

God's not a Magic Wand

1 Samuel 4:1-22

One of our great desires in life is to make life work. Just walk into any bookshop and you'll find evidence that this is what people are interested in. There are all these "how to" books.

- How to be a success in business
- How to win friends and influence people
- How to earn \$50000+ a year with your home computer
- How to make \$100000+ your first year as a real estate agent
- How to be French
- How to play poker and win
- How to study effectively
- How to kiss and keep your customers
- How to lie, cheat and steel your way to the top
- How to kill a country
- How to win at aptitude tests
- How to get seriously rich while failing in business

It's no different if you walk into a Christian bookshop. Amongst the books I have sitting on my shelves I have at least 40 that have "how to" in the title. They include titles such as:

- How to Live like a King's Kid
- How to Recover from Grief
- How to Beat Burnout
- How to Live with your Kids when you've already Lost your Mind
- How to be Happy though Married
- How to Motivate your Child toward Success

- How to Live a Life of Radical Freedom and Infectious Joy
- How to be a Winner
- How to be your own Selfish Pig
- How to Grow an Australian Church
- How to Grow New Christians
- How to Succeed in the Christian Life
- How to be a Christian without being Perfect

I guess it's quite understandable. We find ourselves in the middle of this thing called life. We look around and see it seems to have its good bits and its bad bits. We look for ways to increase the number of good bits in our lives and to reduce the number of bad bits. Thus, we spend our money on all these "how to" books that promise us guaranteed methods to increase the good bits.

As Christians, we often still have this same mindset – only we added one significant bit to the system: God. Now we have God to tell us how to get more of the good bits and how to reduce the bad bits. Even more than that, if we get it right, we now have God to guarantee we get more of the good bits in our lives and less of the bad bits. Indeed, if you truly live the victorious Christian life, you won't have any of the bad bits at all – you'll simply enjoy a life of one good bit after the other. You'll know the secret for knowing just how to get God to bless every aspect of your life.

It's manipulation. It's about learning how to manipulate the system so you get the best out of it for yourself. It's about learning how to manipulate God so He'll do exactly what you want Him to do – so He'll give you the blessings you want in your life. It's the same philo-

sophical approach that the Israelites tried in 1 Samuel 4.

All of a sudden in the middle of verse 1, the Philistines are reintroduced to us. Now, when I say reintroduced, I don't mean in terms of the book of Samuel. This book hasn't mentioned them before. Rather, they're reintroduced from the book of Judges. These are the last major enemies Israel had in that book – during the time of Samson. The Philistines had five major settlements down on the coastal plain: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza. That was the region they controlled. The Israelites lived up in the hill country.

For one reason or another, the Israelites and the Philistines decide to have a war. We're not told the exact reason – it's not important to this story. Given the number of fights the Israelites and Philistines had around this time, there may not have been a reason. It simply may have been that time of year again. On this occasion, the Philistines won. But it wasn't the sort of victory where you totally devastate your enemy so they're on the run and you chase them from one end of the country to the other. Rather, it's the sort of victory where you've won the battle, but the war's not yet over. The Israelites returned to their camp to prepare for the next battle.

The leaders sit around to discuss their tactics. They ask:

Why did God bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

In other words: What did we do wrong in today's battle? How was it that God didn't give us victory? It seems to me that's a good question to ask. Before you go out and repeat today's mistakes, it seems a good idea to find out what today's mistakes were. If you do that, hopefully

you can avoid repeating them next time. If you do that, you can avoid the bad bits of life and get more of the good bits.

They review their history.

- When they travelled through the wilderness, the ark of God went before them.
- When they walked through the middle of the Jordan River, the ark of God went into the river before them.
- When they went up against Jericho, the ark of God went around the city before them.

That's their problem. They're at Ebenezer fighting a battle and the ark of God's sitting back at Shiloh some 30km away. They need to get the ark up here to the front lines and thus guarantee God will fight on their side. They've found the way to force God to act for them.

So that's what they do. They send off to Shiloh for the ark. I'm not sure what they did with the Philistines in the meantime. We're not talking here about an hour's drive in a ute over rough country roads to collect the ark and another hour's drive back to the front lines. We're talking about a 30km hike back to Shiloh, probably an argument with Eli about whether the ark would leave the sanctuary, getting Hophni and Phinehas out of bed with the serving girls, and a slow hike back with these two guys that've been fattening themselves up on the best cuts of meat. Perhaps the weather turned bad. Perhaps the Philistines were content to send out scouting parties for a few days. I don't know. The narrator simply skips over those days rather quickly and gets to the main point.

The ark arrives in the camp. The Israelites are overjoyed.

They can taste the victory. They can hardly wait to get to the battlefield to strike down a few Philistines. Do they have faith? You bet. They're very confident God'll come through for them. They've got God nicely boxed up. Now that they've got their lucky charm in camp, nothing can beat them.

The Philistines, on the other hand, are somewhat concerned. They hear this great celebration in the enemy camp and wonder what's going on. They find out the ark's arrived and they become more concerned still – and perhaps a little confused. They can't seem to make up their minds whether it's one god or several that have arrived to help out the Israelites. Whichever it is, they're quite sure they're powerful – they've heard about what happened in Egypt a couple of hundred years before. They know about the plagues. They know about the Egyptians being struck down. And so they encourage one another to put in an even bigger effort still. Maybe they've got no real chance, but they're gonna go down fighting.

Pause for a moment and think of God's dilemma.

- On the one hand, He's got Israel expressing a lot of faith in Him. Now that the ark's present, they're confident this war's in the bag. But they haven't been paying attention to God. The happenings at Shiloh are a blasphemy – they're not following what God says should happen. They're disregarding God's instructions – both in regard to their rituals and in regard to their morals. They simply aren't treating God as God. What does it say to these people if He gives them victory? Does it not give them permission to keep ignoring what God

wants – to keep being wicked?

- On the other hand, God's got the Philistines. They don't even acknowledge Him as the true God – they bow down to idols and false gods. Their understanding of reality's shaped by their false gods. They're pagans through and through. What does it say to these people if He gives them victory? Does it not give them the idea that they can beat God – that God's not really all that powerful after all?

Sometimes we use those sorts of dilemmas to try to force God to act for us. Most of us compare ourselves with other people from time to time. It's usually pretty easy to find some pagan who's significantly better off than us.

- If we're young, it may be they've got better clothes or more pocket money or a bigger CD collection or a more attractive girlfriend or they're part of the in-crowd or whatever.
- If we're a bit older, it may be they've got a better car or a better house or a better paying job or more money in the bank or they retired earlier.

And so we put it to God. Hey God, they're a pagan. They don't pay attention to You. They don't turn up to church on Sundays. They don't read their Bibles. They don't pray. How come they're better off than me? When are You gonna come through for me? If You keep giving them all this cool stuff instead of giving it to me as one of Your followers, why would they ever want to pay attention to You? As long as You keep letting them win, why would they want to change?

And so we begin to think to ourselves: Perhaps there's something I can do that will absolutely guarantee God'll come through for me. If I can just get that right, then

God'll have to bless me with a better house.

- Maybe if I pray more.
- Maybe if I get up earlier to read my Bible.
- Perhaps if I get the right words to use in prayer.
- Maybe I'm not attending church often enough.
- Perhaps I need to stop talking back to my parents.
- Maybe I should start fasting.
- Perhaps I don't have enough faith.
- Maybe I should practise the power of positive thinking.
- Perhaps I should put more money in the offering.
- Maybe I've been stepping on too many cracks in the footpath.

What's the real secret? If only I could be sure to get the right formula so God just has to turn around and bless me and give me what I want.

Israel lost – not just the battle, but the war. They fled before the Philistines. Many were killed – including Hophni and Phinehas (Eli's two sons). Even worse, the ark of God was captured by the Philistines. It looks like God's deserted to the enemy. Unthinkable.

What's happened here? Why has such a disaster come about for God's people? There are a couple of levels at which this story needs to be understood. On the one hand, it reinforces the lesson that God fulfils His word – His promise. Twice messages of judgment have been delivered to Eli.

- In chapter 2, the man of God gave the message of judgment on Eli's family. He said: Hophni and Phinehas will both die on the same day. That's exactly what happens.
- In chapter 3, Samuel gave the message of judgment

on Eli's family. He reiterated the message given earlier by the man of God.

God keeps His promises. Hophni and Phinehas received fair warning of the judgment that was coming. They chose not to change their ways. Eli also received fair warning of the coming judgment. He chose not to take any effective action against his sons. Thus, God's judgment fell just as He promised. What's more, as the chapter progresses, we find that not only Hophni and Phinehas die, but Eli dies as well, and also Phinehas' wife.

Through this, Samuel's confirmed as God's prophet even though his name's not mentioned in this story. In 3:19, we're told:

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground.

This is an example of one of those words that didn't fall to the ground.

This story's also very much about trying to manipulate God. God won't have it. God remains God. He is not controlled by Israel. He will not submit Himself to their purposes. He remains sovereign – and they must learn to respect His sovereignty and submit themselves to His purposes. Their attempt to control God ends in absolute disaster. That's what we're shown in the two stories at the end of the chapter.

In the first, a messenger comes from the battle. The fact that his clothes are torn and dust is on his head could be a sign he's been in the battle and he's just run half a marathon through the bush – but more likely they're indications that this man's in mourning. He comes to Eli and gives him the news. Four things:

- Israel fled before the Philistines.
- Israel suffered heavy casualties.
- Your two sons are dead.
- The ark of God is captured.

He builds up to the most important one last. It's the mention of the fate of the ark that results in Eli's death. That's the thing that brings Eli the greatest anguish.

Now, just before we look at the second story, I want to draw your attention to the end of verse 18 – only you need to look at the NIV footnote rather than the NIV text:

He had judged Israel for forty years.

There's a certain irony in that statement. Eli's there as one of the judges we're told about in the book of Judges – one of the deliverer figures God sends His people when they get in trouble. Yet, he doesn't function as such in this story.

- The people don't cry out to God in repentance.
- Eli doesn't lead the people in victory against their enemies.

Rather, Israel's judge sits at home, trembling in fear for the ark of God.

The second story tells us about the distress of the wife of Phinehas. The news of the ark's capture is so distressing that she goes into premature labour. The fact she's given birth to a son doesn't give her any relief from her distress. She names the son "No glory" or "Where is the glory" – the exact meaning of the name's unclear. Can you imagine giving a name like that to a child? That's the sort of distress this news brings on her.

What's Israel to make of the capture of the ark?

- If you think like the Philistines – that is, if you

think in terms of many gods – then the capture of the ark means the Philistines' god's more powerful than the Israelites' god on this occasion. That's not good at the present – but in the future the Israelites' god may regain his strength while the Philistines' god isn't looking and maybe he'll win next time.

- But if you think like the Israelites – that is, if you think your God's the only true God and He's sovereign over all heaven and earth – then the capture of the ark means God's allowed the ark to be captured – even caused the ark to be captured and go into exile. That means that, on the surface at least, He appears to have left Israel. God's chosen to desert them. Where does that leave their relationship with Him? Where does that leave the covenant? Have they pushed God over the edge so He's given up on them altogether?

Is that what God's done? Has God's glory left Israel because the ark's gone? Does Phinehas' wife get it right? Has He brought the covenant to an end? It's a complex issue.

- In one sense, the glory of God had already left Israel well before this because they failed to live godly lives. Where God's not honoured through obedience to His word, how can it be said that His glory's present? God's not honoured through evil behaviour.
- In another sense, the ark symbolised God's presence with His people and now the symbol of God's presence was no longer with them. It had been taken by the Philistines. It seemed there was a symbolic departure from them.
- In yet another sense, God's glory's revealed in

Israel's defeat and the death of Hophni and Phinehas. God shows He's sovereign. He judges Eli's sons as He said He would. He refuses to submit to Israel's games of manipulation. He shows Himself to truly be God. His glory's shown in judgment.

- In still another sense, can it ever be said that God's presence will leave His people? As the story goes on in the following chapters, God's still working His purposes for His people. Even though the people don't follow God's instructions, it doesn't destroy God's overall plans. And, after all, was there not still a prophet in Shiloh?

In all of it, the lesson remains: let God be God. God's sovereign – not me; not us. My job isn't to manipulate Him to my will. My job's to submit to His will. My job's to serve Him – not to find ways to try to control Him. But, you may ask, what about this matter of trying to make life work? What about getting the best out of life? Surely there are some principles I can get from God – some things about cause and effect – that if I follow them then God'll have to bless me. Isn't that part of what the Bible's about?

I can remember doing this sort of thing with God when I was a teenager. I'd make deals with God.

- My part of the deal was to not study on Sundays and go to church twice and teach Sunday School and be involved in Christian Endeavour and God's part of the deal was to make sure my marks didn't suffer.
- My part of the deal was to work hard in class, be respectful to the teachers, do all my homework on

time and generally be a good student and God's part of the deal was to give me a comfortable middle-class existence.

It worked. It even worked when I occasionally slipped up and did some homework on Sunday because I'd been out with the youth group on Saturday night. It seemed that God was gracious and overlooked those minor indiscretions. The reality is that God was even more gracious in not wiping me out for trying to manipulate Him to do my will.

Have I learnt my lesson? I'd like to say yes, but the truth is I still find myself thinking in those wrong ways from time to time. I still think that if I do such-and-such, then God'll be obligated to do something for me.

- If I have my morning quiet time, then that will guarantee a good day. If I don't have it, then things are sure to go wrong.
- If I tithe, then God has to make sure I've got plenty of money for whatever I want to buy and bless me with a still healthier bank balance.
- If I pray often enough for something, then that will guarantee I get it. If I don't get it, it must mean I haven't prayed enough or with enough emotion or with enough faith or with enough people or at the right time of the early morning.
- If I become more holy, then I'll be blessed with a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. If my lifestyle is suffering, it means there must be some lack in my holiness somewhere and I'd better find what it is and fix it up so that my middle-class life can work properly again.

I look for ways to involve God in making my life work – of controlling God so He has to make my life work.

One of the problems with that system is that I've adopted a middle-class definition of what life's about rather than a godly definition. It's a definition that says life's all about getting good food and good cars and good houses and good jobs and good bank accounts and good experiences and nice people around you and settling down with it all to enjoy myself. I want to control God and get God to bless me in terms of that wrong definition of what life's about. God says life's all about submitting to the purposes for which He made me.

But, you ask, doesn't God say something somewhere about sowing and reaping – that if you sow to the flesh you'll reap one thing and if you sow to the Spirit you'll reap another thing? That's quite true. He does say that. But what's sowing to the flesh – or the sinful nature? Is not trying to control God part of that? Isn't trying to attain a comfortable middle-class existence part of that also? Sowing to the Spirit's learning to submit to God. It's learning to define life in terms of what God thinks is important – righteousness and purity and godly living.

What's the reward for godly living? Our problem is that we see it as a means to an end – that if we're godly, then our reward will be middle-class comforts. And so we try to use the system that way. We try to get God to play by our rules. We live godly lives for the purpose of getting middle-class comforts. But that's worldly thinking, not godly thinking. Godly living is not a means to an end – it is the end. It's the salvation God offers us. The reward for godly living – if I can put it in those terms – is godliness. It's the purity of heaven for which we long.

We can do it on a church level as well – this matter of trying to control God. For example, most churches want to grow – they want to see more people become Christians and submit their lives to Jesus. There's nothing wrong with that desire. Indeed, it seems to me that's a godly and Biblical desire. Yet, it's easy for that desire to become an excuse for trying to manipulate God. What do we need to do to ensure God gives us growth?

- Perhaps we need more corporate prayer meetings.
- Maybe we need to put away all known sin.
- Perhaps we need to find the right formula in prayer.
- Maybe we need to be more caring.
- Perhaps we need seeker-friendly services.

And so it goes on and on. If you want to add to the list, just read some of the church growth books. Now, let me stress, with most of those things, there's nothing wrong with them. They're good things to do. We should be doing them. But if we do them because we think that will somehow obligate God to give us church growth – or obligate God to do something else for us – then we've fallen into Israel's sin.

Our aim must be to submit to God – to do what He says is right. We're called to be faithful to Him. If God says we need to put away all known sin, then we should do that. It's not a matter of doing it because it leads to church growth or healthier finances or longer lives on this earth. It's a matter of doing it because God calls us to submit to Him. It's the right thing to do.

Now, I suspect that many of us need to examine our hearts in relation to this issue. What's your favourite way for controlling God? Why not reflect on that in prayer?