

1 Samuel 4:1-11

Intro May 18, 2008 God-in-the-Box

Proverbial wisdom is handy knowledge to have. With a quip, one can summarize life's complexities. A maxim manages knotty questions. An axiom answers awkward issues. It is a cause/effect way of living: "Do X and Y will occur." Such wisdom comes with age and maturity. That is why, when kids are asked to complete an adage, they often give surprising answers, helping us see how they view life.

Better be safe than.....punch a 5th grader.

It's always darkest before.....daylight savings time.

Don't bite the hand that.....looks dirty.

A penny saved is.....not much.

Children should be seen and not....spanked.

When the blind lead the blind.....get out of the way.

If you can't stand the heat.....get a pool.

People in glass houses shouldn't...run around naked.

Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and.....you have to blow your nose.

There is no fool like.....Uncle Eddie.

Life's lessons are a tool of making sense of life, of maintaining control, of figuring out how we are to live. Even the kids' answers demonstrate a mind sorting out life. What they come up with may not be the standard answer, but it does show reflective thinking.

The problem with proverbial wisdom is when we treat the proverb as a principle. When we imagine we've discovered a timeless truth that always applies. If we mistake a proverb for a principle, in the final analysis, it is about controlling God. This happens when we engage in a cause and effect lifestyle. If I do X, God must do Y.

If I raise my kids right, God's way, then they won't disappoint me in Wal-Mart. If I work hard, God owes me a good life, ripe old age, a nice retirement and good health. If I read my Bible enough, those plaguing thoughts will dissipate. If I tithe, God will protect me financially.

What we easily miss is that such thinking puts God in a box, it is that Gnostic tendency in all of us to imagine that with right knowledge and properly organized life, we can control our world. The heart of paganism is a mechanical manipulation of God. At its core religion seeks to harness God's power to one's own advantage. Idolatry wants to be in control rather than yield control to God.

Turn to 1 Samuel 4:1-11 where we will see how subtle and dangerous this thinking can be. When we seek to make sense of our world by quantifying and qualifying what God has not revealed to us about his character, we may make deadly errors in judgment. We'll see how easy it is for us to want our God-in-the-box. When we think we know how God must act.

God's people find themselves in a deadly encounter. They ask the right question to make sense of events, but in so doing; they accept a faulty conclusion with catastrophic consequences. READ

Israel finds itself face to face with their archenemy, the Philistines.

Who are these adversaries of God's people? Given their bad-guys status in Scripture, their name is a by-word for those who are rude, crude and socially unacceptable. A Philistine is an uncultured slug: unenthusiastic about opera, uninformed about world events, reading only the sports page and the comics, preferring NASCAR to NPR. (sounds like a lot of people I know).

In actuality the Philistines were a superpower to be reckoned with. Having migrated from Crete and the islands of the Aegean, these Greeks were technologically superior. At the end of the Bronze Age, they developed iron weapons. Settling along the coast in what is now the Gaza strip, they looked down on the lowly Hebrews. Their name was appropriated for the region, as the Latin form of Philistine became what we know as Palestine.

In v2 the battle lines are drawn and the victory goes to the enemies of God, the Philistines. With 4000 Israelite bodies strewn on the fields, the soldiers return to camp to assess the damage. The Israelite elders ask a great question: "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines."

It is not just "why did God let us lose?" or "Where is God when bad things happen?" but they see their defeat as from God's hand. It just so happened to occur before the Philistines. They grasp a painful truth that God uses secondary means to accomplish His purpose. They understood Proverbs 21:31, the horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.

If this conclusion seems severe or their assumption faulty, turn to Leviticus 26:14-20 (read, insert “and your petrol shall exceed \$4”). Ultimately, the bad that happens comes from God, for a reason. So their question is right and proper. But instead of considering these horrific events, rather than reflecting on what might be the problem, they resort to a proverbial wisdom, to an otherwise permissible idea only to find that it will not work.

They ask the question...but they had the answer. Look back up in v1a: “...the word of Samuel came to all Israel. There was a prophet; there was someone they could inquire as to what they should do. Instead they go for *god-in-the-box*. They call for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.

What appears to be a great act of faith is nothing more than rabbit-foot theology.

The Hebrew in v3 is ambiguous, “that it/He may come among us. They understood the importance of God’s presence in the Ark, as it was His tangible presence.

The Ark was a gold covered portable box 3 ¾ feet long by 2 ¼ feet wide and high. It was seen as God’s footstool, the lid - the mercy seat where the blood thrown during Yom Kippur, the Day of the Atonement. Inside were housed the 2 tablets of the Law, signifying God’s commands that He gave to His people and that He would be the one to obey for them, the jar of manna from the Wilderness wanderings, signifying God’s provision and Aaron’s staff, reminding them of God’s salvation. Bringing the Ark into battle was not unheard of, either. Moses did it.

Instead of going to Shiloh where the Ark was kept in the Temple, falling prostrate before God, confessing their sins and seeking God’s mercy, they call for the Ark to be carried by none other than Eli’s wicked sons, the debauched brothers Hophni and Phinehas. Remember Eli’s words in 2:23-24 – everyone knew about their sin. Yet, like Eli, the whole nation refused to see the defeat as a simple call for national repentance and adopt this rabbit foot theology.

In the Ark, they assumed that to have God’s box was to have God. The Lord would have to protect His honor; forcing God’s hand. This is not faith, it is superstition, a formula.

But let’s face it. Success is easier than repentance. Confronting my own sinfulness takes more effort than grabbing a reminder of God’s presence and demanding that God do your bidding. Before we look at what talismans we hold near and dear, note how they resort to this instead of simple repentance. Confessing sin should always be our reflex mode. When troubles come, examine your heart. There may be nothing to confess, but I can’t think of a better place to start.

The Ark is retrieved and the people are relieved...at least the Israelites are.

As Hophni and Phinehas parade the Ark before the people, there is a shout of joy. You can imagine how the ground shook. In v6 the Philistines heard the uproar. Why would an army who just lost 4000 men on the battlefield be so jubilant? When the Philistines hear the news they are miserable, fearful.

They may be Philistines, but they aren’t stupid. Their conclusions show their own bias and faulty information, yet they know there is something deadly wrong. The Ark means their demise!

A god has come into the camp, they say. Destruction has fallen on them (v7b,8). Nothing like this has happened before. Israel is has pulled out the big guns, they’ve called in reinforcements that can’t be out-numbered, for they have the Lord of hosts (4). The Philistines know their gods are no match for the God of Israel. They rehearse the exodus. These gods (huh?) struck the Egyptians with plagues in the wilderness (where?). While their facts are a tad confused, they have the right idea. Their only option is to rally the troops with a command to be brave and fight like men.

Someone passing by Israel's camp would have thought something tremendous was happening. Certainly, this would have been considered a great church service, and many would think they were really trusting in God. But for all the appearances, it was really nothing. All their noise and excitement meant nothing because it wasn't grounded in God's truth. In place of repentance they tried praise, but God would have none of their euphoria.

While faith produces enthusiasm, the two should not be confused. One can manufacture excitement but that does not insure God’s blessing and presence. The Israelites could shout till their throats were soar, but they had no cause to shout. Soon their carcasses would be strewn on the plain.

There is nothing wrong with being expressive in our worship, in fact there can be much right about it, but our excitement does stir up a sleeping God. It is marvelous things when we lift our voices in song, yes, even clap and raise our hands and God may be pleased. Yet such acts of worship do not conjure up His favor.

Praise that is silent on the lips is still heard in heaven. Our passion may be too deep for words. At times, if we try to express our struggles our words fail us, our mind staggers and trembles beneath their weight.

For this reason, never confuse enthusiasm with faith when you look at the externals of worship or you will succumb to a boatload of blunders. One man may worship God with a visible intensity and God will hear and answer; but another may worship who merely sits in silence and not even speak of word. The key is worship that begins with seeing our sin that takes us to the cross and there once again finds joy in being accepted by the Father.

While God is our audience when we gather to worship, never mistakenly imagine that our worship twists his arm that if we do it right, He will give what we desire. God will not be confined in that box. This same truth applies across the board. More contemplative worship does not ensure a better response. More rooted in tradition is no guarantee that God is forced to give us our desires. Discerning the correct worship rubric is not that magic formula to unlocks God's favor.

God calls us to repentance of sin and faith in Christ. Getting what we desire matters little in the end. What matters is that God is honored in our lives. What matters is that when hard times come we fall to our knees and seek His face.

The battle begins...our proverbial wisdom tells us what the outcome should be...but that's not God's plan. With simple wording, the Philistines fought, Israel was defeated and ran home. The slaughter was tremendous. Not just 4000, but 30,000-foot soldiers, sons and fathers fell on the plains that day.

Hophni and Phinehas died...but we were told that. But what is worse, The Ark of the Covenant is captured, the God in their midst is gone. This is not just defeat; this is decimation. God's people had to learn a hard lesson: God will not be manipulated or controlled, even by proverbial wisdom, truths that in other circumstances may have worked.

Israel treated the Ark as an idol, as though they had God by the arm, twisting it so that He had to deliver them. They, like us, take good things and make them idols. God's presence was celebrated in the Ark, and yet God willingly sacrificed that good gift to His people so that they would stop from worshipping the gift and enjoy the giver.

It is not uncommon for us, as we are estranged from a vital relationship with Christ, to latch on with fondness to the externals of our faith, in vain hope we have the substance. Where do we call for the Ark in our lives, thinking we have grabbed the proverb that will guide us through tough waters?

My family's in an uproar, wisdom tells me I should spend time with the kids and all will be well. Bad idea? Of course not! Will it guarantee the results you think it should? No, for your response may not include simply confessing to your spouse and kids the sin of your detachment.

My future is in jeopardy. I should plan and pray. Is this better? Not bad, but if you think by those twin good actions God will grant you stability as you move forward, be careful, for the Philistines may just cart off what you hold dear. You do not control God's working in your life even by doing that which is good.

Let's make this more of an immediate challenge.

Before us we have the sacrament of baptism, a means of God's grace, the sign and seal of God's covenant promises to us. This is not just to remind us what God has done, it is not just to encourage us to do what is right. We confess that as faith attaches to the promise expressed in baptism, that God's grace would work in our lives.

By making use of this outward rite are we just calling in for the Ark to be sent? Are we making the same mistake as Israel did? No, for God commands baptism, but he also commands that we lay our lives before Him in trusting obedience.

Just as the Ark was a tangible reminder of God's presence, so also baptism is a tangible reminder of God calling us His child. May I use that baptism as a talisman, as though God's hand is now forced to ignore my sin? No. For just as we do not worship god-in-the-box, neither do we worship God in the water. Instead, what the Ark pointed Israel toward, now baptism directs my faith where I am to look.

This morning we have the joy to receive some new members and two baptisms.

Professing faith before others is vital. Trusting God by receiving the water of baptism is also critical to what it means to be a follower of Christ.

But just saying you believe, even being smart enough to become a member of this illustrious body of believers doesn't amount to very much. That must never be the end. Your profession of faith can be nothing more than God-in-the-box if you are living in light of that profession today. Presenting oneself or one's child for baptism is very important, as it is a means of grace to confirm our interest in Christ; yet, it is not the end, but the beginning of the story. God does not owe you a life of ease because you follow Him. But what He will pour out on you is His love and affection.

We are given baptism as a sign and seal of God's covenant of grace. It speaks of our identification with Christ, being marked by his seal. It calls us to trust in his cleansing work on the cross.

When we trust Christ to work in and through these promises, we may move in the knowledge of His love for us. We can claim the promises that we belong to Him. Yet we must never rest on the gift, but always look to the Giver, for it is He who promises us His lovingkindness.

Baptism is not a magical formula any more than my wedding ring caused me to be married. But it does serve as a pointer to the promise Janet and I made to each other. The sacrament becomes a god-in-the-box when I start to worship the ring and forget the one who gave it to me.

Baptism is a visible reminder of God's promise to us, as Acts 2 reminds us. It is with that we welcome into our community these newest members.