you know, earlier in the Old Testament, earlier in the law that God gave to his people, he had made a promise within his covenant that was clear.

[23 : 16] If they abandon God, continually sin and presume upon him, then the just consequence is exile. That they would be invaded, kicked out their land and have to find refuge in other places.

And yet in this story, even though we see Israel are guilty, they are not the ones who face exile. In 1 Samuel 4, in an act of amazing foreshadowing mercy, rather than the people being sent into exile, it is the ark of God who is sent into exile.

God's presence goes into exile in their place. He takes the punishment that they rightfully deserve upon himself. Do you see how this connects?

On the cross, Jesus, who is God incarnate, is handed over. He is captured and killed. He enters the ultimate exile out of a city to death on a cross.

And he bears the full weight of God's just punishment against our sin, so that we don't have to. If you were to take one thing home about Christianity, it is this.

[24 : 29] The Bible's central claim is that on the cross, Jesus, who is God himself, in an act of love, steps into our place, takes the exile and punishment we deserve so that we could receive forgiveness.

Do you see, in 1 Samuel 4 and in the cross, we see not a weak God who is captured by events, but an almighty and amazing God who chooses what seems like his own defeat for our salvation.

We'll see next week in the rest of 1 Samuel, just what God's victory and comeback looks like. But you see, the greatest glory is not going to be found in the victory of a corrupt people.

