

Missing the Background

Our Upside-Down World Series, April 17 & 18 | Judges 2:1-5
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HOW DO YOU WRITE HEADLINES FOR YOUR LIFE STORY?

The headline on October 28, 1962, probably should have been, "Vasili Arkhipov saves world!"

Arkhipov was an officer on a Soviet submarine dispatched to the Caribbean Sea during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Soviet submarine traveled silently and without surfacing. Under water, the air conditioning system broke down; temperatures climbed above 100 degrees, and air quality dropped.

When they reached the Caribbean, the Soviet submarine was spotted by the United States Navy. President Kennedy ordered a blockade of Cuba after discovering that the Soviets had placed nuclear arms capable of reaching Washington on the island capable of reaching Washington. The blockading ships began firing depth charges.

Exhausted and cut off from contact with the surface, the crew in the sub hit a breaking point. As American depth charges rained down, the sub's commander concluded that war had broken out and that his only play was to launch the tactical nuclear torpedo he had on board.

Vasili Arkhipov was the officer who refused to allow the launch. Instead, the sub surfaced.

If they had launched the warhead, catastrophic nuclear war would have been almost certain.

The headline on October 28, 1962, should have been "Soviet Officer Saves World!" Instead, the headlines focused on world leaders and the story above water.

We didn't know at the time how significant one unseen event had been to the whole drama.¹

Would you get the headlines right if you were to write the stories from your own life?

Headlines are supposed to grab attention.

In 5-10 words, they need to summarize what the article is about and draw readers in.

If you could turn the events of your life into newspaper stories or blog articles, then you would have the challenge of writing accurate headlines.

Do you think we'd get the headlines right?

Sometimes we would take too much responsibility for things that go right (or wrong).

Other times we would give away too much blame or excessive credit.

Sometimes we would miss the real story altogether.

Instead of writing, "Soviet Officer Saves World," we might write, "Family Adopts Poodle!"

As we turn the world around us into stories, we frequently write the wrong headlines.

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/you-and-almost-everyone-you-know-owe-your-life-to-this-man> and <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-real-lessons-of-the-cuban-missile-crisis-11617985606>

We miss the real actors and the real power; consequently, we miss the real story.

In particular, we miss the spiritual powers at work and the unseen world.

For long stretches in the period of the Judges, the people of Israel missed that the Lord was the real actor and real power propelling their individual life stories and their history forward.

Missing the power that God exerts over life and history lead to disaster.

Why? Because...***Living as if God weren't at work turns the world upside-down.***

JUDGES CHAPTER TWO BEGINS WITH AN ANGEL.

The term translated "angel" is actually a little unclear.

The word is "malak Yahweh," and it doesn't exactly mean angel.

The word more literally means, "messenger of the LORD."

Sometimes (as here), this word seems to imply a heavenly being who is not the LORD himself.

Other times, this word implies a human prophet.

At times when the messenger of the Lord appears or speaks, it seems as if the LORD himself had appeared or spoken.

This angel appears multiple times in the book of Judges.

The angel of the Lord appears when God calls Gideon to be a judge over Israel.

The angel of the Lord also appears when God announces to the parents of the judge Samson that Samson would be born to them under miraculous conditions.

This is likely an angel we encounter elsewhere.

In **Exodus 23:20-21**, as God talked about sending his people on to the Promised Land, the Lord promised to send an angel with them and told them to listen carefully to the angel and to obey the angel as they would obey the LORD himself. God said:

"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him."

Was that angel the mysterious being Joshua, the leader who started Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, met as he contemplated the siege of Jericho? **Joshua 5:13-14** says:

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." ...

There are many unanswered questions about this angel.

We don't know what sort of spiritual being this was.

We don't know if this was all one spiritual being or many.

We certainly don't know everything this spiritual being did.

This angel reminds us that God acts in ways that we do not see or fully understand.

Living as if God weren't at work grows out of an error.

Just because we can't see God at work doesn't mean he isn't acting.

Just because we don't understand what God is doing doesn't mean that God isn't working!

That means that when we live as if God wasn't at work and as if we made all of our own decisions, are able to cause all of our own outcomes, and are responsible for all of our own accomplishments, then we are kidding ourselves.

If we think that's the case, then we are telling the wrong stories and writing the wrong headlines! We're missing the real story, real power, and real actors that drive our lives!

THEN THE LORD BROUGHT CHARGES AGAINST ISRAEL.

Judges 2:1-2 reads: *Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?"*

The angel of the Lord started out at Gilgal.

Gilgal was the place where the people of Israel camped when Joshua led them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land for the first time as a people.

Gilgal became an important military headquarters for Joshua.

It seems to have continued to be a headquarters of sorts for the people after Joshua.

Hence, it is natural that the angel of the Lord was revealed at Gilgal.

Then the angel of the Lord went to an assembly of God's people at Bochim and spoke.

Bochim isn't a real place name. It's a word that essentially means "weeping."

In verses 3-5, the people of Israel will name the place where they were meeting "Bochim."

The angel went to where the people of God were assembled to deliver a message from God. That message amounted to a set of charges or a court case against Israel.

The Lord had a covenant relationship with Israel.

This covenant relationship went back at least to Abraham when God promised to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan.

God made that earlier promise clearer in **Exodus 34:11** when he said that, in keeping their covenant, he would drive out the people who lived in the land at that time:

"Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites."

And in **Deuteronomy 7:2** God told them what this covenant would mean for them:

... and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.

The angel began by recalling what God had done because of that covenant relationship. God brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Then the Lord gave them the land that he had promised to their ancestors. God had kept his end of the bargain.

However, the Lord accused the people of Israel of breaking that Covenant.

The angel reminded the people that the Lord had also told them to avoid making any covenants with the people of the land.

Instead, God told them to break down the altars of their vile gods. In other places, God was even more specific about his demands to eliminate, push out, and avoid these people.

However, the angel told the people, they had not obeyed the demands of the covenant.

Then the angel asked a tragic question: "What is this thing you have done?"

Can you imagine hearing those words from God? That's what happens when we live as if God weren't at work.

Living as if God isn't at work leads to disobeying Him.

It's the same rationale with which my grandmother taught me to eat Rice Krispy Treats.

My grandmother knew that I loved Rice Krispy Treats growing up, so she made them almost every time I went to visit her (particularly after I became an adult).

At some point she and I both started thinking about calories; that's when I remember my grandmother telling me Rice Krispy Treats were fine to eat because they were mostly air.

She always laughed when she said it.

However, eating a whole pan of Rice Krispy Treats (which I did often) can lead to problems.

Puffed rice coated in butter and marshmallows actually has plenty of calories!

Living as if calories didn't count leads to eating too much which leads to weight gain.

And living as if God weren't at work leads to disobeying Him.

AS A RESULT, ISRAEL FACED CONSEQUENCES.

Judges 2:3-5 concludes: *"So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.*

God kept his promise to give the Israelites temptation and trouble.

The people of Israel had already made their fundamental decision in Judges chapter 1. They were not willing to trust the Lord and go to battle against what seemed to be a numerically and technologically superior foe.

Instead, they decided to live with Canaanites in their midst.

God warned them not to do it because they couldn't stand up to the temptation doing life with Canaanites would cause. God repeatedly called the Canaanites a snare, meaning that they were like a trap that catches an animal. Those were the natural consequences of their actions.

Beyond that, God spoke about potential consequences He himself would give his people for disobeying Him. In **Numbers 33:55-56** God said that the Canaanites would become like thorns that irritate and infect and weaken, and that God himself would end up disciplining Israel as he had intended to discipline the Canaanites: *“But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.”*

In advance God promised that if the Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites, then their world would eventually turn upside-down.

The world had already begun to tilt upside-down in Judges chapter 1.

In Judges chapter 1, as the tribes of Israel first went to battle, the Lord was with them.

Pragmatically, the Lord’s being with them likely meant that the angel of the Lord, the commander of the Lord’s army, fought with the people of Israel.

However, we quickly stop reading that the Lord was with Israel.

That may mean that the commander of the Lord’s army stopped fighting alongside the armies of Israel, giving them victory against odds that seemed impossible. In all likelihood if we follow the plot forward, the commander of the Lord’s army went to Gilgal, to the headquarters of the armies of Israel, to wait and see what the people would do.

With the commander of the Lord’s army no longer fighting with them, the people of Israel stopped winning battles against impossible odds. Instead, they began to lose.

Their world was already turning upside down.

The world turned further upside-down in Judges chapter 2.

In Judges 2:4-5 we read that the people of Israel repented of the way they had already turned against God. However, that repentance was short-lived.

In Judges 2:11-15, the generation that knew the Lord had died out. Their descendants largely forgot the ways that the Lord had saved them in the past and the power the Lord had demonstrated on their behalf and in their midst.

The generation that came behind them did not follow the Lord. Instead, they followed the gods of the Canaanites—the Baals and the Asherahs. They did the very thing God sent them into Canaan to end and to judge.

God was angry and gave them over to their oppressors as a natural consequence of their actions since that was all they had to look forward to without God and all they were capable of on their own.

Then **Judges 2:15** makes it clear that the power of the Lord that had been with Israel at one time was now against them: *Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.*

Living as if God weren’t at work turns the world upside-down.

God has a plan for our lives that is good, and it is for our good. When we ignore God’s plan and live as if we made the rules and as if we were free to do whatever we want, then that decision comes with natural consequences. We experience pain. It’s not so different from the noises my engine makes when I forget to change the oil when it has been scheduled.

Beyond that, when we ignore God, disobey him, walk away from Him, or work against him, then we can rest assured that the Lord is not “fighting on our side.” In fact, we may very well experience life with God fighting against us.

Pretty soon we’re experiencing everything we talked about last week: our world is turning upside-down violently with problems, our world is turning upside-down philosophically as everything we try fails, and our world is turning upside-down emotionally as we run out of hope and run into despair. Living as if God weren’t at work turns the world upside-down.

LET’S LIVE WITH GOD IN THE PICTURE.

What does that mean?

Think of the focus of a camera because how we focus a camera matters. It influences the kind of image we get and says something about what we’re looking at, what we’re looking for, and what’s on our minds.

For instance, some photographs are taken with a very specific focal point. You see what’s in the foreground, but what’s in the background is blurred.

By contrast, in other pictures we get to see not only what’s in the foreground but also the intricate detail that’s in the background. We get more of a sense of the context. For instance, in this photograph we get to see trees and leaves and vines.

How we crop an image matters as well. When we crop a picture more broadly, we get to see what else is happening around the image at the center. For instance, in this photo we get to see a second photographer.

Picture yourself as operating a camera that is capturing a photo that tells the story of your life.

Thinking about how we focus the camera matters a great deal.

It is possible to narrow the focus of the camera lens so much that we are the only subject matter in the photo. Sometimes we are that self-focused and that self-absorbed. There is no room for God in that picture.

But if we widen the focus just a bit, then we can see that there are so many things going on in the background, things that we might have missed altogether before.

And if we widen the camera’s angle a bit more, then we see that there are not only things going on in the background but also other people in the picture!

Let’s focus the lens of the camera taking the picture that summarizes our lives in such a way that we are looking out for God’s working in our lives. We’re open to Him and even expecting Him to work and direct.

Let’s live with God in the picture for this moment.

That means that as we live day by day and make one decision after another, we are living those days and making those decisions one at a time in obedience to God.

We are surrendering our desire to have our own will, to get our own way, and to do our own thing; and we are asking what God’s Law teaches us and what God expects of us. Then we’re making a conscious choice to do that as often as we can.

Let’s live with God in the picture for the future.

History is moving in a direction; it is moving in a line toward a conclusion.
God is actually guiding history toward that conclusion. God is working in history!
Living life with God in the picture means that we trust him with history and our lives.
It's freeing to turn the future over to God because we don't have to control everything.

Let's live with God in the picture for the things we can't handle ourselves.

That's usually where we turn to God anyway.

When someone is so sick that we can't heal them with a pill or some chicken soup, then we suddenly turn to God and ask him for help like he has been on the sidelines doing nothing and just waiting for us to give him permission to jump in.

If we're living with God in the picture all along, then we are eager to trust God with the things we can't handle ourselves, because we've been trusting him with the moments and with the future all along.

And as we trust God with the things we can't handle ourselves, the biggest thing we're trusting God with is forgiveness, our relationship with him, our eternal destiny, and the destiny of everything around us. We can't handle any of those things on our own. Only God can handle those things through Jesus Christ, and we know it intuitively. Let's trust God with the things we can't handle ourselves.

Let's live with God in the picture for the things we think we can handle ourselves.

This is the real test of whether we are truly living with God in the picture or not.

The temptation we face is to rely on ourselves too much—to set our own rules, to get our own way, to build our own lives.

If we are handling the things that we think we can handle ourselves, then we're probably pushing God to the impossible edges, and eventually we'll push him out altogether.

Pretty soon, we've focused the camera lens down on us and on the things immediately around us. Before long, all we can see is our own face staring back at us, and the world is ready to flip upside-down.

Instead, let's keep God in the picture.