

“So the Lord Sold Them...”

Judges 4:1-7

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Are there times when the suffering and misery that we experience comes about by the will of *God*? There are times in Scripture when calamitous events happen that are said to be the *Lord's* doing – an act of God in response to the evil of the people. How do we know, in our *present* circumstances, *now*, when something bad is happening by chance – and when it is the *will of our Lord*?

It is not an idle question. This year, 8.2 million acres burned out west in a series of massive, record-breaking wildfires. The worst global pandemic in more a century is raging wildly out of control. Are natural disasters truly just “natural”? Is there any chance that *God's hand* might be at work?

To try to answer these important questions, we turn our attention to this week's passage from the book of Judges in the Old Testament. This story may not be very familiar to you. It's part of a larger series of stories in Judges that take place after the Israelites have settled in the land of Canaan but before they have established a kingdom. There is a recurring pattern: the Israelites do bad things; God sends judgment upon them, typically in the form of troubles with the kingdoms around them; the Israelites cry to the Lord for help; and God sends them a deliverer – a “judge,” to use the biblical term.

In this case, we have a cast of unfamiliar characters. There was *Ehud* – he was an Israelite judge who had saved Israel from an oppressive Moabite king. He's dead now. There is *Jabin* – he was a Canaanite king, ruling a part of Palestine north of the Sea of Galilee. He ruled from a city called Hazor, which was – at that time – the largest fortified city anywhere in the land. There is *Sisera*, the commander of Jabin's impressively large army which included, among other things, 900 horse-drawn chariots made of iron. There is *Deborah*, an Israelite prophet – a *female* prophet, mind you – who was known for her wisdom. Israelites would come to her bringing disputes that were in need of resolution. She was, at that time, the most important leader in all Israel; no one else had the kind of stature that she had. We're talking about a time period more than *three thousand* years in the past; Deborah is without question one of the world's earliest major female leaders. There is *Barak*, an Israelite whom Deborah knows; she summons him to be Israel's military leader, leading ten thousand men into battle.

So what happens is that the Canaanite King, Jabin, and his general, Sisera, start causing massive trouble for the Israelites. We aren't given many details, but presumably it involved some military conquests of some of the Israelite towns and villages in the north. Word reaches Deborah; she sends for Barak, and tells him to muster ten thousand men from two of the northern Israelite tribes to fight against Sisera and his chariots. She even gives Barak specific military directions, as if she knows where the best place is for the Israelites to make a stand. It is a huge battle – 900 chariots and who knows how many well-trained warriors on the one side; 10,000 largely untrained men (probably mostly farmers) on

the other. But the Israelites have a decisive victory; Sisera's army and all those chariots are crushed. Sisera himself manages to escape on foot, but he ends up getting killed by another Israelite woman, named Jael. So King Jabin's entire army is defeated by the Israelites, and in time King Jabin himself falls.

Now there are a couple different ways this story could be told. There are two sides, two leaders, two military commanders; one big battle. One side wins; the other side loses. Straightforward.

But that's not the way the Bible chooses to tell the story. The Bible doesn't just tell us what the *humans* in the story did. The Bible also tells us what *God* did, both *during* and *before* the battle. *During* the battle, "the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic." The Israelites win the battle because *God* was on their side. The Bible says, "On that day *God* subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites." And *before* the battle – what did *God* do *before* the battle?

Well, that's where things get even *more* interesting. Let's go back up to the top, to the very beginning of the story. "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan." What this means is that *the whole reason King Jabin started oppressing the Israelites was because the Israelites were doing evil things – and God sent the Canaanites upon them as punishment for their sins*. There's a cause-effect situation going on here. *Cause*: the Israelites do evil. *Effect*: *God* sends judgment upon them. It wasn't *just* the case that King Jabin was exercising his military prowess. It was also the case that *God* wanted to send Israel a *message*. There was a divine agent at work, behind the scenes. The hand of *God*, at work in history.

But *God* does not stay on the side of the Canaanites. "The Israelites cried out to Lord for help." The Lord responds, through Deborah's wise and capable leadership. *God speaks* to Deborah, and *through* Deborah. *God* gives Deborah the specific instructions that enable Barak to position the Israelite troops in *just the right place* so that when *God* throws the Canaanite army into a panic, *Israel* will win the day. So *God used* the Canaanite army against Israel – but then *saved* the Israelites from their enemy. Why did *God* change sides? Because in the midst of the crisis, *Israel remembered God*. They cried out to *God* for help. *God* wanted to save his people; *God* cared about them, a great deal, but *God* also was more than willing to use a foreign power to shake Israel up – to put the *fear of God* into them.

So there are two ways to write history. One way is to just write *what happened*, on the *human* scale. The other way is to discern how *God is at work* in history – and tell everyone *that* story. But – how do you do that? How do we *really know* how and when *God is at work* in history?

Ah, there's the rub. It was a question Abraham Lincoln wrestled with, in the throes of the Civil War: "Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." How do you *interpret* the acts of *God* in history? Who gets to *decide*?

We are on dangerous ground here. I remember, back in the 80's, during the AIDS epidemic, there were Christians who were saying that AIDS was *God's* punishment upon homosexuals. They said that because, at the time, most of the AIDS infections and deaths were among gay men, though there were plenty of exceptions – I knew a female college student who died of AIDS. Today, in some parts of the world, women contract HIV/AIDS at much higher rates than men. But there were those who saw *God's* hand at work in that deadly disease; sadly, there are churches that still preach that message.

So we need to be careful here. It is incredibly easy to assign *God's* judgment on some *other*

group of people. But that's not what the Bible does, not here in this Judges passage, nor in many other places. Whoever wrote or compiled the book of Judges was an Israelite, and was assigning God's judgment on *his own* people. He was looking back at history – I am presuming it was a “he” – and saying, “These bad things happened to us because *we* were bad.” Not because *some other group of people* were bad. This was an exercise in *self-examination*. This was someone taking a good, long, hard look at what had been done *by his own people*, at the collective failings of *his own nation*. It's a very different thing to point a finger at *yourself* or *your people* than it is to point it at *other* people.

You see, he *knew* that his people knew better. God had given Moses *very clear laws* for the people – laws which the people had *failed to obey* time and time again. God had sent to Israel prophet after prophet, trying to get them back in the ways of God, calling them to repentance. Some had heeded those calls. Many had not. So when terrible things happened to his people, this author looked back and said, “It's all because of our sins.” Calamities occurred because *we* weren't being faithful.

So when we look at calamities that happen today, is it – or is it not – appropriate to say that this is *God's hand at work*? Is this some kind of *punishment* for our collective sins? Well, maybe.

Take the wildfires. The western part of the United States experienced record dry weather last winter. The dry weather was caused largely because of the extremely high land and ocean surface temperature; 2020 tied with 2016 as the highest global temperature since we started keeping records. There has been a pretty steady rise in the global average temperature for about 120 years now. While it is true that the earth's temperature has not always been constant – there were once glaciers here in Michigan – it is also the case that we have pumped – and continue to pump – massive amounts of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and various man-made gases into the air. Those pollutants change our climate. We have known that for decades. There is not one single national or international body of scientists anywhere that disputes the reality that human activity is accelerating climate change. In biblical terms, prophets are telling us the *truth* – and yet we are stubbornly resistant to changing our ways. How many more disastrous wildfires or other calamities will it take before we're willing to listen?

Similarly ... the coronavirus. There are about 200 countries across the globe. Only 12 countries have lost a greater percentage of their population to this disease than the United States. Belgium, Peru, Spain, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Mexico, a handful of others – those countries have had more COVID deaths *per capita* than we have. The vast majority of countries have lost (proportionally) a lot fewer people than we have. In China, where the disease originated, *fewer than 5,000 people have died*. Compare that to the almost-*quarter-of-a-million* deaths due to COVID in the United States – and China's population is about four times greater than ours. In the early months, the virus quickly spread to every province in China ... but, for months now, China has it *almost completely* under control. On Friday, there were only 18 new diagnoses in China. Here in the United States, we had *18,000* new diagnoses on that same day. The difference mainly boils down to national strategy. They committed to *doing what was necessary* to get the virus under control. We didn't. They took to heart the recommendations of the health experts. We didn't. While they move on with their lives, we get to cancel our Thanksgiving plans.

There are times, I believe, when God sends people – or whole nations – a *message*. God used the Canaanites to send a message to the Israelites three thousand years ago. Today, I think God is using the wildfires and the pandemic to send *our country* a message. My question is ... whether we will *listen*.

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