

God in a Box

December 9th, 2007

1 Samuel 4

Rodney Swab

God in a Box

These Israelites thought God lived in a box

It was a beautiful box ~ but it was still a box

The box was designed to be carried

~ portable omnipotence was theirs

~ they regarded this box as modern soldiers might regard their howitzer

~ hook it up behind the Hummer and take it anywhere

They call their God an **it** in verse 3

~ they mistake the box for God

~ shockingly irreverent..

~ but our culture does the same...

A hat box

Dodge House museum in CB, IA

~ beaver top hat (President Lincoln)

~ looks in place on table in museum

But what would happen if I chose to wear it?

~ People would think me weird or at least out-of-style

Many people now think of God as they do of the top hat

~ it fit in 150 years ago - but no more

~ being a biblical Christian today is like wearing a beaver top hat

~ everyone else is wearing no cap or a ball cap

~ maybe... some wear top hats on Sunday mornings...

What's the first thing you ask your kids when you find them fighting?

Transition: Who started it?

Going into Battle Unprepared

Israel started it

Israel started this war

~ v1 – Israel went out to battle against...

They had been subject to the Philistines

~ v9 – as they have been to you...

Israel was spiritually unprepared for the fight

~ "they hadn't inspected their cannon before they started this war"

Do we also battle although unprepared?

Our life is war (2 Cor 10:3-6 "for though we walk...")

Yet we enter into battle unprepared

We enter into our days without having read the Word and prayed

We prepare messages, counsel people, do "the business" of the church daily

We must do these things – yet these things are aspects of war

We will do them well only if we are prepared – as in battle preparedness

When we regard them as 'normal' – we no longer remember we're at war

What is worse than this – worse than not preparing for the war we're in?

To willingly accept the role of vassal to an evil state

To not make war against an evil oppressor

Our failures and our weaknesses should drive us to God – to His presence

But failure can instead lead to:

~ a TV remote

~ sleeping in

~ idleness

~ any number of other diversions

When this happens we have:

~ relinquished the field to the Philistines

~ cast down our swords and refused to fight

~ negotiated our own temporary armistice with the enemy

~ In short: We have deserted God's army

Transition: Let me share a story about fighting...

Success and Motivation

Witnessing success story

Once upon a time...

A few people witnessed to a man – well-armed against the gospel

They met with him week after week –eventually he turned to the Lord

They asked him why – what had they done that worked?

Arguments were pitiful... But you kept coming back...

You wouldn't be whipped... This I attributed to God...

We cannot win the victory... Only God can do that...

But we must not remove ourselves from the battlefield...

Israel fought – but why – what was their motivation?

Were they indignant that an uncircumcised people had invaded their land?

Or were they upset that people were stealing and destroying their crops
and humiliating them?

Both are valid... But the latter cannot displace the former.

We must question our motives for fighting...

- ~ Are we fighting to defend God's honor or our own?
- ~ Are we fighting to propagate God's truth or our own?
- ~ Are we fighting to glorify God or ourselves?

Transition: Israel is defeated in battle...

An Unanswered Question

The people return to the camp

The elders ask, *"Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?"*

What a good question!

This presupposes 2 very important things:

First) It was God who defeated them – not the Philistines.

~ all adversity in our life exists by God's design...

~ if God did not will for it to exist – it would not – it is that simple...

Second) Their question presupposes a reason for their defeat

~ may we be so astute to ask ourselves this question...

~ but may we be more diligent in seeking the answer...

A crazy plan

They asked a good question

"Why has the Lord defeated us today?"

~ but they don't answer it

~ instead they seize upon a reckless plan.

"Let us bring the ark of the covenant to us that it may save us..."

~ Irrational!

~ Cornelius van Til – *"The greater the unbelief of a people the more irrational will be their behavior."*

The unbelief of this people seems to have been very great.

3 errors so far:

1) Confused their God for a box

2) Went into battle unprepared

3) Didn't answer their own question

But there are at least 3 more...

Transition: Let's look at 3 more errors of the Israelites

3 More Errors Preceding the Rout

First ~ Israelites assume God wants them to win the battle

They don't push for answer to question they just asked...

~ *"Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?"*

Note it is not addressed to God... But to one another rhetorically

They do not ask God because they have no relationship with God

~ They're used to making decisions without consulting God (thumb phrase)

~ This is how they've been making all of their decisions ~ they're used to it

Their faith is dead... it is rhetorical... it is symbolic...

Beck Wethers illustration ~ 1996 Mt Everest - Into Thin Air

~ Frozen hands ~ returned to USA ~ X-ray taken ~ hand is dead

~ The hand is dead but still working ~ use of the hand will cease

~ Churches filled with such people - Land filled with such churches

Second ~ They think the box just needs to be closer

v3 - *"Let us bring the ark ... to us ... that it may save us..."*

Their God is doing them no good way back there in Shiloh...

~ *Illustration* of Balak and Balaam (Nbr 23:13, 27)

~ Perhaps His power will be greater closer to our battle front

~ This box ~ containing their God ~ like a big lucky charm or rabbit's foot

~ They'll pull God out of His box like a magic genie ~ to do their bidding

Third ~ Rely upon Hophni and Phineas

They rely upon a vile Hophni and Phineas to preside over this debacle

~ For years they have corrupted the tabernacle services

~ Placed prostitutes at door of tabernacle

Many years earlier (*Samuel was a boy*) God had promised to kill them

~ The people had then complained about them

~ Now the people have them lead the parade out of Shiloh

~ Over 30 years the people came to embrace their evil ways

Conservative opposition to Clinton c/ National Endowment for the Arts

~ In 1997 House came within 1 vote of zeroing out NEA funding

~ On Jan 29, 04 President Bush proposed a \$20 increase (120-140M)

~ *Where was the outrage to this proposal?*

~ G. K. Chesterton quote about progressives and conservatives

Transition: Let's look at the ark's affect on the situation

Responses to the Ark

Israelite response

The people's shouts makes the ground shake
Enthusiasm not lacking for false or dead corrupted religions
The Ephesians chanted for 2 hours in honor of their goddess – Diana

Philistine response

The Philistines react in near panic
*"God has come into the camp!
Who will deliver us from the hands of these mighty gods?
These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness."*

They could benefit from some catechizing (gods) - but their fear is justified
Unlike the Israelites ~ they've not lost a fear and reverence for God
And then in verse 9 there comes an amazing change...
~ *"Be strong and conduct yourselves like men!"*
God seems to calm their fears so they can rebuke His people

The battle is joined...

A loss turns into a rout ~ 30,000 soldiers fall...
~ Earlier they had *"returned to their camp"*
~ Now they *"flee to their tents"*
~ Monty Python ~ *"Run away!... Run Away!..."*
But perhaps this is nothing to joke about... Many people died...
A friend from Denver emailed me yesterday due to the mall shooting
~ Now I know what the other towns feel like...
~ But, honestly, I feel no different...
~ This hasn't budged my worldview one inch...
~ People are just as evil today as they were last week
~ Jesus spoke in Luke 13 of the tower of Siloam killing 18 people
~ *Were they worse sinners than all other men?*
~ *"Sin ravages us all..."*
~ The first person born into this world was a murderer...

Transition: Let's look closer at Eli and his sons...

Eli and Sons a Metaphor

Metaphor for the modern church

Eli = true believers ~ Sons = liberal unbelieving masses

v15 – Eli is 98 years old ~ great age denotes frailty

~ He tires easily and tasks himself lightly

~ He no longer functions as he did in his youth

~ He knows this and has grown accustomed to it... ~likewise~

~ The true church is frail & weak in our society

~ We have no strength for mighty works

~ We know this and have grown accustomed to it...

v15 – Eli is blind

~ He is unaware of much going on around him

~ He waits for word at the gates ~ but people pass him by... ~likewise~

~ The church is blind to what is going on

~ We stand at the city gates ~ but people ignore us ~ pass us by...

v18 – Eli is heavy

~ He'd grown heavy over his long life

~ Too much feeding of self and not enough feeding of the flock

Of the sons ~ little needs to be said

Live in total disregard for God's Law and Word

Do what feels good ~ what brings them pleasure

Steal from the flocks

Sleep w/prostitutes at the entrance

So they are like the godless liberal churches

Steal true spiritual food from the people

Sleep w/false gods in full view of their flocks

Deny the true God and usurp His spiritual earthly authority

Transition: Let's look closer at Eli ~ Let's look past his faults...

A Closer Look at Eli

There is yet a wonderful lesson in all of this...

Bitter news comes via runner

Eli is waiting there by the gate

And we have a wonderful lesson

- ~ In midst of turmoil we Christians are to keep our heads to wait and watch
- ~ We are to pay attention ~ not to be ignorant of God's work in our world
- ~ What should we be praying for?
- ~ What should we talk to leaders about?
- ~ How should we be instructing the flock?
- ~ If the widow could influence the judge ~ so can we...

But we learn more from observing Eli

The runner says, *"Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phineas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured."*

At the words, "*Israel has fled...*"

Eli is not moved

His national pride means little in comparison to his God...

At the words, "*...there has been a great slaughter among the people...*"

Eli is not moved

He is not carried away by undue sentimentality.

These were soldiers that died soldiers deaths...

At the words, "*... your two sons, Hophni and Phineas, are dead...*"

Eli is not moved

God had promised judgment upon them ~ judgment has come...

Transition: But when he hears the words...

Closing

"... *the ark of God has been captured.*"

Eli falls over, breaks his neck and dies...

It was for the ark that he had waited at the gate...

It was for the ark that he had trembled with fear...

It was not for the ark as his sons or the people viewed it

~ a magic box

~ a portable howitzer to use against their enemies

But for what it truly was...

the presence of God...

the promise of God...

For hundreds of years

the presence of the ark symbolized

the presence of their God

Now its absence symbolized His absence...

The loss of the ark reflected God's abandonment of His chosen people

This is why Eli was heartbroken

Not because the ark was no longer with them

But because God was no longer with them

In the flood of Noah all mankind was abandoned to death

In this battle with the Philistines (and at other times) the Jews were abandoned

Yet... From all peoples of the earth God has formed a people

A special people ~ His people

These people (of which we are a portion) will never be abandoned

God might abandon Europe or America

But He will never abandon His people ~ His church ~ His bride

The proof is in the question Christ cried from the cross...

"My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?"

The answer is, *"So that God would never forsake us..."*

Small Group Questions

God in a Box

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1. The God of the Bible was referred to as a "top hat" in this message. It was said that He is considered "out of place" in today's world and has been replaced by either a "ball cap" or "no cap."

Do you understand this metaphor? Please explain it so all can understand.

Do you agree or disagree?

If you agree, can you provide examples of each (top hat, ball cap, no cap)?

2. The Israelites entered into this war unprepared. What was said to be worse than this?

3. What was said to be the motivation for the Israelite rebellion?

Do you agree with this?

Was this proper motivation?

If not, what should their motivation have been?

4. In the message, the liberal church, illustrated by Hophni and Phineas, is birthed by Eli, the true church.

Why do you think this happens?

Can anything be done to prevent it from happening?

5. The true church (Eli) was old, fat, frail and nearly totally blind. Give examples of how these attributes describe the true church in our day...