

Will Your Boxes Hold?

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

As many of you know, Vicki and I have moved several times in our life together; 15 times to be exact. We have gotten so good at the whole moving process that our kids now ask us for advice on how to pack and what size truck or trailer to use. But during all these moves, one thing we've learned is the importance of a sturdy box. (*By the way, unfortunately, liquor stores have the best boxes.*)

However, every once in a while, something happens in a move that pushes the strength of a box beyond its normal level. Something shifts the wrong way, or too much weight is thrust against the sides. The result is often the damage or destruction of the contents. These are painful lessons, but once learned, hopefully the experience won't be repeated. As a result, we've learned to only use the best boxes.

Life is filled with many "moving" experiences: marriage, loss of employment, financial hardship, death of a loved one, and parenting challenges to name just a few. You may not relocate physically from one place to another, but the stress of the events hit you like you had. When those seasons or events hit, and sometimes blind-side us, we often realize that our "boxes," especially our "spiritual boxes," aren't really up to the challenge. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "*Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn.*"

Our Gospel passage for today talks about how the disciples dealt with their own "busted" boxes. We're told, "...*the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.*" Jesus had died, and there were stories that He had risen...but this was a group of men holding some pretty ugly looking spiritual boxes. Nothing had worked out quite like they had expected or planned. So they hid.

They had obviously forgotten about another "righteous" man named Job, who had lived hundreds of years before them. He was a man of godly character and tangible success. He loved God, and walking with Him was a way of life. In turn, God lavished innumerable blessings upon him: livestock, children, servants, wealth, and reputation. Job had it all.

Until, that is, one day when Satan decided it was time to strip away Job's façade. The Devil was in a "box crushing" mood, and he wanted to attack a few of Job's. Satan was convinced that Job's godliness was due to a lack of challenge in his life. So, as Satan figured, take away God's provision, bust up a few of Job's boxes, and you strip away Job's faith. The Devil must have forgotten how things went with Job, and assumed the same would happen to the disciples – take away their leader and you take away their faith.

Anyway, Satan is eventually allowed to take away all that truly mattered to Job. God knew Job's "boxes" would

hold up to the worst Satan could throw at him. But Satan tried anyway: Possessions, gone. Children, gone. Status, gone. Wealth, gone. And finally, health, gone. All he had left was a hurt and resentful wife, and what remained of his body. As a result, we see Job struggle to make sense of what was left of his spiritual "boxes," those things he had believed about God.

Now lest we come down too hard on Job (*or the disciples*), we need to remember that all of us have our spiritual "boxes." We read the Bible, and absorb its truth. But as we read, we often pack those truths into handy boxes for future use. We have our promise boxes, our health and happiness boxes, our morality boxes, our "what God is" boxes, and our "what God isn't" boxes. We have boxes for handling finances (*which are only opened occasionally*), "grace and forgiveness" boxes (*which we rarely open but like others to keep open*), and a "pain and suffering" box (*which is very small and marked "for emergencies only"*).

We live our lives according to these boxes. So, when we encounter a decision or challenge, we search for the appropriate box. Eventually, we pull out what we feel is the proper answer to our problem, or at least one that we're comfortable with.

Sadly, we're not really concerned with making our boxes bigger, only keeping the contents that make us comfortable. We read a smattering of verses from Scripture dealing with a topic, put them in our boxes, and then think we have enough truth packed away for any inevitable "moving" experience. Our limited experiences in life reinforce the flawed notion that our boxes are indeed durable, properly sized, and correctly packed.

But every once in a while something happens in life that just plain tears, or maybe even crushes, our boxes. These are the events that make us stand, fists clenched and voices screaming, in utter confusion and pain. It is in these moments when we, like Job, stand before God and say, "Just let me die. I wish I had never been born." (*Job 3:11; 10:18*)

It isn't that God has ceased to be God, or that He has somehow morphed into an evil twin of Himself. It isn't that God has somehow changed or gone against His revealed Word. What's happened is that life has threatened, or even trashed our boxes; our preconceptions. As Dr. James Dobson once observed, "Life has a way or trashing our trophies." Sometimes, experiences have a way of challenging our understanding of God, His character, or His Word.

And in those moments, these times of painful trial, many people will do one of two things: they will either abandon their faith (*since God doesn't seem to be willing to play by our rules*), or they will draw closer to God in humble submission to His sovereignty. It's this second option which God wants, because He longs to have His children draw closer to Him for comfort and understanding.

C.S. Lewis once observed, “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*”

Sadly, it’s a natural reflex of our flesh to run from God, as did Adam and Eve. In that moment when God pleads for intimacy, yearning to minister to our pain...we flee to a hidden place to lick our wounds. We pull out our hand-made boxes, review the contents, and then blame God for not keeping His Word, or remaining true to His character. The disciples hid “for fear of the Jews.” But they also hid because they were convinced that God had failed and abandoned them. They were looking at some very empty boxes – at least from their perspective.

This is precisely what Job’s friends did. They pulled out their collective boxes and evaluated the contents. This left them with the conclusion that Job must have done something horribly wrong, for “God wouldn’t punish a righteous man.” But if you’ve read the book of Job you understand that their conclusions were incomplete and their theological boxes inadequate for a sovereign God.

This left Job with two choices, “Curse God and die!” (*Job’s wife’s suggestion*), or “*Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him.*” (Job 13:15) Job chose option 2. He held on to his faith, even in the face of great confusion and horrendous pain. It was from this foundation of absolute trust in God, that he felt the freedom to take his hurt and questions to God (*at times, quite firmly*).

That’s where our brother, Bob Hughes, is right now; as he mourns the death of his bride, Evva. Others in this church have also been in that same place recently. That’s where my brother Greg was, a little over a decade ago. As if the horrible destruction of cancer wasn’t enough, his wife’s last hours were filled with terribly intense pain (*due to a failure with the meds*). Everyone expected a peaceful departure. After all, people were praying, the family trusted in God, and the hospice team did everything just as designed. But yet, those last few hours ended up to be an agonizing ordeal. All Greg could do was hold Becky and try to calm and comfort her in those hours until the end came. I don’t care how strong your faith is, times like that will test and mess with your boxes.

You may love the Lord and have done everything you were supposed to in your pregnancy; but yet, the miscarriage happened. You may have kept your life pure, chosen a godly spouse to marry, and still the marriage ended in failure. In this fallen world, bad things do happen to good and godly people. Sometimes sinful choices are made, and bad things happen. Sometimes we hurt because of our sinful world. And sometimes God is simply wanting to do something we just don’t understand yet.

We aren’t told how long Job had to endure his time of testing. But we do know that during that season he didn’t sit silently, patiently accepting his circumstances. No, he

wrestled with the truths he had packed in his boxes. He called out to God, honestly and humbly, seeking wisdom and perspective. He was even willing to let God repack his boxes. The problem was that God didn’t say anything until the ordeal was over, and then didn’t explain Himself. God only asked Job to trust Him...which he did.

Job 1:22 **Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.**

Eventually Job came to this conclusion:

Job 19:25 **"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. 26 "Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; 27 Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!**

Even though God didn’t answer until many chapters later, Job had resolved to go back to one singular foundational truth, “*I will hold on to God, in confidence that I will one day stand before Him and all will be made clear.*” Sometimes that is the only truth that will put our crushed boxes into perspective.

The apostle Paul ends his great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians with this same principle:

1 Cor 15:55 **O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? 56** **The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57** **but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58** **Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not {in} vain in the Lord.**

Sometimes, that is the only box left intact.