

# You Can't Put God in a Box

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray, Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening, in Christ's name, Amen. Grab a seat.

Well, good evening, folks. My name is Aaron. If you don't know me, Aaron, I'm the minister here, and I'm originally from New Zealand, which brings me to my first point.

I would especially like to welcome members of the Australian community who have chosen to join us here in this wonderful church. Our passage this evening, gee, it's good, isn't it?

Isn't it good? Were you hearing that thinking, wow, I do not want to preach that sermon. So our passage begins with Israel versus the Philistines.

It's kind of like Kilsnoo versus commercial drive, right? Like a big battle with smart cars versus fixed gear bicycles or something, right? So they have this big battle, and the Israelites are defeated.

[ 1 : 15 ] And the Israelites ask a very good question. Why has the Lord defeated us today? Which is a great question. We don't often think in those terms, right? Last night there was a rugby match, and Australia versus New Zealand, the semifinals for the Rugby World Cup.

New Zealand won. The All Blacks won. 20 points to 6. They're just numbers. One number is considerably higher than the other number. But again, they're just numbers.

And when the All Blacks, when the Wallabies lost, as the Australians said, when the Wallabies lost, I don't think anyone sort of said, you know, why has the Lord defeated us today? No, we don't think in those terms, right?

They were thinking, why do we lose today? And the answer is that they were outplayed in almost every aspect of the game for 80 minutes. But that's irrelevant.

I'll keep moving on. So Israel asked a very good question. Why has the Lord defeated us today? It's a good question. But their response was terrible.

[ 2 : 29 ] A terrible response to that question. We've been defeated, so what do we do? Well, let's get the Ark out. Let's wheel out the Ark, and that'll bring us home. Well, we're sure to win when we've got the Ark.

Now, you guys, this is the Ark of the Covenant, right? I'm sure you guys have seen the Indiana Jones series of documentaries. And you know that the Ark can do cool stuff, like it can melt Nazis, which is, that's cool, right?

But what is it really? Well, the Ark is this box that holds the tablets, the commandments of God amongst a few other things. But it represented God's promise to Israel.

It represented the presence of God. And so Israel's thinking, well, let's take that into our next fight with the Philistines, and we'll go okay.

We should win this, because it's happened in the past when we've got the Ark out. Now, it was not the right move. What was the right move? What should have they have done after their defeat?

- [ 3 : 34 ] Well, they should have said sorry. They should have repented. The reason they lost wasn't because they didn't have the Ark. The reason they lost was because the spiritual heart of Israel was completely rotten.
- We learned this last week, didn't we, with the Eli's sons, old, you know, itchy and scratchy or whatever, right? So these guys were super dodgy, and they were like leading the nation in sort of spiritual worship.
- And they were really, really, really sketchy, completely away from God. But instead of looking at their own lives, instead of repenting before God, saying they're sorry, these guys thought, well, let's get our religion on, you know?
- Let's grab it. Let's grab it, the externals of religion. And it's, you know, it's one of the great failings, I think, of the liberal church, whether it's Anglican or Lutheran or whatever.
- You know, within all of these denominations, there's kind of tends to be conservative evangelicals instead of liberals, right? Great failing of the liberal church is that they hold on to the externals of faith.
- [ 4 : 44 ] They hold on to the external stuff, like all the stuff, you know, all the stuff, but can, like, ignore God in all this. Paul writes to Timothy about this in 2 Timothy, and he says, he talks about people who are holding on to the form of religion, but denying the power of it.
- So these guys say, let's get the ark, and they think they have God because they've got it, and they don't. What they have is the furniture of religion. God's left the building a long time ago.
- So the next thing, they get the ark, comes from Shiloh, and who's bringing it? Hophni and Phinehas. So this is a nod in the text to say, team, look, seriously, seriously, look at this.
- This is the thing that's going to save you, carried by these really, really super sketchy guys. Come on. But a big shout goes up in Israel. Woo! We got the ark!
- Awesome. Awesome. This is great. This is a sure thing now, which goes to show you that volume doesn't indicate a heart after God. You know, just feeling amped up in a worship service doesn't mean that you're kind of onto it.
- [ 6 : 03 ] Anyway, so the Philistines hear this big cry, and they get freaked out. And in verse 9, it says that the leaders kind of do this big motivational speech. Come on, team. Come on. Be aggressive.
- Be aggressive. Right? Take courage, it says, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight.
- Not a bad speech, actually. So they go out for a second battle. And what happens is the Israelites just get completely hammered again and even worse.
- They lost about 4K, about 4,000 people the first time. This time they lose about 30,000 people. And the Ark is captured. Eli's corrupt sons are killed. That's not a great loss, to be honest.
- But it's a fulfillment of a prediction that we learned about last week. Okay, a couple of lessons so far. First one, God's power can't be manipulated.
- [ 7 : 04 ] Can't manipulate God's power. If the Ark of the Covenant didn't guarantee victory for these guys back in the days, you know, me attending church or saying the liturgy or doing whatever isn't going to guarantee my success and happiness in this world, you know.
- If you think it will, you're thinking that God's power is at your disposal. And you think if you do these certain things, everything will work out for you.
- Your faith has become superstition. Second point. These guys tried to take hold of the Ark and ignored the demands of God for holiness in their life.

Same with us. We can't claim to follow Jesus and, you know, do whatever we want. Live completely debauched lives. But this is what the Israelites were doing.

They wanted the benefits of being God's people, but living however they wanted. And that's why they lost the battle. That's why they lost the Ark. Okay, next scene.

[ 8 : 11 ] This is the story of Eli's death. We're still in chapter 4, chapter 4, verses 12 to 22. Eli, who was the judge of Israel, which is like the leader of Israel, he's waiting by a gate, he's blind, he's been eating, he's just gorged himself his whole life.

So he's incredibly unhealthy. He's sitting at this gate. This runner comes and tells him about what's happened in the battle, how he's lost his sons and he's lost the Ark and he falls backward and breaks his neck.

And his daughter-in-law dies during childbirth and names her baby Ichabod, meaning where is the glory? This is a very pivotal line, where is the glory? Because these three verses are a whole one big idea.

And it's all about the glory of God and how we respond to the glory of God. So what is the glory of God before I continue? I'm not old enough to tell you about it.

But it's like God on display, if you want a pithy explanation. God on display.

[ 9 : 15 ] And it is dangerous and it is wild. Chapter 5, the Ark goes on tour. The Philistines captured it.

And as was their custom, they wanted the people to know that we've not only defeated you, Israel, as your people, we've also defeated your God. Just to show you how badly we've schooled you, we're going to put your God in our temple.

And so they do that. This is the whole Dagon story, right? So they chuck in the temple with Dagon. Now, Dagon is the big cheese in terms of God. Dagon is the father of Baal.

He's the chief God. So they put the Ark in there. Philistines wake up the next day, it says. And they find Dagon's statue on its face before the Ark.

So they have to prop it up. And it's meant to be like a funny story. Like this is their God, the God of all gods in this pagan religion. And they kind of have to prop it up.

[ 10 : 19 ] So they prop it up. And then the next day, they find it face down again. But this time, its head and its hands have been broken off. Do you know the great irony of this?

And by the way, this little chapter 5 here, this is the heart of the whole of the passage. Chapter 4 and 6 all kind of point inwards to this thing in the middle here.

The great irony of this, the great joke of these three chapters is this. is that Dagon is the only one who gets it right.

Dagon is the only one who responds to God appropriately in three chapters. Now I am aware, just so you know, that Dagon is not real.

Okay? Alright, just so you know. Okay. However, as a character, he's the only one that responds to God properly. There's three chapters here. In verse 6 of chapter 5, it says, The Lord's hand was heavy on the Philistines.

[ 11 : 36 ] Heavy, heavy in glory, kind of really similar word there. The Lord's hand was heavy. And what was the Lord's hand, this heaviness?

What was this glory doing? Well, it was causing lots of problems for the Philistines. See, in the area that they were where they first took the ark, people started breaking out.

It says tumors, but we don't really know. It could be like hemorrhoids or boils or some rashy, awful thing. Like something unpleasant anyway was happening to the people around there. And so what are these?

And there were rats and mice and stuff, right? And so what else? So what did they do? Well, they decided to send it on to another city. So there's five cities down a coast, and they just sent it through all these cities.

And every time it went to a new city, the guy boils and hemorrhoids or whatever, and they'd be like, let's get rid of it. We've got to get rid of the glory of God. Let's get it out.

[ 12 : 30 ] And eventually they gather people together, and they say, okay, team, what are we going to do with this thing? You know? They go, well, let's send it back to Israel. We've had enough of it. And then there's that weird thing where they make the golden tumors.

Or hemorrhoids or whatever. Right? So I'll just pick the tumors from now on. So they make the golden tumors, right? And golden mice, I think, is actually in the text, not rats.

It was like a guilt offering. They kind of get it, kind of, but not really. I mean, they talk about wanting to give God the glory and stuff, but it's...

They go about it in a completely pagan way. They're trying to buy God off. They're trying to get God's glory off their back.

You know, we can do that, can't we? You know, like... Because the glory of God is this wild, dangerous, beautiful thing. It's God on display, and it makes demands of us, doesn't it?

[ 13 : 45 ] It makes demands of our life. And our unhealthy responses, sometimes it's like, get it off my back. What can I do to feel better about my situation here?

And we can buy God off by doing nice things, which are nice to do, and you should do them. But you can't buy God off. But it seems...

That's a... There's two unhealthy responses here in this passage, eh? You know, in this story here. Trying to buy God off and trying to get rid of His glory.

When it's such a shame, because one of the things as Christians that we're supposed to experience and be a part of is the glory of God. We're supposed to share in the glory of God, you know?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They don't need us, right? They don't need us. But they've chosen to share their lives with humanity and kind of invite us into that relationship.

[ 14 : 54 ] Sort of participate's not the right word, but it's invite us in for us to experience the glory. And... And they just want to get rid of it.

Or buy God off. So the next thing. The return of the ark. So the Philistines send the ark off back to Israel. Back to Beth Shemesh.

And they're kind of clever about it. They build this cart and chuck a couple of cows on the front. Put the ark in the cart. And they're cows that have been separated from their calves. And cows hate being separated from their calves, right?

They'll always go back to their calves. So they figure if these cows actually stick to the road and actually head to Beth Shemesh, this is God as, you know, God's doing something here. And it happens.

It's great. The ark gets back to Beth Shemesh. It arrives. And you kind of wish this was the end of the story. It's like, oh, the ark's eat great.

[ 15 : 53 ] We made cookies. And, you know, we were cuddled. And it was great. And we got it back. You know, like, this is awesome. But it doesn't end like that. It says in verse 19 that some men looked at the ark and died.

And what is it that they did? What does it really say? But it infers that there was this casualness. There was this indifference to the glory of God.

And they suffered because of it. And then the people in this, you know, this town who experienced this say this line in verse 20, which is a great line.

Who was able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? They go on to say something else which is terrible. But the first part's quite good. Maybe they're starting to get it.

Like, wow, this is, God, this is a, God's a big deal. You can't afford to be casual or familiar with God. But then the second half of the line is kind of weird to understand but it's basically like, well, let's get rid of it.

[ 16 : 56 ] You know, let's get it out of, let's get it out of here again. They're just as bad as the Philistines. What do we do with this glory? Well, we don't want it around here.

It's too difficult. It's too hard. It makes too many demands. We don't like it. Let's get rid of it. Which is what they do. And those are the last few verses. It talks about going to a different town.

Okay, team. What's this all got to do with Jesus? That's probably quite a good question, right? Let me take you to Philippians 2, verses 6 to 11.

Let me read this to you. Who, talking about Jesus here, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

You guys know this passage, right? But made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[ 18 : 12 ] And therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

If glory is God on display, then the greatest display of glory is Christ Jesus. It's God with flesh on. And this passage challenges us in many ways about how we think about Jesus.

How do we respond to God's glory? How do we respond to Jesus? Well, we can be like the men who looked at the ark in Beth Shemesh with indifference, as a novelty, you know.

Well, Jesus is cool, but he's just kind of one of a lot of prophets. And I like to think about Jesus sometimes. So he's not really in his rightful place in your life, if that's the case.

That's one way we can respond to God, I think, with some kind of casual indifference. God is, and Jesus is this kind of, like a thought experiment we like to think about sometimes.

[ 19 : 41 ] We can be like the Philistines. We can say, get away. I want to get this glory off my back. You know, trying to appease God by being particularly religious. Thinking that that's gonna, that we can leverage favour with God by doing that.

We can put ourselves in God's good books by doing stuff. We can be like the guys initially, right at the start. We can be like the ark getters.

You know, we only show interest in the glory of God and Jesus when, when we're in real trouble. You know, our prayers are always requests, for example.

Or we could be like Dagon. Ironically, like Dagon. Which is the appropriate response. Is to humble ourselves before Almighty God.

who was able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? It's a great question, right?

[ 20 : 50 ] Well, all of us can. All of us can. But before we stand before this mighty God, we have to kneel before this mighty God.

we have to humbly come before God and say, God, I am not the man or the woman I should be. I'm sorry. Forgive me. And because of what Christ has done, because Christ has lived the life that we can't live, that we'll never be able to pull off, we can come quite confidently to the glory of God.

We don't have to be people that are like, get off my back. We don't have to be people who try and appease God. God has, his wrath, his anger, whatever you want to call it, has been appeased because of what Christ has done.

So we can actually stand before the Lord, this holy God. And that's the strategy, team. That's the strategy. I hope this has been a challenge to you, this passage.

It was a difficult one to get my head around. If you were here this evening like a guest and you're not a Christian, but it's sort of like, wow, this is interesting what you're talking about.

[ 22 : 08 ] But I have a lot more questions. That's awesome. I'd love to talk to you. In fact, starting Thursday week, I run a little short course that lasts seven weeks called Christianity Explored.

We'll meet here or at our church offices and we'll have a meal together. We'll meet like on a Thursday night at 6.30 for seven sort of consecutive Thursdays. We'll read something about, read a bit about Jesus.

Then you have space to ask any questions you like. Or if you like, you can just sit and listen to other people ask questions. There is no question too stupid or too hostile and all are welcome.

In the PLN, which is the white sheet, I've got my details in there. I'd love to hear from you. Folks, can I just pray for you as we finish? Father, thank you for Jesus, Lord.

And we think about these songs we are singing that are filled with thanksgiving. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you that because of you, we don't have to try and buy off God.

[ 23 : 18 ] We don't have to send your glory away. We don't have to try and escape it because of what you've done on the cross.

Lord, help us to be people that know your grace, that know your mercy, that know your forgiveness, that know how it is to live a life that is marked by those things.

And thank you for this passage tonight which points to you, Jesus. In Christ's name. Amen.