

Introduction to
Unboxing God:
Reclaiming Faith in a Post Church Culture

I sat in the church service devastated. My life and ministry had just been tossed up into the air and were dramatically falling down, piece by piece. As the pastor began to pray, something strange happened. I saw a big refrigerator box in my mind, and then I sensed God say, “You’ve had Me in a box, and I want to remove your boxes.” Then, He took the box and began to rip the box apart, one side at a time. I didn’t realize it then, but this was the start to a wild, wonderful, and often confusing and disorienting ride of my faith.

I am sharing my story because I wonder if perhaps you may recognize yourself within it. I was doing all the right things: reading my Bible, sharing Jesus with people, tithing to our church, and even giving my life to serve in ministry. But, deep down inside, I knew there was more to this walk of faith. I yearned to experience a life that resembled the believers after Pentecost with the miracles and community they experienced on a daily basis. But, then I’d look around and see my reality, people faithfully doing and saying the right things, but still rather stuck in their circumstances and challenges. I would realize, yet again, that I needed to wait for heaven to experience the communion Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden with God or the crazy miracles the new believers experienced after Jesus’ ascension to heaven.

Interestingly, even though I tried to be content with my life of faith, God had other plans. It all started with the box experience, and now many years later, He is enjoying the journey of life together with me...*with absolutely no box present at all.*

To set the stage for sharing my journey with you, it is important that we first acknowledge the season of history that we find ourselves within. We are in transition, much like the time of Pentecost in the beginning of Acts. I like to think about all that took place after that awe-inspiring day when the once fearful disciples left the upper room, went boldly into the Temple courtyard, where the very one who denied Jesus three times just 50 days earlier, stood up and preached the sermon of his life. Peter was so bold in his assertions that Jesus had been crucified, dead in the tomb for three days but then resurrected, and then ascended into heaven 50 days later, that 3,000 people responded with a “yes” to his invitation to follow Jesus and even to be baptized. It’s not so farfetched to think that, just weeks before, many of them may have found themselves chanting, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

After Pentecost, everything changed. The fearful disciples became bold apostles and began to call people to meet in homes after the Temple services. They saw big miracles take place; in fact, miracles became common place. They developed a community of support, of learning, and of sharing communion around the dinner table. The new Jesus followers were still Jewish, and they kept practicing the rituals of their Jewish faith, even as they walked out their new season of life.

It wasn't until Stephen was stoned to death that the new believers began to leave Jerusalem. This is where it gets interesting. They suddenly found themselves around the dinner table with those who previously had been declared unacceptable. Problems abounded because both Jews and Gentiles were being challenged to lay down the familiar and pick up the unfamiliar new practices of Jesus and His Kingdom ways.

Today, we find ourselves in a very similar period of shifting. The Church Season which I believe began after Constantine declared Christianity the legal religion in the fourth century, continued for close to 1,800 years. It was around the time of the emerging Internet when everything began to change, launching a huge transition into the Kingdom Age. Transitions of this magnitude don't happen overnight, however, so the shift between the familiar Church Season and the rapidly advancing Kingdom Age may take up to 50 or 100 years to fully complete.

It's during these massive transitions that confusion and disorientation become commonplace. As I asked people how they defined the Kingdom, I found there was much confusion; many thinking that church and kingdom were the same. So, one day, I decided to write a concise, precise definition of the Kingdom. I looked up some of my heroes of faith to see how they defined the Kingdom. Interestingly, I didn't find many authors who attempted to define it, but I found three that were helpful.

Dallas Willard—professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California for 41 years and prolific author—defined it this way: “The range of God’s effective will, where what God wants done is done. It is an everlasting metaphysical reality, the natural home of the soul: God and His reign ‘from everlasting to everlasting.’”¹

Mike Breen, founder of 3dm, describes the Kingdom in these words:

The king of heaven has taken on flesh and chosen to walk among his wayward subjects, to reveal the future he has prepared for us, a future that we can taste now if only we will surrender to his Kingship. The King is a servant King who wants his people to be the greatest recipients of its benefits. In response to

receiving all the blessings, the people of the King offer him their love, loyalty, glory and honor. The Kingdom of God is expressed in three key words: King, authority and power. ²

Bill Johnson, senior pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, states, “The Kingdom of God is when everything in Heaven is instituted on the earth, so that God’s government, teaching, worship, glory, and power are manifested here on earth, and the earth looks just like Heaven.” ³

I also looked up every Scripture I could find about how Jesus defined the Kingdom, and this is what I discovered. Jesus never *defined* the Kingdom! He *pointed to* the Kingdom, and He pointed out *when* the Kingdom was present. I finally wrote this phrase at the end of my study: Jesus *described* the Kingdom, but He never once *defined* it. So, if it worked for Jesus, let’s decide to let it work for us. We can have fun looking for all the clues, much like a treasure hunt, because each one of them will lead us right back to greater relationship with the King of the Kingdom.

I am personally very excited about the transition we find ourselves living because it is in the times of shifting that the Lord reveals Himself in a new way. Miracles increase. The Holy Spirit speaks through revelations, dreams, and visions, adding layers to how God communicates Himself to us. On the flip side, transitional periods are also opportunities for great divisions. Denominations, churches, and individuals decide if they think it is truly the Lord moving, or if it is something trying to counterfeit God.

Perhaps whole generations find themselves feeling misunderstood, misrepresented, and very disillusioned with the status quo. Others defend the status quo as “faithful Christianity,” and the Body of Christ looks as if it’s been all chopped up in the process.

I am telling my story in an attempt to speak to you wherever you find yourself. Perhaps you have diligently done the things you were trained to do to live as a “faithful Christian.” Maybe you even went so far as to attend seminary and become one who is employed by the church or a Christian organization. Possibly, you were raised in a church home, but as you began your life as a young adult, you find the traditional answers and practices no longer appeal to you or even bring you close to the God you long to know. Maybe you are so frustrated with all of it that you’ve given up and are exploring other pathways to know God.

Let me ask you some questions:

Do you feel different?

Do you feel restless and, possibly, even bored with spiritual activities or church attendance that used to fulfill you?

Are you beginning to find excuses for why you aren't available to do them?

Have you even stopped attending Bible study or church altogether?

Are you feeling confused or guilty or both?

Even more, could you possibly be in ministry and spend more time planning your escape route than writing your sermon?

If this describes you, be at peace. You are in the midst of making the transition from the Church Season to the Kingdom Age. It doesn't always come easily, *but the price is worth it.*

If you find yourself like me—knowing there's more, wanting more, but not knowing how to find it—keep reading. God has brought you here because He wants to take your box and rip it to pieces, so that you can discover the life of freedom which comes from seeking Jesus and discovering His Kingdom ways.

Let me warn you, however, if you start down the path of allowing God to break down your box, there may be a moment when you realize that you can't turn around and go back. The only way forward is to go...*forward*. But, here's the good news. You aren't alone. The numbers of people who are walking this path are growing every day, and one day, they will become the majority.

Some of you may struggle to hear how I speak about my life with God. I actually have conversations with Him, often. Some people, even professors in seminary, told me that it wasn't okay to have conversations with God and especially not to talk about it, or even worse, write it down!

Here's the reality. In the opening chapters of the Bible, we find God and Adam and Eve engaged in a very real and recorded conversation. So, if it is okay with God to record our conversations, I hope it will be okay with you too. If it isn't, this book may not be a good fit for you.

Perhaps we might want to make this agreement: For this book, we will drop all our "religious" preconceived ideas. Let's ask God to give us a fresh look at an important part of life—our relationship with the One who created us, life with a loving Dad who is busy working behind the scenes to bring about our best, and One who sets a place for us at His great big dinner table. Let's give God permission to unbox Himself with us.

Jesus came to earth to give us a picture of His Dad, and He spent a lot of time journeying with His friends from one place to another. Take a moment now to envision yourself on a journey with Jesus, as His friend, and give Him permission to take you where He is *already* going.

I can say with confidence that if you seek to read this as an intellectual exercise or an academic pursuit, you will most likely miss the point. We already know way too much information. Our brains are stuffed full to the point of bursting. I think many of us are crying out for an “experience with God,” one that will radically change the way we think, worship, and live our day-to-day lives.

One last word of encouragement: The end matter at the close of each chapter is created to help you bridge the gaps that currently keep you stuck at one side of the canyon unable to cross over. Don't skip over them. Consider that they are the conversations you and Jesus are experiencing as you journey down the road together! He really does care about you and how you think.

Now, let's get started!