

March 30, 2008 – God in a Box – Pastor David Porter

One of Saddam Hussein's statues was pulled down on April 9, 2003. It was designed to be a signal that his awful regime had ended. The symbolism was clear: Saddam was no longer to be feared. Of course, time has revealed that defeating those with similar ideologies is not an easy matter.

Twenty days earlier, on March 20, 2003, United States forces began an attack on Iraq, launching a conflict often referred to as the second gulf war. Their intent, so it was claimed, was to topple the government of Saddam Hussein in order to prevent future large scale attacks by Iraqi forces on other nations. It has continued to be a nasty conflict for the past five years, with no end in sight. Just this week, it was noted that the US forces saw their list of soldiers killed in battle pass the 4000 mark.

Approximately 3060 years earlier, another war was waged, this one between the nation of Israel and the Philistines. The casualty list in this particular conflict was much greater. In one day, 30000 of Israel's soldiers were killed. On that same day, the ark of the Lord was captured by the Philistines. That's when the problems got worse. Today I'm using the title "**God in a Box.**" I want to direct your attention to **I Samuel 5:1-12** to see what happened next.

This chapter comes in the middle of a section (chapters 4-7) that is referred to as the 'ark narratives'. The overall message of this whole section is that God is not something or someone to be controlled. God is sovereign and as such is beyond our control, manipulation or ownership. Unfortunately we don't always get the message. We say that God is sovereign, but we live otherwise. Israel was punished because they thought of God as being in the box. As long as God was in the box, everything was OK, and everyone was happy, supposedly. But God proved very clearly to Israel and the Philistines that He cannot be contained in one place nor controlled by his followers. He is God, completely other than us and must be honoured as such.

Yet we make the same mistakes as the Israelites today. How many times do we pray and, when we don't get the answer we desire, conclude that we just don't have enough faith? We must be doing something wrong, because God is not answering as we desire. Or worse, we accuse someone of not being healed because they don't have enough faith. What we are really saying by such statements or beliefs is that God is subject to us. If we just say the right words, then we've got God right where we want Him. Check out some of the books available to Christians: *How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer*; *How to Listen to God* (Charles Stanley); *How You Can Be Led by the Spirit of God* (Kenneth Hagin); *Six Steps to Spiritual Revival: God's Awesome Power in Your Life* (Pat Robertson); *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (Joel Osteen). While the information in these books may be good, the look and feel is that these spiritual blessings are obtainable if only we will follow the prescribed steps.

How many of you have heard of pop theology? It's short for popular theology, that is, religious thinking based on the popular ideas of the day. OK, well how many of you have heard of pop machine theology? Well, here it is. We all know how a pop machine works, right? Even a small child can tell you what to do. Some people can even tell you how to get a free pop from some machines. Let's see if it works! Who wants a drink? Now what do we do? We put in the money - \$1.50, press the button of what you want, and what's the result? You get the kind of drink you want! Let's try it again.

That's great for getting a drink. You want reliability when you are looking for a bottle of pop. But what about our relationship with God? We are people who want to know how things work. A couple of weeks ago, I watched a TV show with Joel, called "How It's Made" on the Discovery Channel. It takes you into various factories, etc, to see the manufacturing process behind everyday products. I think the episode we watched together featured motorcycles, clay pipes, football helmets and whistles. (I had to ask Joel about what was on the show, because I remembered watching; he remembered what we saw.) It's an interesting show that I like to watch, but don't get to see very often. I like to see how things work, how they're made, etc. It's indicative of humanity's desire to figure things out, to control things. I always wonder how some inventors come up with their creations. How did Edison figure out you could record sound on an aluminum cylinder? Even more mystifying is, what first gave him the thought to even try? My point is that we want to take things apart to see what makes them work. We treat God that way also. We like to think that He's something that we can analyze and figure out how He works – hence the popularity of books with "How to..." and "___ steps to...".

Just like the pop machine, we believe (or at least we live like we believe) that if we just say the right words, press the right buttons, and put in the right amount of money, that God will be forced to give us what we want. Israel behaved in much that same way toward God. They viewed God as someone captive to their interests. Hadn't he committed Himself to them? So they had God right inside the ark of the covenant, so to speak, or in the box. Their thought was that if they took the ark into battle with them, they would be taking God along, and then He would be forced to make sure they won. How wrong they were, when they thought they had it all figured out!

In our Scripture reading earlier, we heard the words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel: "Knowing the correct password—saying 'Master, Master,' for instance— isn't going to get you anywhere with me." God is not a performing seal, ready to perform tricks and miracles at our command. Again, in Jesus' words from Matthew 7, "All you did was use me...."

The Philistines did not have a direct relationship with God, and thus didn't know His laws, but God did not tolerate their treatment of the ark either. They saw it as the literal representation of the god of the Israelites, and put it in the temple of their supreme god, Dagon. They used it as a war trophy, placing it there to honour their god for conquering the Israelite god. In addition, they mistakenly thought they were honouring God by placing the ark in the temple of Dagon. Their system of belief included many gods, and adding one more could only make things better for them, so they thought. However, God cannot be in anything but first place, even though we must understand that God was never in the box. As the familiar saying has it, 'He must be Lord of all or He's not lord at all.' However trite some of these familiar sayings can be, there is truth in them. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. The Philistines found out that God was not to be taken lightly. They discovered that God put the idol Dagon in its rightful place – on the floor in front of the ark in a position of worship! When they still didn't get the message, they were inflicted with tumours and rats. Some scholars studying the text have concluded that what the Philistines actually experienced was outbreaks of the bubonic plague. Not knowing what to do, they began playing hot potato with the ark because of what was happening to the people wherever it was kept. They then concluded that they needed to send it back to Israel.

We can't put or keep God in a box, though we often try. Even if we could put or keep God in a box, then what would we do? As the Philistines found out, it's a little like lighting a stick of dynamite and then sealing it in a cardboard box! We cannot manipulate God like a pop machine. Neither can we use Him as a trained seal or any other circus animal. He is the sovereign God. He commands first place – well, truly, He commands the only place in our lives. He will not share our loyalties with anyone or anything else.

There are two truths in theology regarding the nature of God: transcendence (superior or above; that which is beyond all limits of human experience) and immanence (to indwell or belong to; that God is present in or with the created order). Transcendence means that God is completely other, completely superior to humanity. Immanence means that God is in the world, intimately involved in the affairs of humanity. Problems arise when we stress one of these over the other. To shut Him in the heavens is to deny that He is involved at all, or knowable in any way. To put Him in a box is to say that He is not separate from humanity, but is trapped in creation and therefore subject to our whims and wishes. This is one case where you can have it both ways; in fact you must. God is **both** completely other **and** intimately involved. Intertwined with both aspects is His sovereignty. We cannot limit Him in either regard.

But as human beings with limited understanding, we often make several mistakes in our views of God. I want to highlight three of the common ones here: One is like Sherman, with his view of Santa Claus: God is too good to ever really condemn anyone for what they do. This view incorrectly believes that God will always forgive no matter what; that God is too kind to judge anyone or punish them. Another is that God is sitting up in heaven just waiting for us to make a mistake so he can punish us. Jesus makes it clear, and so does Charlie Brown (the rain falls on the just and the unjust), that God is gracious to both the good and the bad. A third is from Linus: your beliefs don't really matter, as long as you're sincere. The Bible speaks of truth that is not changeable. Not all religions lead to God. Jesus said "I am the way...."

God instructed the Israelites to build the ark of the covenant, and it served to symbolize His presence among them. They made the mistake of believing that they had God in a box, and therefore He was subject to their control. We cannot be too hard on them, as we are often guilty of the same belief, at least in practice.

God is completely other, unknowable by us. But He has revealed Himself to us through the world, His Word – the Bible, and through the person and work of Jesus. God in a box? – Never! But He can dwell within you if you invite Him in. But His presence in our lives is on His terms, not ours. So, have you tried to put God in a box, or is He in your life?