

HINDRANCE #1

Boxing the Lord In

In the Old Testament, we learn about Naaman, the powerful commander who had delivered the Syrian army in a great battle. A respected man and natural leader, Naaman was held in high favor among many.

However, that doesn't seem to be why his story is in the scriptures. Naaman was a leper, and because his wife's handmaid knew of a prophet in Samaria, Naaman was part of an incredible miracle. The story leading up to that miracle is where we will begin our study about "boxing the Lord in."

Once Naaman discovered there was a way to be healed, he rode to Samaria with his chariots, a large sum of money, and, it seems, the beginnings of faith. However, when he got to the house of Elisha, the prophet did not come out to meet him. Instead, he sent out his servant, who told Naaman to go down and wash himself seven times in the river Jordan to become cleansed of his leprosy.

This angered Naaman, and he exclaimed, "Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So, he turned and went away in a rage" (2 Kings 5:11-12).

Although there might be many reasons why Naaman was angered — including pride or misunderstanding or cultural tradition — there could be at least one other explanation: Naaman might have been upset because *nothing* in that experience ended up going the way he thought it should: "Elisha should have come out to meet me." "He was supposed to do something dramatic and perform a miracle right then." "Surely, he could have asked me to go bathe in some other river?"

In other words, Naaman had set parameters for how he was to be healed. He "boxed the Lord in." And because the Lord's help didn't fit in that box, Naaman wanted nothing to do with it.

Thankfully, we know that's not how the story ends. One of Naaman's servants was brave enough to ask him this important question: "Just because you didn't get the respect you thought you would, and just because this hasn't gone the way you thought it should, does that mean it is not of God?" It seems his servant didn't have a box for the answers to fit in. Naaman then chose to humble himself and went down into the Jordan seven times "according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (v. 14).

Naaman wanted to be healed of his leprosy. Yet, God seemed to have greater things in mind. He wanted to heal Naaman, not just of a skin disease, but of what was keeping Naaman from true joy and peace, even what was keeping Naaman from finding *Him*. So, He sent Naaman an answer that wasn't in his "box."

Sometimes, we carry around a similar box: a mental receptacle meant to receive the answers, help, or comfort we are seeking from the Lord. Our box, whether intentionally or not, sets the parameters of not only what He is supposed to do for us, but also how and when and where He is supposed to do it. We limit the Lord by "boxing Him in."

I find that we might not necessarily set these parameters because we think we know more than God. Instead, it might be because we think we know our specific situation better than He does, or at least that we, like Naaman, know what we want in that situation. However, when we *dictate* how revelation works in our lives, we can *diminish* what revelation we receive in our lives.

Let me share a time in my life when I boxed the Lord in. While in college, I decided early on that I wanted to be a marriage and family counselor. At the beginning of my junior year, I had narrowed down my graduate work to three schools that I wanted to attend and took the decision to the Lord several times, asking Him which of the three were right. However, for months I didn't get any real direction.

At one point, I had an Institute teacher pull me aside in the hall and say, "Stephen, have you ever thought about teaching Seminary?" I actually had. Right after my mission, I had spoken with the man in charge of the Seminary teaching program and, upon leaving his office, concluded that it probably wasn't for me. Besides, I had never imagined myself as a teacher. As I explained this to the Institute teacher, he simply said, "I understand, but still think about it, will you?"

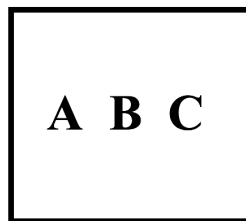
About a week later, my former Seminary teacher, who had become a close friend to me, called me and said, "Hey, is there any way you could come and share a few thoughts with my Seminary class next week?" I wondered what was going on!

After teaching in his class that day, I again felt a prompting to talk to the administrator over Seminary, but I discounted the prompting because, in my mind, I already had a plan for my career (never mind that I wasn't getting any clear divine direction on my original plan!).

After more spiritual nudging, I finally decided to give it a chance and go through the application process. It required me to take a few classes, put some lesson plans together, and teach in front of my peers. However, I immediately ran into some roadblocks. I really wasn't very good at teaching. Plus, my heart really wasn't in it. Consequently, I began to come up with some very valid reasons why teaching Seminary as a career wasn't going to work. Thankfully, the Lord intervened . . . again.

I was invited to go teach a two-week trial class at a nearby high school. As I stood each day in front of those students — seeing their faces, hearing their stories, and sincerely hoping the lesson I had prepared that day was what they needed — something truly unexpected happened: My heart began to change. I fell in love with those students and with the rare opportunity a teacher has to bring light into others' lives.

I realize now that I had come before the Lord with a box and asked Him to give me an answer that fit in that box. I expected Him to help me choose from my pre-determined and pre-established list of possible outcomes: the graduate schools I had already researched, within a salary range I had already decided on, and among the job choices I had already considered.



I only wanted His guidance on options A or B or C, each of which was an ideal choice in my eyes. I didn't want an answer that wasn't in my box. I didn't realize that was what I was doing. Nevertheless, it was truly limiting my ability to grow, learn, and be guided during the experience.

However, as soon as I realized I had this box and started setting it aside, revelation began to flow. And as I continued to open my mind and heart to other options, revelation really began to flow — options that I had not thought of, expected, nor even wanted.

God started revealing to me not only what my next step should be, but also what He wanted me to do with my life. The prompting was clear: Choose another career outside of the marriage and family counseling arena; teach the youth and young single adults of the Church.

What I learned is that our Heavenly Father is always willing to give us direction if we are willing to seek Him diligently.¹ But sometimes, in our haste and eagerness, our seeking may sound like this:

- “Heavenly Father, I need an answer by Monday.”
- “I’ll accept any calling but . . .”
- “Lord, she needs to win this. Can you just please help her win.”
- “I’ll go where you want me to go, as long as it doesn’t require me to move to . . .”
- “Please don’t tell me the answer is _____. I already know that. I need a different answer.”
- “God, we’ll have as many kids as you want, as long as it’s not more than four.”

We might also have expectations like these:

- “If I am supposed to switch majors, then I will know because _____ will happen.”
- “If she is indeed the one, then I will know because _____ will happen.”
- “If the Prophet is really a prophet, then when I go to Conference, I will immediately feel an overwhelming confirmation that he is the prophet when he walks into the room. I know this because my dad told me that, on his mission, the prophet visited the MTC. When he walked into the room, my dad immediately felt a confirmation in his whole body that he was standing in the room of a prophet.”

Lastly, here’s another way of looking at this; these are examples of “boxing” that I often use with the youth that I think we can adapt to apply to other circumstances, as well:

- “You can give me revelation in my patriarchal blessing, but not on the style, length, or tightness of my clothing.”
- “You can give me revelation about which college to attend, but not if I should switch my schedule to fit Seminary in.”
- “You can give me revelation about going on a mission, but not on what I should stop watching or listening to.”
- “You can give me revelation during EFY, Girl’s Camp, or Youth Conference but not when I’m hanging out with my friends, at a movie, or while at work.”

In other words, “Lord, I really need Thy help and guidance, but You can only give me revelation if it fits within this box: my pre-determined list of possible outcomes. You can only inspire me when I say I am ready for it or as long as it’s already in my box. Please only answer my prayers if it’s something I want to do or something I am good at. Otherwise, I just don’t have time for it. I just can’t do it. That just wouldn’t work.”

Elder Gerald N. Lund taught, “Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we inadvertently seek to tell the Lord how he should conduct his business. We may feel a great urgency about a question and press the Lord for an answer by a certain deadline. Or we may strongly desire a particular kind of manifestation, such as one of the more dramatic forms of revelation, and be satisfied with nothing

less. We may try to tell the Lord how to solve our problems or what answer we would like. But these are not *our* choices. All aspects of the revelation are determined by the Lord.”ⁱⁱ

One time I had a college-aged young woman share with me that she was seriously considering marrying a phenomenal young man whom she was dating. He treated her like a gem, was diligently trying to be obedient and faithful in the gospel, and was working hard to pursue a career. He was a great young man. It was obvious he truly loved her. She even brought him home to meet her parents.

There was only one problem: her parents didn’t think she should marry him. However, they were against the marriage because, in their family, they had discouraged their children from getting married before graduating from college. In fact, when this young woman asked if her parents had prayed about their opposition to a possible engagement, the mother abruptly said, “We don’t need to pray about it. You know the rule in this house. If he’s such a great guy, he can wait until you are graduated.”

I didn’t fully know the circumstance of this young woman nor the complete reasoning behind her parent’s rule, but as she sat weeping in my office and asking me what she was supposed to do, I couldn’t help but think of ways I may have done this same thing in different ways with my own children. Have I created a rule in our family that gets in the way of revelation? Have I been adamant that things are done a certain way, or in a certain timeframe, that has prevented the Lord from revealing to me a different or better way something should be done? We can box the Lord in with our own idea of timing, circumstance, or even the “traditions” of the way things are always done.ⁱⁱⁱ

Boxing the Lord in can also involve filling our box so full with our own desired answers or conclusions that there isn’t much room for God’s answers. Naaman headed to Samaria with a box already full of how he thought God would heal him and a list of ways that healing should occur. His faith was in what *he* thought the answers were.

We, too, sometimes go to the Lord thinking we are being open-minded, thinking we have the faith to accept any answer — but once we are given heavenly instruction, our first response sometimes is, “That *can’t* be the answer.” I had spent months praying for guidance about graduate school between choices A or B or C, when all along He was trying to tell me, “It’s ‘D,’ Stephen. It’s ‘D,’” and I just wasn’t open to that possibility.

What if the Lord tells us to simply show more love to that son whom we have already decided just needs more disciplining? What if our new calling *is* in the nursery? What if the Lord does ask us to have another child? What if the Lord *does* ask us to do “that”?

Years ago, my wife and I had an interesting experience with a job transfer. We were moving across the country to a very unfamiliar area. We knew what size of home we were looking for and where we wanted to live but soon discovered once we got there that we were in no way prepared for what the economy, housing market, schools, and neighborhoods were like.

Every day of our house-hunting trip, we kept having to change our criteria as we learned more about the area, moving farther and farther away from where I would work, and into “un-researched” places. Each night at the end of a long unsuccessful day, Michelle was usually in tears. Where were we supposed to live? It was a very frustrating and unsettling experience.

On our last day there, we still hadn’t found a house. As we were on our way to another appointment, we happened to drive by a home that had a “For Sale” sign in the yard. We immediately stopped. Something felt very good about it. We knocked on the door to discover that it had not come up on our real estate listings because, up until a few hours before, it had been under contract. Their buyer had just pulled out.

From the moment we stepped into this house, we felt an immediate confirmation that it was a home that would work for our family. It was beautiful and in a great neighborhood that fed into great schools. We negotiated with the buyers to purchase it, flew home to pack our family, and arrived a few months later.

But here's the interesting twist to this story: Within a short time living there, we discovered that the cost of living in that area was much higher in ways we had not anticipated and that we could not afford to stay. About nine months later, we had to put that house up for sale.

As we began our house hunting again, we found ourselves being drawn to look in a wonderful community 15 minutes farther than our last house from my office, creating a commute of almost an hour. It was an area and size of home we never would have considered the first time around. We settled in and ended up loving that home and that new area just as much, living there for many years.

After that second move, I went through a period of time where I was frustrated with the Lord about the whole thing. Why hadn't He just led us there in the first place? It was not fun, to say the least, to pack everything we owned back up and move our family of seven *again*, changing wards, schools, friends, and neighborhoods. Months later, I was sitting in a priesthood meeting when a clear impression came to my mind: "This is where you were always supposed to be."

I realized that, because we had our own limited criteria of where we "could" live and what size of home we could live in, we wouldn't allow God to guide us to where we truly needed to be. In fact, each morning of that week looking for a house, we prayed earnestly that He would help us find the right place for our family, but it was a prayer asking for answers in the parameters we had set. He was kind and merciful enough to bless us in finding a great home in the meantime because I think He knew we wouldn't listen. It took us experiencing for ourselves the higher than anticipated cost of living before we would open our minds to other possibilities. And that was not God's fault. It was ours.

The prophet Moses was once given a grand vision of the lifespan of the earth and all God's children who ever had and ever would live on it. After many hours, he had been shown evidence through his spiritual eyes that "man is nothing," *something he "never had supposed"* (Moses 1:10-11; emphasis added). Sometimes God's higher and more holy answers fall somewhere out of our box simply because they are something we never had supposed.

Elder W. Craig Zwick tells of an experience he had as a Mission President with a young elder who announced the first day he arrived at the mission that he wanted to go home. Elder Zwick shared that he was sure, through long-suffering and encouragement, he could help this elder change his mind. Yet, after three agonizing weeks, the elder still wanted to go home.

Then, Elder Zwick said, "It finally occurred to me that I might not have the whole picture. It was then that I felt a prompting to ask him the question: 'Elder, what is hard for you?' What he said pierced my heart: 'President, I can't read.' The wise counsel that I thought was so important for him to hear was not at all relevant to his needs. What he needed most was for me to look beyond my hasty assessment and allow the Spirit to help me understand what was actually on this elder's mind. He needed me to see correctly and offer a reason to hope. Instead, I acted like a giant demolition wrecking ball. This valiant elder did learn to read and became a very pure disciple of Jesus Christ. . . . What a blessing it is when the Spirit of the Lord widens our view."^{iv}

With neither intention nor knowledge of doing so, Elder Zwick had essentially come to the Lord with an assumption of what that young man needed; he had boxed in the revelation for this

elder. A single open-ended question removed that box, allowing the Lord to bless the lives of both men and probably countless others.

Sometimes what God is trying to teach us, or what the solution to a problem is, falls outside of the area of our understanding or expectations. God's higher ways always take into account things we don't know and cannot see. Just because that's where the revelation falls doesn't mean it's not from Him nor that it's wrong.

Indeed, President Ezra Taft Benson once taught that all "men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover . . . that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can."^v I have found that this making of our lives takes many forms. It involves expanding our vision, quickening our minds, and increasing our opportunities. Sometimes it involves divine direction that takes us places we never thought we would go or doing things we never thought we would do. It often includes options we never anticipated or experiences we never thought we would have. Yet, God's making of our lives can also mean we experience blessings greater than we ever thought possible — like Naaman's skin, which was not just restored to that of a seasoned warrior, but to the precious, beautiful skin of a little child.

If we will truly allow our Father to guide us — without parameters, without stipulations — He can and will guide us in ways we cannot even comprehend.

Lehi's son Jacob admonished his family to "despise not the revelations of God" and to "seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand" (Jacob 4:8, 10). Let us despise not the revelation that comes to us outside of our box; let us seek not to counsel God in what choices we will consider. Let us set aside our boxes and make room for the greater, higher, sometimes unexpected, but always perfect, ways of the Lord. "For behold, we know that great and marvelous are the works of the Lord . . . unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and . . . he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy, over all his works" (v. 8).

ⁱ D&C 109:7; Zephaniah 2:3

ⁱⁱ "The Voice of the Lord," BYU Devotional, December 2, 1997

ⁱⁱⁱ D&C 93:39

^{iv} "Lord, Wilt Thou Cause That My Eyes Shall Be Opened," *Ensign*, November 2017

^v President Ezra Taft Benson, "Jesus Christ – Gifts and Expectations," *Ensign*, December 1988; "Yes, men and women who turn their lives over to God will find out that he can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. Whoever will lose his life to God will find he has eternal life." (President Ezra Taft Benson, "Jesus Christ — Gifts and Expectations," *Ensign*, December 1988)