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Putting God in a Box

1 Samuel 4

Prayer: *Father, again I just thank you for who you are, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for this church, Lord, it is a product of your power, your grace and we're grateful and thankful that we can still meet and still have that freedom to meet. So I pray again as we open up your book, Lord, as we are looking into 1 Samuel that you would continue to give us the gift of the presence of your Holy Spirit. God, accompany us and make this of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we are in 1 Samuel and when we last left Samuel, he was still just a young boy telling Eli, the high priest of Israel, the devastating judgment that awaited him. If you remember the era of judges is coming to a close, Israel was in an advanced state of rebellion when young Samuel gave Eli the news of this pending disaster awaiting Israel. It was Samuel's first prophetic utterance but it certainly wasn't going to be his last.

And chapter 3 ends with the next prophesy to come from Samuel. We pick up on *1 Samuel 3* starting at verse 19. It says: *And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.*

Now that prophetic word from the Lord to Israel through Samuel, that took twenty years to be delivered. We had to jump three chapters but if we do we find out in *1 Samuel 7*, it says: *From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.*

You know, many a times I've mentioned how different we Westerners are about how we understand time compared to the way the Eastern mindset might view it. I mean, we would have had the equivalent of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations before we actually arrived at a time span of twenty years and yet that's how long God chose to remain silent. So Israel finds itself in the midst of a war at the time God decides to speak once again.

We pick up at *1 Samuel 4* starting at verse 1. It says: *And the*

word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?"

Now you have to understand this is not the first time that Israel has found itself in this type of situation. Many, many years before during the time of Joshua's leading of Israel she had a similar crisis. God had given them all kinds of victories until suddenly he seemed to have withdrawn his support, and the result was a resounding defeat.

If you go back to *Joshua 7:5*, it says: *And the hearts of the people melted and became as water. Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel. And they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord GOD, why have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, when*

Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name?"

Well Joshua's concern, it was naturally for him and his people but his greatest concern was for the great name of his God which would suffer at his defeat, at their defeat. So he's bringing the people's fate before God. And God told him that someone from their camp had stolen and buried items from a previous victory. And after a systematic inquiry, they discovered and punished the thief and so Israel was restored.

Well, just -- I want you to consider, consider the reaction to a battlefield defeat back then when Joshua was at the head of Israel with the reaction that Israel now has with Eli and his sons as their leaders. Their response was wildly and sadly different.

This is how they responded. They said: *"Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."* There's no concern whatsoever for God's name, there's no concern for his reputation, there's not even a questioning of God to determine where they had failed. Instead there's nothing but a grotesque desire to use the

ark of the covenant as a talisman, as a good luck charm. They literally thought they could put God in a box and trot it out to guarantee themselves a victory.

You know, we often use a phrase to describe a narrow and false perspective on God, you know, perceiving God much more from our own prejudices, our own desires so that they are literally putting our own restrictions on God, and we call that putting God in a box. Well here literally, literally Israel has done just that. I mean, they genuinely believed they had the God of the universe in a box. In this case it was the ark of the covenant which was literally a wooden box that God had agreed to temporarily covenant with his people in. But Israel had fallen so far as to think they could bring this -- quote -- "God in a box" with them to ensure victory over the Philistines. It proved to be an absolutely disastrous conclusion.

It says: So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great

shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness."

Now understand Israel at this time has no relationship with the living God. All they really had was a history of that relationship and the fact that the Philistines also remembered that history. It wasn't just the leaders of Israel who had reduced God to a symbolic box, it was the people themselves who genuinely thought that they had a magic God box that would give them a victory.

And so the Philistines, they hear the uproar in Israel's camp and in spite of their shouts, they steel themselves for the battle, saying in verse 9: *"Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight."*

See, the ark had the exact opposite effect from what Israel had expected. I mean, at first the Philistines, they were terrified, but the very terror they experienced energized them to respond to

the fury that only desperate people can muster.

Verse 10 says: *So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.*

Now Hophni and Phinehas were the priests who accompanied the ark thinking it would provide the ultimate weapon, and just had God had prophesied through his prophet before, they both lost their lives.

Now Eli gets the news. It says: *A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And the man said to Eli, "I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." And he said, "How did it go, my son?"*

Now the first thing we can gather from this exchange is that the ark is Eli's genuine concern. This is actually one of his saving graces. You see, his concern is not so much for his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were crooks and thieves, who absolutely ignored their father's beliefs, his concern was for the ark of God. And he may have realized that it had been reduced to a good luck charm because his concern was focused on that ark. And I think there's a lesson there and there's a lesson for all of us right here and right now.

You see, I think there's a temptation for us to be doing the exact same thing that Israel did with their God in a box except that the box that many evangelicals are looking to is actually called MAGA and the God inside is Donald Trump.

I just want to take a moment to share my concern about this year's political contest, the one that's beginning to occupy every single newscast, because I was thinking about this, and I looked back at a message that I gave four years ago directed at the same end and it was astounding to me by the grace of God how prescient that message actually was.

I want to quote to you from the exact message I gave four years ago in November of 2020. I said this, I said -- quote -- "I think it

goes without saying that this year the choice for many is complicated. You have a choice between choosing a party headed by a man with serious moral shortcomings or a party determined to defy God directly in what He has clearly commanded in scripture."

And I went on to outline the struggles that would ensue if Mr. Biden had been elected, and I'm sad to say that Mr. Biden has outdone himself in terms of doing exactly what I was concerned about.

And again, understand, I very rarely bring politics into faith but when politics and faith intersect, there are so many areas that our current president's policies directly attack biblical norms that I feel we just need to recognize it and resist it. From education where the Biden administration is now going after Christian universities with a vengeance, to culture where Mr. Biden proudly proclaims his support for the trans community, for the obliteration of God's design for male and female, particularly when it comes to children and sports. He's also proudly championing the mutilation of children by doctors, a practice considered so out of bounds that almost all of Europe has now banned it and all of it accompanied by a fawning devotion to all things LGBTQ. And then there's the lack of support for the nation of Israel as it comes under assault by its enemies, but in particular it's life itself as the Biden

administration embraces with a passion the very thing that the Bible condemns outright, and that's the killing of children in the womb.

Mr. Biden is now arguably the most pro-abortion president in the history of the United States, and herein lies the problem for us. See, there are many folks today, myself included, who see this administration as Israel just might have seen the Philistines. Israel was terrified of the Philistines and we have our own Philistines attempting to attack every aspect of biblical norms and culture.

We look around at the culture that we see and we have here the month of June where the LGBTQ agenda is going to be celebrated ad nauseam by every single pandering enterprise, from Wal-Mart to major league baseball, telling you that what used to be considered a cardinal sin -- pride -- is now absolutely wonderful as long as it's coming from this community.

We've seen the justice system turned upside down in a courtroom against Mr. Trump, so much so that many of those on the other side acknowledge they're looking at a banana republic sham. But now even more ominously, we see the Biden justice system meting out lengthy prison sentences for anyone who would dare protest at an

abortion clinic.

I mean, you can have pride marches with men marching down the street stark naked or BLM protests with dozens of buildings set on fire with no consequences whatsoever. You can have administrative buildings taken over on college campuses by anti-semitic protesters, smashing their way in and occupying buildings for weeks, again, with no consequences whatsoever. And yet Paulette Harlow, a 75-year-old grandma in poor health, has been sent to jail for two years for praying and blocking an abortion clinic entrance for two hours. Her sister got two years as well. And another, Lauren Handy, got more than five years in jail for the exact same event.

Joan Bell -- hear me now -- Joan Bell of Montague, New Jersey, got sentenced to more than two years. My guess you've never even heard of this even though all of the principals involved, one of those principals involved is literally from the town next to us. Yeah, they blocked, they blocked a business that's involved in killing. But no, they weren't screaming and cursing or burning anything, they were simply gathered together to pray.

So take over a building or even burn down a building that suits a political position, there's no consequences. Shut down for two

hours the business of taking life, and you will go to jail for a long, long time. And I say this because there has never been anything like this. My guess is you probably never even heard about it because the news has been largely squashed.

You see, the frustration of seeing the moral and ethical collapse of our culture has created this sense that the Philistines are once again just outside the gates of the city and they're about to come crashing through it. And just like Israel did when they saw this impending threat, it turns not back to God but to some magic "God in the box" they thought would solve all of their problems. And that's just what I fear about much of the support from Mr. Trump.

I just want to say, like I said it four years ago, I'm not a big fan of Donald Trump. I think he's narcissistic, he's clearly a womanizer with a mean streak who goes after his enemies in a decidedly non Christ-like manner, but there was another narcissistic womanizer with a mean streak who went after his enemies in a decidedly non Christ-like manner who happened to be named Samson. And in spite of his many faults, God was able to use him. So I have no doubt whatsoever that God can and does use Mr. Trump powerfully, just look at the Supreme Court. But again, we have to understand that politics is no substitute for the sovereignty of God. As the great reformer of the past Abraham

Kuyper once said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

And it's easy to think that politics rules the day but politics is simply a means to an end and the end is always going to be Christ. That's why I get nervous when people ascribe to a man a future that can only be shaped and molded by Christ. Mr. Trump's a politician; he's not a saint. The solutions are political, but our issues are largely spiritual. I mean, I have no idea whether or not Mr. Trump is actually a Christian or not; I wonder if even he knows. I mean he's made statements even including this past week about his own personal faith that are theologically baffling at best, but his faith is not ours to determine. What is ours to collectively determine as a nation is who our leaders are going to be.

See, the point is Christ has given us a government where citizens themselves are responsible for electing their leaders as opposed to the judges and kings of ancient times where no one had any say whatsoever. Folks claim voting is a sacred responsibility and there's some truth to that, I mean, if there are 200 million eligible voters in the United States, that would make every one of us as individuals 1-200 millionth responsible for our elected officers. And as tiny as that responsibility may seem, it's enough

to make each of us responsible for the government that we receive. So a responsible position for us evangelicals is to see Christ as the end of all things but politics as simply a means among other means to that end.

I was having a conversation with someone recently about voting and my unhappiness with the candidates. They wanted to know, well then, who are you going to vote for? I said, "Look, in spite of his failings, I would crawl over broken glass to vote for Mr. Trump this fall." And the reason why is because voting in the United States has become a binary affair.

I mean, there's other characters, you know, there's RFK, there's a few others, but we know that this race is between Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden. And Mr. Biden who masquerades as a Catholic has trampled on so many areas that Bible-believing Christians view as sacred that I personally believe no one in good conscience could actually support him for president. And I know, I know there are Christians who see this in an entirely different light and actually feel that Mr. Biden is the only one their conscience could support.

And to that I refer to Paul's lengthy discussion on how we're to respond when brothers or sisters differ about things the Bible is not explicit about. Politics happens to be one of them. This is

what Paul said in Romans 14: As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

So I'm telling you flat out who I am fully convinced to vote for, and if somebody decides to vote for the other candidate on the basis of his understanding of his obligation as a Christian, I simply have to accept him at his word and move on. I cannot challenge their faith because it's not my place. I may challenge his sanity but not his faith.

And having said all that, I want to focus on why I think there's a real danger in seeking Mr. Trump as our "God in the box" solution to these Philistines who are here at the gate. And the main reason is that it fails to look at politics from a wider perspective, actually from the perspective that I believe matters most to God.

One of the most frustrating things about our culture's collapse is that much of the church has collapsed along with it and statistics bear this out. The days when the church was held in universal respect are long over and folks are saying that genuine persecution might be only an election away.

And if you look at this from man's perspective, it certainly looks like things are getting darker and darker and that being a Christian just might become far more costly. But if you look at this from God's perspective, you will quickly see that the strongest churches in the world, the ones that are moving the fastest, the ones that are filled with life and energy are those churches in places like China and Iran and Afghanistan and parts of Africa and parts of South America, Mexico, India. And one thing about all of those places that they have in common is that the gospel in those places is both hated and persecuted.

Each week at our corporate prayer meeting we take up a different area of the world, we pray for those saints who are being actively persecuted, and what a difference we find between their prayers and ours. Oftentimes we find people brutalized, raped, robbed, beaten and in prison and they're praying for the very people who did that to them.

And so we can draw some conclusions from the typical responses to persecution that a great many believers have. I mean, there's almost a universal response from the persecuted community that is summed up well by a statement from Open Doors. This is what they say -- quote -- "Persecuted" -- now pay attention to what they're saying here. "Persecuted Christians, no matter what country they are from, do not ask us to pray that persecution would end, but rather ask us to pray that they stand strong through the persecution. They do not wish to be delivered from the persecution, but rather ask us to pray that they would be able to overcome the trials that they are facing in a way that is honoring to God."

Nik Ripken and his book *The Insanity of God* made the exact same case. He said persecuted believers never ask that their persecution be removed. They only ask for the grace to withstand it well. And after reading *The Insanity of God*, which is still one of the best books I have ever read, I think I understand why. See, persecuted believers pay an enormous price but they uniformly think they're the ones getting the bargain.

And the best context I can put this in is if you remember the movie *Rocky*, you remember Rocky decides he's going to begin training for

the heavyweight crown, so his life drastically changes. His life goes from easy to hard. You know, they show him getting up at 4:00 o'clock in the morning to go out in that frozen predawn hours to run for miles and his diet changes drastically, he gives up all the junk food, he eats only what his body needs. You remember that scene of him eating a half dozen raw -- drinking a half dozen raw eggs. And he borrows time in his butcher friend's freezer to work on his boxing technique with slabs of frozen beef. And from everything that we can see from the outside, his life has taken a drastic and painful turn. So drastic and so painful we're tempted to help him find some relief. But if you were to tell him, "Don't worry, Rocky, we can make all this pain stop," he would look at you like you were crazy because he understands that the pain has a purpose. He's going for a crown. And so it is with those believers who are undergoing persecution.

This is what Paul said in *1 Corinthians 9*. He said: *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

See, the persecuted church understands exactly what Paul was getting at here, because they, too, were going for a crown that never fades. And every day in spite of the hardship and the pain and the fear, they have the sense of Christ's presence that is more real and more immediate than anything you and I have ever dreamed of. They have a deep, abiding sense of God's grace and approval, and along with that, constant reminders that he is there right alongside them going through it with them in spite of how awful it may be.

These folks might look at us, see that we live in a place of great ease and comfort and wealth and that basically nobody in this society is really satisfied, and they wonder what it is, what it really is or who it really is that's getting the short end of the stick. They've got Christ, they've got the Holy Spirit, the joy of the Lord and profound hardship and they see us as having Hollywood, iPads, Wal-Mart and a profound existential boredom and they think we're the ones who desperately needs prayer; and guess what, they are right.

I mean, there's a reason why the persecuted seldom ask that the persecution stop. It's because the presence and the grace of God is so great a pleasure that even persecution can't take it away.

So one cause for rejoicing in persecution is the presence of God on a level that only the persecuted can really know. And what I'm trying to say is that our present administration is the most hostile towards Christianity that one has ever been, it's the most I've ever seen in my lifetime. And should Mr. Biden be reelected, I have no doubt it's going to get worse. But then I ask myself the same question you might be tempted to ask Rocky in the midst of his training, and that is do you want the pain to stop or do you want the results that it's going to produce?

When I say "pain," I would say we're at a level far below than what I consider the actual persecution. Nothing like the persecution we've seen brothers and sisters endure for years now all over the world. What we are enduring at this level is nothing compared to their struggles and if and when it gets worse, it will do two things that can only benefit us. It will separate genuine believers from those who were just along for the ride and it will strengthen and intensify those with genuine commitment to the kingdom.

And so the good news in all of this is that regardless the outcome of the election in November, we still will have the ability to rejoice and praise God. If Mr. Trump is victorious, we can take

refuge in the fact that some of the attacks on faith will be addressed and we'll have probably four more years to prepare for inevitable persecution that's coming some time down the road.

If Mr. Biden is elected, I have no doubt things are going to grow more and more difficult for us as Christians and for us as a faith community. But in the end I can certainly see this may well be the best thing that can ever happen to us. After all, it's the sovereign Lord of the universe who said this in *Matthew 5*:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

So much for my rant on politics. Let me just get back to Eli and Israel's disastrous attempts to use the ark of the covenant as a magic charm. We get back to Eli is breathlessly listening to this battlefield report from someone who's just returned from the front, and the news is nothing but awful. He said: *He who brought the news answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has*

been captured." As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

So the sad reign of Eli as prophet and priest has come to a tragic end. Actually from the perspective of the average citizen, God had completely abandoned Israel from her time of need. I mean, God's prophet and the high priests Hophni and Phinehas are now dead, but the tragedy doesn't stop there. It says: *Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."*

Just picture the news this woman receives. Israel has been utterly defeated, her husband is dead, her father-in-law is dead, and she's about to go into labor. And as we mentioned before, the birth of a

son is the highlight of a Jewish woman's life but there's no life left in this woman. There's no reason to live including the birth of her son, so she appropriately names the child Ichabod which means "no glory" or "the glory has departed." I mean, how would you like to be saddled with a name like that? I mean, understand, the ark of the covenant, the very place where God had tabernacled is now in the hands of the gloating victorious Philistines. And no doubt all of Israel is filled with abject terror and what the future is going to bring since God has clearly abandoned the ark and the nation; but again, we have the advantage of knowing the whole story.

The fact is God has not at all abandoned Israel but he is clearly disciplining her severely. We're going to see in future chapters that the Philistines have no reason to gloat over this capture. It would soon become an absolute disaster to them, a disaster so bad that they would desperately seek to rid themselves of that ark. But it points out two things about God that we need to keep in mind. Number one, God is absolutely sovereign over the affairs of men, including our politics. I mean, the rank and file Jews who saw the ark being captured must have thought God was either too weak to defeat their enemy or that he'd altogether decided to abandon them but they had no idea that neither was true.

When Eli heard the bad news about the battle, he had to have remembered the prophecies spoken by the prophet some twenty years before that way back in *1 Samuel 2*. The prophet said: *And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day.* And even though everything seemed to wreak of chaos and destruction, it was obvious God's still in charge. He was then and he is now. I mean, there is still not one square inch of this earth that Christ isn't still able to call "mine."

And point number two, God will never forsake or abandon his own. You know, the beauty of scripture is that in many of the historical books we get to see the big picture, the picture that nobody in Israel was able to see. You know, God's ark packed up on a Philistine cart and carted away must have seemed like the very end for those Jews. They had no idea it was just the beginning of a brand new era of God dealing with Israel.

So what happens? What happens if God ushers in a brand new beginning for his people in America, one that might look as disastrous as the ark being captured? Well, we remember what God has promised us. This is what he promises in *Romans 8:32*. He said: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

See, God points us always, always to the cross. If God was willing to leave heaven itself to come down to live among us and do it perfectly so that he could earn the right to take his perfect life to the cross and offer it up as payment for our sin, if the King of the universe was willing to be stripped naked and nailed to a cross for us, isn't it reasonable to assume that he'll see us through anything that comes our way politically or otherwise, just as he's done so for Israel? God's already sealed his commitment to us with his blood, and that's far more real than any God in the box this world or the church can come up with.

Jesus put it this way in *Matthew 10*. He said: *Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.* Folks, the more you believe that, the less who our president is is going to matter in November. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you. I thank you that your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven regardless the politics that surrounds us, regardless the hysteria that surrounds us. We can take solace, we can gain peace in knowing that you are sovereign and every square

inch of this world is yours. And so we pray for the grace and the strength to allow the process to go forward to do our very best to be part of that process the way you have encouraged us to but to recognize that in the end it is your choice, your sovereign choice, and we accept it. And we accept it in Jesus' name. Amen.