

You Can't Put God in a Box

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[0 : 00] So bow our heads and pray just as we're standing. Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word now, we pray that you would help us to see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ, but not just see it, but to experience it, to savour it and to serve you.

For we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Please sit down. So it's great to welcome you, as Dan has, to our service.

And I'm sorry about this moving of the religious furniture. Because of the way the building is set out in a kind of a ribcage, fishbone sense, when you stand over there and preach, you feel completely irrelevant.

Don't say anything. Stop it. So we're going to try this. And if you want to follow along the passage, the three chapters, most of them are printed out.

If you want to check it in the Bible, you can. On pages three and four of the bulletin. And all three chapters, it's a great big long story about a piece of religious furniture. It's about the ark, 38 times.

[1 : 14] And nothing in Israel has ever happened quite like this. And nothing ever happens again like this. And so in my research this week, I went back and I watched Steven Spielberg's 1981 hit, Raiders of the Lost Ark.

Actually, the music's curiously like Star Wars. I wonder why. I discovered that all the Nazis are bad guys. And the good guys all speak with an American accent.

And the most difficult thing was telling Dan it's not a documentary. So here we are.

It's a great story. It has a beginning and a middle and an end. The beginning, the ark of God in Israel is captured by the Philistines. The middle chapter, chapter 5. It's in Philistia as a slave as it were.

And then in chapter 6 it comes back. And it has everything in it. It has lights and action and special effects and danger. But of course, like all the Bible, it's really about God, what it means to live in his world and relate to him.

[2 : 20] And it's actually about his glory. So we'll come to that in just a second. Before we dive into chapter 4, how do you describe what is indescribable?

How do you speak about something that is so far beyond any categories that we're used to? And when I was at university, I learned that one of the simplest ways is to use negatives.

To say it's like this, not that, not quite that, not quite that. So I'm calling these three chapters. I'm using negatives as headings. But it's because of the massive positive behind it.

It all makes sense. And if it doesn't, come and see Dan afterwards. Chapter 4 I've called, You Cannot Keep God in a Box. Put him in a box.

It begins on the field of battle where Israel gets a sound thrashing by the Philistines taking heavy casualties. We are in 1100 BC.

[3 : 23] And the Philistines were a warlike people with state-of-the-art military technology and vastly outnumbering the Israelites. And they had expansionist dreams. You may not know that the Philistines arrived in Palestine the same time as Israel.

And they wanted to colonize the land. And so it's no surprise that they gave Israel a thrashing. But it was a surprise for Israel. Hadn't the God of heaven and earth rescued us from slavery in Egypt? And in doing so had single-handedly beaten the only true superpower of the day, the Egyptians, the army and the pharaoh and the gods of Egypt and led them out and through the ten plagues and across the Red Sea and brought them to Sinai.

And then he brought them into the land and he promised to give them the land. So you see, the defeat to the Philistines, it's not a military crisis, it's a spiritual crisis. That's why in verse 3 the leaders are asking the right question.

Why? How could this happen? Isn't God supposed to be on our side? And then suddenly it occurs to them, we didn't bring the ark. Didn't bring the right furniture.

[4 : 35] So they go and get the ark. Now I just, I want to apologize. It's a little naughty to call the ark religious furniture. It was designed by God himself.

And at Sinai he gave direction on how it should be built on the way to the land. It was about the size of that thing, the podium over there. It's about four feet by two and a half by two and a half.

Not that way up, this way around. Covered with gold, solid gold. Covered on the top, on the lid with two solid gold cherubs bowing down like a kind of a seat.

But inside, inside the ark were a number of things including two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written by the very finger of God himself.

And God said to Moses, when he gave instruction on how to build it, I will meet you there. It's a symbol of my presence and my commitment to dwell with my people.

[5 : 36] When it was built and the tabernacle was built around it, in the last chapter of the book of Exodus, we read that the glory of God came down and filled the tabernacle.

And what that looked like was during the daytime, there was a pillar of cloud going up over the tabernacle, all the way up to heaven, over the ark. And at night time it was a pillar of fire. And whenever the fire or cloud moved, Israel packed up and moved on and followed God.

So it's not really just a box. And when they come to the land, to the River Jordan, they've got a cross. The ark went out in front of them, carried by priests, as God had given very specific instructions.

And when the priest's feet touched the water, the water separated and they walked on dry land. And it was the same sort of story with Jericho. But here is the problem in chapter 4 of 1 Samuel.

Do they consult God? Do they ask God what they should do, as they have done it all the time in the past, and God has instructed them to do? No, they don't. They take things into their own hands.

[6 : 41] They want God to come and beat the Philistines. They want to utilise God for their own purposes. They want to bring the box because they've got a formula, you see, and the formula is we have the box, we win.

We don't have the box, we lose. They're treating the ark as a kind of a rabbit's foot. And the one thing they've left out of their equation is God himself. And this is a sign that you may be trying to put God in a box, you see.

It's a focus on the externals. It's a way of treating God as a kind of a lucky charm. It's taking God for granted.

It's when you think God will fit into your formula, a formula faith. You know, I pay my tax, I do good, I give at the door when people disturb me. He's got to do his side.

And all sorts of things work according to formulas. Some of us raise our families according to formulas. Some of us do okay in business according to formulas, but not God. You have to deal with God himself.

[7 : 46] However, they bring the ark into the camp and they have a mighty shout. And it says the ground shakes. And the Philistines just across the valley say, we are in deep trouble.

A God has come into their camp. Nothing like this has ever happened before. What's interesting is that the Philistines rehearsed the Exodus story twice in our readings. They've obviously heard it. They say, aren't these the same gods who trounced the Egyptians? All right, they say to each other, let's die like men. Let's fight with nothing to lose. And they did.

And they won. And it was a slaughter. 30,000 dead on the side of Israel. And unbelievably, the ark of God is taken into captivity.

It's captured and taken back into Philistia. And Israel's crisis becomes a catastrophe. The ark of God had made no difference whatsoever.

[8 : 46] It is as though the God who had defeated the superpowers now humiliated. God has left the country taken captive by the Philistines. And you may say, what's the big deal?

Why don't they get a couple of pieces of wood and make another one? Well, it's Mrs. Phineas who tells us what is really going on right at the end of the chapter, chapter 4, halfway down page 3.

She's in the middle of childbirth, which will prove fatal. And when she hears the news, the last verse of 4, 422, she says, the glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured.

She sees the real issue. The real issue is, it's not the furniture, it's not the box, it's not the external. It's a glory issue. The fact that the ark can be captured is because God's glory has left.

Now, we use this word glory all the time in conversation. And we use it for wealth, things that we value highly, things that have, things that matter.

[9 : 59] Celebrities, not that I'm saying they matter. This is how it is used. Your net worth. I was reading an article the other day in The Atlantic about corruption in the US college sports system.

And the article says, corporations offer money to the colleges so they can profit from the glory of the college athletes. And what's driving these three chapters is the glory of God.

That's the big underlying issue. And in the Hebrew, the word glory, literally, it's from a physical description at first, it means heavy, it means weighty, and it comes to mean what matters, what's really worth value.

And in physical reference, you sometimes get a sense of this, I think, even today, when you look at the ocean or the mountains. First time, I remember the first time I experienced the Rocky Mountains.

Actually, we first came to Canada in 1988. And I didn't know anything about Canada, really. But I've seen in a travel shop a photo of Lake in the Rocky Mountains.

[11 : 15] And I said to Bron, I want to go there. So we went there. And there is this great sense of personal weightlessness. We don't have mountains quite like that in Australia.

We have bumps. Our mountains are smaller than the local mountains here. We have very good beaches, but the mountains not so much. When you go there and the oxygen's thinner, you get this sense of how light and fragile and temporary you are.

But it's not just objects that have glory. That's a kind of general experience of glory. But it's people and significance and matters. You know, my wife's opinion has more weight than yours.

She's more glorious. Let's finish the service. Here's the thing with God. If we put everything that's most valuable, most precious to us and to everyone in the world, all the riches and value and beauty on one side of the scale, and we put God on the other, you know what's going to happen? God alone is glory. He outweighs the universe. And that's why the Ark of God was so important. Because the glory of God by itself would crush us to death.

[12 : 34] And the Ark was the way that God had of embracing his people and sharing his glory with them a little bit but keeping them alive. You know, whenever the Bible God appears or there's a vision of God, the people don't get happy and say, this is very entertaining.

They feel terror. But here is the Ark. It was a precious symbol that God in matchless beauty and majesty and worth could be with his people in a temporary way.

Of course, God is everywhere. God is present everywhere. And every single person, I think, has this general sense of glory. But this is different.

This is the personal, relational, intimate, saving experience of the glory of God. It's the thing we are made for. It's the thing behind all our longings.

It's the very thing that gives meaning to our human existence and it can only be found in face-to-face relation with God himself. Mrs Phineas was right and so she calls her son Ichabod.

[13 : 42] Where's the glory? No glory. Because by their treatment of God, they had driven God away. And I think of all the signs that God gave his people in the Old Testament, the Ark is the most precious and the most heart-rending.

It's like an engagement ring. But Israel valued the ring over the person. And I don't know how frustrating that must be for God that his people go for the box and not for him.

They value the box more than they value him. And I don't know how frustrated God is when he gives us all the rich gifts that he gives us. And instead of turning to him and saying, thank you, you are marvellous, we take the gifts and we begin to worship them and value them and give glory to them.

So, God, you can't keep God in a box. That's the first chapter. The second chapter, chapter 5, which is on the bottom of page 3 and a little bit over the page, I've called God is not helpless. So, how did the ark fare among the Philistines? We begin chapter 5 and the Philistines are flush with victory and they drag the ark of God into their temple, into the house of their God, Dagon, because it's clear to them that their victory came from Dagon.

[15 : 10] Dagon has routed the God of Israel. And so, they bring the ark as a kind of a trophy of submission before the feet of their God, Dagon. Dagon, not so popular today, very popular those days.

In fact, very popular for a couple of thousand years, which just goes to show that even gods can outlive their usefulness, the gods we make.

He was the head, the top dog of the Philistine pantheon. And we have letters and inscriptions to him from all sorts of places, from all sorts of cultures and civilizations.

He made the other gods. He was termed the Lord of Gods. He was the God of death. And lots of people named their children after him. Not so much today.

But it was clear to the Philistines that it was Dagon who had humiliated the God of Israel. So, they bring the Ark in as a kind of a submission to Dagon.

[16:20] But on that first night in their sacred space, something goes terribly wrong for poor old Dagon. And the next day when they come to flaunt their victory, to their horror, the Ark is not bowing to Dagon.

Dagon is lying prostrate in front of the Ark in a posture of worship before God. And what do they, what should they have done then? They should have said, the glory belongs to the Lord of Israel. They should have bowed and called on him. No, what they do is they take out the super glue and they lift up poor old Dagon and they put him back on his pedestal. And if Dagon, if Dagon could speak, which he cannot, he would have said, no.

Don't put me back up there. Don't you know what is in that Ark? There are two tablets of stone written by the finger of God and you know how they start?

They start, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods beside me. You shall not make yourself a carved image. You shall not bow down to the worship of them.

[17:32] I am just a tree. I was. And all the glory you're giving to me belongs to him alone. His glory outweighs the universe.

For pity's sake, whatever you do, don't put me back up there. But they do. And the next day when they approach the temple, this time a little more cautiously, there's Dagon on his face before the ark.

Only this time he has fallen with such force that his hands and his feet have been separated from his body. And the Hebrew text says, all that is left to Dagon is Dagon.

It's as though in the night the gods had hand-to-hand combat and Dagon lost his hands. Because the true power and the true glory belong to God alone and he will share them with no other.

It's very important. God alone is God. If you try and squeeze God into your life alongside other gods, it's humiliating and degrading to God and it will not end well.

[18:30] if you put him in your life as no more valuable or no more precious than something else that's very precious, it's a very dangerous thing to do. That's why it gets worse for the Philistines.

If you look at the bottom of page 3 in verse 6, we read, the hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod and he terrified and afflicted them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory. There's a word play here. The word heavy is the word glory. Same word. So, as Mrs Phineas said, Ichabod, glory's gone.

Now, though Dagon has lost his hands, the hand of the God of Israel is glory, is heavy against the Philistines. This is the heart of the story.

This is the great reversal. See, weren't the Philistines the winners? Weren't they successful? Didn't they have the technology in numbers? Yes, but what we look at as powerful and valuable and winning actually is not.

[19:36] And what we look at as humiliation and degradation God exalts. This is the God of the Bible. And God strikes the Philistines with plagues as he would as he did the Egyptians.

and so the ark does a very speedy tour around Philistia. I didn't tell the nine o'clock congregation this but this is a parental guidance recommended moment.

The mice and tumours is a polite English translation of rats and hemorrhoids. So, what happens is yes, as the ark true, as the ark comes to each city, you know what they do?

They say, no, we don't. We'll send it to the next city. So, the ark does a very fast tour around the five cities. It's like a sort of a nuclear bomb that's leaking glory and they want to get it out of their hands.

And all of this has been done without any human help. And God has demonstrated that Dagon is completely useless and irrelevant. And I think just before we go to the last chapter, if there's anything to take from this, it is that if we elevate something in our sacred space to be equal with

God, you know, every idol we make, everything that we value very highly, no matter how good in itself, cannot compare to the glory of God.

[21 : 08] In fact, all our pleasures are actually in search of the glory of God. And it's a tragedy to settle for the gift and not the giver. God does not need us.

So we begin, we're about a paragraph in on page 4. Philistines are desperate to get rid of the ark. They call their top clergy for a solemn assembly and look at what they decide in chapter 6 verse 5, halfway through that big paragraph.

So you must make images of your tumours and images of your mice that ravage the land and give glory to the God of Israel.

Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. That's a brilliant statement. You see, if you want to get rid of God, you must make images.

It doesn't mean necessarily going out into the woods and chopping down a tree and carving faces on it. The Bible is very clear that we have idols of the heart. We manufacture idols.

[22 : 17] And one of the best ways to detect our idols is to listen to ourselves in conversation. Do you ever find yourself, hear yourself saying, I like to think that God would, and then you say something you'd like God to do. Or I can't believe that God would do, and then you say something you can't believe that God would do.

It's what you want to be true, but if you believe that, that's no more use than Dagon. we create our own idols because we're made for God's glory.

It's a natural human thing to do. But if you have God boxed up, or if you're sharing your God space with something else, what you're going to experience is not the glory of God, but something you've invented, a God in your own image.

You can tell that you're beginning to experience the true glory of the true God when God is above what you like and dislike. When you come with an attitude, you don't have a choice about it.

You have an attitude of awe and humility. The only one in this story who gets it right, or comes close to getting it right, is Dagon. He can see that what really matters in this equation is not what I think of God, what God thinks of me.

[23 : 35] God doesn't need us. And if he's peripheral to our lives, we have not got his glory. But at least the Philistine clergy recognise that they need to give God glory and they're dealing here with something of a completely different order.

They cannot manipulate, they have not the capacity to manage this. But again, instead of bowing down and calling on him, they come up with a plan. They say, let's send the ark back to Israel and let's make some offerings to God, a guilt offering.

And their suggestion, because I'm guessing the clergy were a bit stumped for ideas, let's make out of gold five tumours and five mice as a sign of our submission to God.

And at one level it's very religious and they've taken the most precious thing, they have gold, and they offer up to God so they won't hurt us anymore. But it's grotesque. And it is a crude way of trying to buy God off.

they want to dictate the terms to God. They know the Exodus, they know that God takes no delight in offerings, he wants an open ear and an open heart, he wants to share his glory with us, but they've still got a Dagon world view.

[24 : 56] See, God wants to be treated as more than a block of wood or an idol or a thing. So, they get two cows that have never walked together, they've just had calves, they put them together, they lock the calves away, which is a tricky thing to do because cows stay with their calves.

They put a cart behind them and the ark on the cart to see where it goes and the ark goes straight up the road to Beth Shemesh in Israel with the cows mooing in protest because they want to go back to their calves.

And when it comes into Israel in verse 20, the men of Beth Shemesh say, who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And the answer is no one. Well, you may think, David, that is a very negative way to finish a point.

You've come to a negative point and I want to remind you as we conclude of what I said at the beginning. When we try to describe something that is so brilliantly beyond our words, we have to speak negatively at first.

Because what's underneath and because what's going through these passages is the glory of God, I want to say it this way. We cannot confine and contain God in a box.

[26 : 06] His glory is not something we master, it's something we bow to and give ourselves to. It's not something you manipulate or control, it's something we come to realise matters more than anything else.

And God may appear helpless to us and often he doesn't act in the way that we think he jolly will ought to, just as Jesus dying on the cross. But this too is the glory of God.

And the truth that he doesn't need us is not cause for despair, it's cause for joy and longing. If you think about it, if God doesn't need us, why does he bother?

He bothers because of his great desire to share his glory with us and for us to enter his glory with him. God did not create us because he needed us to glorify him, but to share his glory with us.

And of course, if you keep reading through the Bible and you come to the New Testament, we find this is why Jesus came. And one of Jesus' closest friends, John, says, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father.

[27 : 19] Jesus Christ is the true ark. All that God did symbolically and temporarily in the ark, he does permanently in Jesus Christ.

The ark is a shadow, it cannot contain all of God's glory. Jesus is the reality, all the glory of God dwells in him. The ark was like the engagement ring, Jesus is the person, he's the partner.

You know, the ark was a symbol given by God, we shouldn't worship the symbol, Jesus is the reality, we are to worship him. The ark showed none of us could stand before God, but Jesus has come so that we could stand in the presence of God.

The ark brings death, Jesus brings life, the ark can't transform us, but Jesus does, he changes us. It's in Jesus Christ where God embraces us with his glory, pulls us to himself, changes us by that very glory.

And the moment of supreme glory in Jesus' life was when he was crucified and he hung on the tree, he stood in our place, he took our sin and as he faces God, he is crushed by the light of God's glory for us.

[28 : 35] He's put out of God's glory so that we might enter into God's glory. He suffers shame and humiliation so that we might draw near to God forever. And on the third day, God raised him by his own glory.

And now he has seated Jesus Christ at his right hand and he calls on every one of us to bow before Jesus and acknowledge him as the Lord, to see in the face of Jesus Christ the glory, all the glory that belongs to him.

And not just see it, but to savour it, to serve it as we serve him. These are God's terms. This is very simple.

He puts forward his son Jesus Christ and he calls us to come to him through him. To acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and to pray that we would increasingly see in his face all that we desire, all that we need.

And may we keep doing that through this service and the rest of today and the rest of our lives so that Jesus Christ will matter more to us than all things.

[29 : 43] Amen. please kneel to pray.

Father God, we come before you this morning and we confess that we naughty.
currents to