

24. Put God in a Theological Box

As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.

(Eccl 11:5)

The Bible is an essential guide to help us relate to God in an intelligible, logical, and moral way. It also equips us to serve him for, *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim 3:16–17).¹

However, the ability to fully understand the depth and breadth of God’s thoughts and ways are beyond what we can comprehend. God says to us, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’*” (Isa 55:8–9).

We set ourselves up for great disappointment and bewilderment with God when we put him in a theological box we have created.

The construction of the box is often accompanied by an all-knowing attitude that misrepresents him to others as well.

We create a theological “box” when we become self-assured as to why God has either acted or not acted in

¹ Cf. Ps 119:105; 2 Pet 1:3.

the affairs of this world when he himself has not said why. We can often extend this perspective to how we believe he should act or has acted on our behalf or the behalf of others.

The root of this error may stem from personal experience, limited human reasoning, and ecclesiastical traditions. Frequently, misinterpreted Scripture and false extrapolations from it are involved as well.

There are many instances in the Bible where various individuals and groups of people created theological boxes for God and consequently caused much difficulty for themselves and others. Many in Israel wrongly believed that some people (particularly non-Jews) were outside of God's saving grace,² while others felt that he would not use sinful people to accomplish his divine purposes.³ At times they incorrectly supposed that the Lord could be manipulated into intervening for them.⁴

Some mistakenly thought that tragedy was always the *direct* result of God punishing human sin.⁵ However Christ made it clear that this was not the case. The Gospel of Luke recounts, *"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"*

² Acts 11:1–18.

³ Hab 1.

⁴ 1 Sam 4.

⁵ Luke 13:2, 4; cf. book of Job.

I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:1–5).

In a similar manner, many thought that physical ailments were *always* the direct result of sin.⁶ The Lord Jesus cleared up this misconception when he declared, regarding a person who was blind, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him”* (John 9:3).

Ultimately, multitudes incorrectly believed that Jesus was not the promised Messiah because they had a very self-assured view of what type of person he should be as well as how he should carry out his mission.

To many of them, this undertaking did not involve him having to suffer and die on a cross for the sins of all humanity. The Bible says, *“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted”* (Isa 53:4).⁷

We are certainly prone to put the Lord in the same old theological boxes today. We are also apt to place him in a wide array of new ones we ourselves have created.

For instance, we may feel that certain requests are so seemingly small and insignificant that he would have no interest in assisting us and it would be belittling him to even ask.

We could wrongly relegate what is truly divine intervention to being merely coincidence, fate, or natural progression simply because we don’t think he would involve himself

⁶ John 9:1–2; cf. Exod 34:7.

⁷ Cf. John 20:9; 1 John 2:2.

in such matters. Conversely, we could attribute what is certainly not of God as being from him.

Finally, and for various reasons, we might hold that the Lord would never guide, gift, and intervene for us like he did for other believers in times past. This is perhaps something the Apostle Paul was admonishing the Thessalonians about when he commanded them, “*Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt*” (1 Thess 5:19–20).

When contemplating such matters, here are some tips to consider which will help us to avoid putting God in a theological box of our own making.

Diligently Search the Scriptures. So we do not mistakenly minimize how we see God’s potential readiness or ability to be involved in something in the first place, we should be active in diligently examining the Scriptures.

It is very easy to think that God will only act in a manner and extent that we ourselves would act if we were running the show—all because of erroneous theological boxes we have created for him.

The Apostle Paul encourages us to, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Tim 2:15).

This is something the Bereans who listened to Paul strived to do. It says of them, “*Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*” (Acts 17:11).

The discipline of studying God's Word will greatly help us to see whether or not any constraints we may have put on him are *unmistakably* true. And if they are not *indisputably* so, then we should be willing to consider that we are wrongly limiting the Lord and adjust our thinking (and consequently our prayers) accordingly. This is something the Old Testament character Job had to do.

At the end of his suffering, confessing his wrong perspective of God, Job said, *"I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know"* (Job 42:2–3).

Hold Fast To What Is Clearly True of God. Because of a fear that we may be placing God in a theological box, we can overreact by not holding fast to the many facts which are clearly revealed about him in his Word. However, when such truths are unmistakably evident we must not be fearful of both strongly believing them and *humbly* proclaiming them, even if we are deemed by others to be overly self-assured or narrow-minded.

The Bible says, *"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect"* (1 Pet 3:15).⁸

Trust in the Lord's Power and Wisdom. Very often the reason we make theological boxes in the first place is because of our own insecurities and uncertainties regarding the unknown and our desire to make sense of them. However in the midst

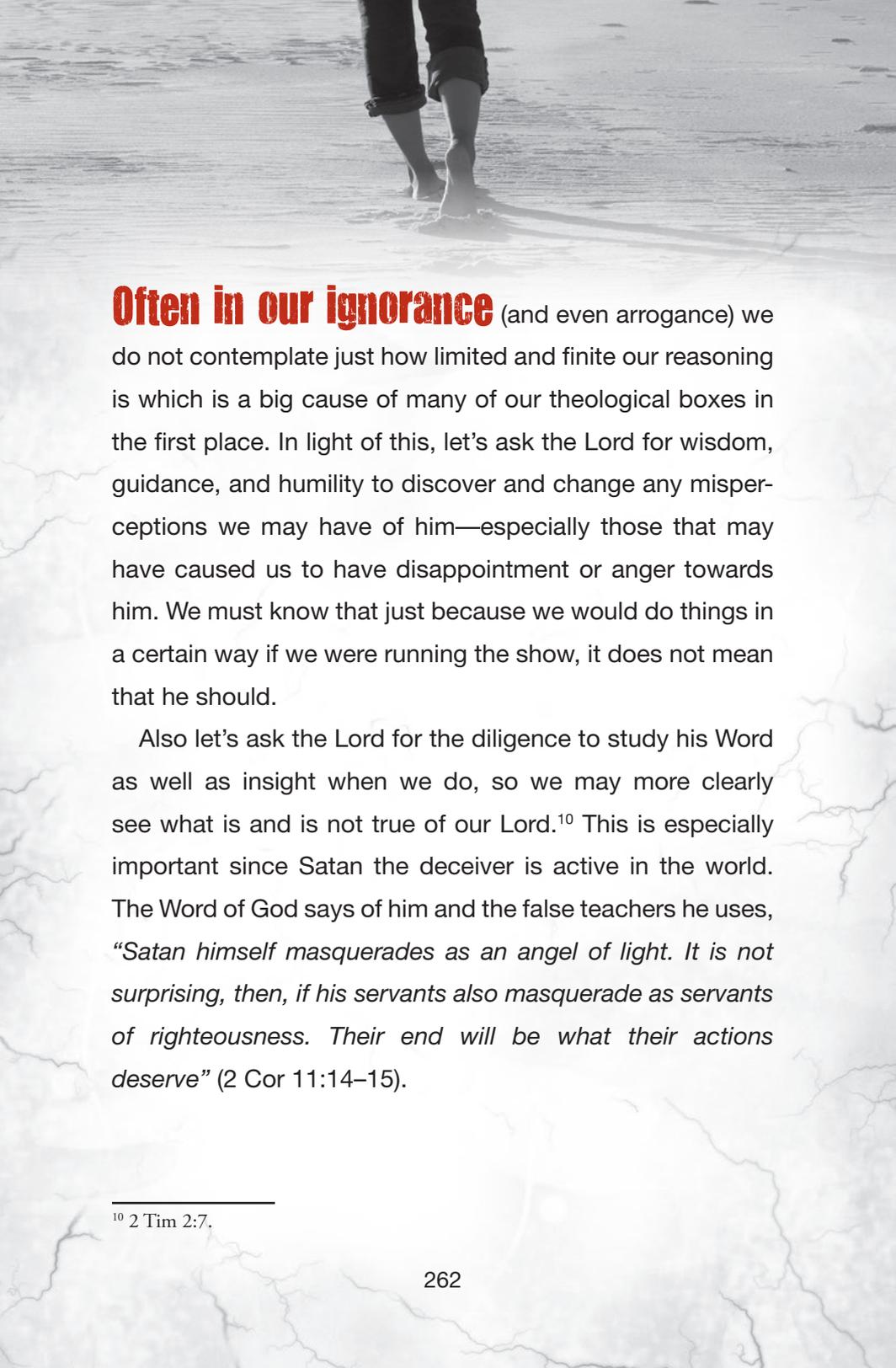
⁸ Cf. Jude 3.

of these things we should ask the Lord for his wisdom. The Apostle James informs us, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind”* (Jas 1:5–6).

It is here that we must trust in the Lord and believe that he is in control and working on our behalf even when things do not make sense to us. The Apostle Paul says, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (Rom 8:28).⁹

We can also be certain that he can do immeasurably more than we can think or ask. Paul extols, *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen”* (Eph 3:20–21).

⁹ Cf. Prov 3:5–6; Isa 55:8–9; Eph 1:11.



Often in our ignorance (and even arrogance) we do not contemplate just how limited and finite our reasoning is which is a big cause of many of our theological boxes in the first place. In light of this, let's ask the Lord for wisdom, guidance, and humility to discover and change any misperceptions we may have of him—especially those that may have caused us to have disappointment or anger towards him. We must know that just because we would do things in a certain way if we were running the show, it does not mean that he should.

Also let's ask the Lord for the diligence to study his Word as well as insight when we do, so we may more clearly see what is and is not true of our Lord.¹⁰ This is especially important since Satan the deceiver is active in the world. The Word of God says of him and the false teachers he uses, *"Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve"* (2 Cor 11:14–15).

¹⁰ 2 Tim 2:7.

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Finally, if we have made God small in our own estimation, let's change our perspective and fully trust in his unlimited power, wisdom, and ability to do new and great things in and through our lives. The psalmist tells us, *"He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit"* (Ps 147:4–5).¹¹



¹¹ Cf. Mark 9:23; Eph 3:20–21.



HOW TO DESTROY YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Granted, it's easy to put God in a theological box, but you have to be reasonable. For instance, with so many people dying in the world because of war, poverty, or other calamities, do you really think he's concerned about your insignificant requests like finding your car keys or helping you to remember something for a little quiz or test?

Now, every once in awhile you may see or experience things in your life which may rattle your faith and cause you to want to reexamine some of your long-held beliefs about God and particularly how he interacts in the world and on your behalf. But when this happens be sure to valiantly stand firm in continuing to believe what you (and perhaps others) have always held to be true.

After all, this is how Satan will try to get you to fall from the truth. If he can get you to start questioning even one thing about your faith, soon you will start questioning many things. Before you know it you will be a heretic like so many others. Besides what will your fellow believers think if they hear you are struggling with deep and personal stuff regarding your faith? You could even end up causing them to stumble and fall from the Lord.

One more thing, if you happen to know of other true believers who just happen to have a different view than you about how God guides and gifts his people today, be certain to pray for them—especially that they will either be touched more fully by the Holy Spirit in some way or that they will be more diligent in studying the Scriptures so they can clearly see, as indeed you do, the truth regarding these matters.