

# Choosing Our Battles

**Our Upside-Down World Series, April 24 & 25 | Judges 4:4-10**  
**Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal**

## TIMING CAN CHANGE THE OUTCOME OF A BATTLE.

### **Timing was critical in the Battle of Waterloo.**

History remembers the Battle of Waterloo as the final defeat of the French emperor, Napoleon. However, the battle very nearly went the other way.

The French army had superior artillery, was battle-hardened, and outnumbered the British and Prussian armies separately.

On the days before June 18, 1815, French forces defeated the British and Prussians separately.

Then on the afternoon of June 17, as Napoleon prepared to give a final, crushing blow to the British the next day, thunderstorms hit the area; it rained most of the night.

During the rain, the French were consistently slowed in their preparations, and the British were able to get into a defensive position.

Then on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, Napoleon and his commanders delayed the planned morning battle, hoping that the ground would dry so that their artillery would be more effective.

When the battle began in the afternoon, the French were quickly beating the British. However, the Prussians arrived later in the afternoon. Combined, the Prussians and British overwhelmed the French forces. Napoleon was defeated.

Had the battle begun early in the morning as Napoleon had planned, historians are nearly unanimous that the French would have won.<sup>1</sup>

### **Choosing our battles can make the difference between an upside-down and a right-side-up world.**

When we choose to fight the wrong battles in the wrong ways at the wrong times, our world tends to turn upside-down.

However, when we choose to fight the right battles in the right ways at the right times, our world tends to turn right-side up.

We're going to see that clearly today in the book of Judges.

## ISRAEL MISSED THE RIGHT BATTLE FOR YEARS.

### **First, we see that Israel's world turned completely upside-down.**

As Judges chapter 4 begins, the people of Israel were once again disobeying God.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/bams/74/3/1520-0477\\_1993\\_074\\_0413\\_ghetws\\_2\\_0\\_co\\_2.xml](https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/bams/74/3/1520-0477_1993_074_0413_ghetws_2_0_co_2.xml)

Once again, the people of Israel started worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, the people who lived in the Promised Land before them. When they worshipped the Canaanite gods, they started thinking and acting like Canaanites.

**Consequently, the Lord allowed Israel to suffer consequences from a Canaanite king.**

The irony about this king is that, if you're a student of the Bible, you've read his name before.

The Canaanite king was Jabin of Hazor. Hazor is a city in the extreme northern reaches of what would be considered the Promised Land.

Joshua defeated Jabin of Hazor when the Israelites invaded the Promised Land. In fact, Joshua utterly destroyed the city. Who, then, is this Jabin of Hazor?

Most or all of the kings of Hazor were apparently all called "Jabin," just as names like "Henry" are common in the royal houses of Europe.

It seems that some members of the royal family of Hazor escaped when the city was destroyed. They seem to have regrouped elsewhere and leveraged their wealth to make a comeback on the site of the old city. (If you're a Star Wars fan, then these guys are like the First Order trying to resurrect an old Empire.)

Specifically, Jabin seems to have hired a mercenary named Sisera to gather an army.

Jabin paid for Sisera to gather troops and construct the very best military technology available at the time—iron chariots.

Sisera's army extended Jabin's rule and seemed to return Hazor to the status it had once enjoyed in the region—a power that could control everyone. Sisera's chariots commanded the roads and the valleys; his troops could go wherever they wanted and do whatever they pleased.

**Israel missed the right battle for years.**

Of course, the battle they were supposed to be fighting was to push the Canaanites out and bring God's judgment on the idols of the Canaanites.

The Israelites were also afraid to fight the battle for righteousness in their own society. Instead, they started worshipping and serving the Canaanite gods.

Judges 5:1 implies that the leaders didn't know what battles to fight or when!

Instead, for 20 years the Israelites were too afraid to fight Sisera and his chariots. Judges 5:6-7 indicates that people stayed off the roads to avoid the chariots. They abandoned their villages and hid from Canaanite raiding parties in the hills.

**Then God sent Deborah to call his people to him in Judges 4:4-5.**

*Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.*

Deborah was a prophet first and foremost. She represented the presence, perspective, and will of the Lord to the people of Israel.

Because she had a clear sense of God's presence and perspective, the people consistently came to her. She set up court outside of the city of Bethel. The people came to her there to give judgments about important matters.

When no one else would stand up and call the people of God back to God and back to the battle God had called them to fight, Deborah was the one who spoke for God.

### **Question #1: Am I missing the right battles?**

There were battles that Israel needed to fight. God wanted them to take action. However, the people of Israel refused to fight those important battles. Consequently, they suffered.

That reminds us that when we refuse to fight the battles that God has put before us, we tend to suffer, and the world tends to turn upside-down.

There are battles God has called each and every one of us to fight.

I don't want to make this too small nor do I want to make this too large.

Sometimes it is a battle of character, and we have to fight those battles. Loving God is always our guide in knowing which character battles we have to fight.

Sometimes it is a battle of righting wrongs, and we have to fight those battles. Loving others is always our guide in knowing which wrongs to right.

Sometimes it is a battle of surrendering ourselves to serve God. Multiplying followers of Jesus here and around the world is always our guide in knowing when to fight those battles.

If God is calling you to fight a battle for him and you don't, then don't expect life to work.

## **DID BARAK CHOOSE THE RIGHT BATTLE?**

**In Judges 4:6-10 Deborah called Barak to summon God's people to battle against the Canaanites.**

*She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?'" Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.*

Through Deborah, God gave Barak a very specific command because God was making it clear that this was going to be his battle fought in his time and in his way.

Deborah told Barak to summon 10,000 troops (mostly from his own tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun) and gather them at Mount Tabor. That would be the site of a coming battle.

Further, Deborah directed on behalf of God that he would draw out Sisera and his troops and chariots and defeat them himself. Very specific.

### **Did Barak choose the right battle here?**

That's where the text becomes a little bit unclear.

In response to God's instructions through Deborah, Barak told Deborah that he would go if she went with him but would not go unless she did.

Some translations make it sound as if Deborah were chiding Barak for making that statement. Beyond that, the translations sound as if God were punishing Barak. That's not clear in the text.

Statements like Barak made don't often lead to disgrace for the person making them.

What Barak said is not so different from what Moses said when God implied that he would not be going with the people of Israel when they left Mount Sinai to head out into the wilderness and eventually on toward the Promised Land. Moses said in **Exodus 33:15-16**:

*And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"*

Beyond that, Barak was counted as a model of faith in the New Testament.

### **Ultimately, Barak prepared to fight the battle God gave him.**

Word went out to Israel, particularly to the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun.

Barak and Deborah went to Kadesh-naphtali, Barak's home.

As troops began to stream in, God sent them quickly to take the high ground on Mount Tabor.

Nearby, the Canaanite general Sisera heard that the Israelites were massing on Mount Tabor.

Sisera gathered his troops on the western side of the plain below Mount Tabor by the Kishon River.

From there they set out toward Mount Tabor on the eastern edge of the plain.

Up on the sides of Mount Tabor, the Canaanite iron chariots would be no good. Clearly, Sisera hoped to draw the Israelites down onto the plain where the chariots would give them a massive advantage in battle.

With the Canaanite forces at the base of Mount Tabor, all the pieces were in place.

### **However, God was the one who fought the battle.**

Judges 4 says that the Lord instructed Deborah to call the Israelites to battle on a particular day. Then Judges 4 pivots quickly to the fact that as the Israelites raced down the mountain ready to fight, the Lord routed Sisera's army.

In **Judges 5:4-5** Deborah and Barak sang about the battle itself and gave us more details:

*"LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel."*

Coming down from the mountains, the Lord seems to have caused an earthquake. At the same time, rain began to fall. This would have quickly caused the heavy chariots to become swamped and unusable. Furthermore, the Canaanite soldiers clearly interpreted this as the intervention of a powerful god, turned, and began fleeing.

The battle quickly turned into a rout. The Israelites began cutting down the Canaanites. Sisera himself got down from his chariot (stuck in the mud) and fled on foot. Barak pursued the remnants of the army all the back to the Kishon River. Virtually all of the army was killed.

### **Question #2: Am I rushing into the wrong battles?**

## HEBER AND JAEI CHOSE THE WRONG BATTLES.

### **Heber the Kenite chose the wrong battle.**

Heber the Kenite is mentioned in Judges 4 in the verses that follow what we read today.

The Kenites were a tribe of people who decided to join with the Israelites in the Promised Land. They had entered into a treaty with them.

However, one Kenite family decided to peel off when the Israelites began to push back against Jabin, Sisera, and their forces. Heber the Kenite left his home in the Israelite territories, moved near the city of Hazor, and entered into an alliance with Jabin.

Heber decided that the battle was a battle to survive, and he decided that allying himself with Jabin may have meant betraying the Israelites, and it preserved an uncomfortable status quo, but it was the easiest way to survive.

However, this wasn't a battle to survive. Heber chose the wrong battle.

### **Then Jael, Heber's wife, chose to fight the wrong way.**

After Sisera's army was defeated, Sisera ran until he came to the home camp of Heber.

Heber's wife, Jael, had stayed behind on the family's land while Heber went to meet Jabin.

Sisera came to Heber's home. He asked Jael for sanctuary.

Jael welcomed Sisera. She hid him under a carpet in her own tent and gave him milk to drink.

Sisera asked Jael to keep watch in case someone came looking for him. He asked Jael to lie to anyone (particularly any Israelite) who asked and say that she hadn't seen him. Jael agreed.

In the tent, Sisera fell into a deep sleep. Then Jael snuck back into the tent and murdered him. The Canaanite general was dead.

When Barak arrived, Jael was waiting for him. She invited him to come inside and see Sisera. Barak probably drew his sword expecting to fight the enemy general. However, when he went inside, he found Sisera dead.

Of course, the Israelites had every reason to celebrate the death of the enemy general.

However, what Jael did is not so easy to endorse. She had a peace treaty with Jabin and Sisera; these were allies turning against one another. Beyond that, she welcomed Sisera into her tent; the rules of every ancient near-eastern culture stipulated that when he was in her hospitality, Sisera had every right to expect her to protect him. Jael broke all the fundamental rules of society. None of what Jael did was right.

### **Still, God did something with Heber and Jael.**

Defeating Sisera led to the ultimate defeat of Jabin.

God's people were no longer subject to the raids of the Canaanites.

Instead, God gave the people 40 years of peace before the cycle began again.

### **Question #3: Am I fighting battles in wrong ways?**

The ends don't justify the means.

At times we convince ourselves that we have to break the rules in a broken world in order to serve the greater good.

However, convincing ourselves that we must break the rules to serve the greater good means that we don't ultimately trust in God's power, goodness, or control. Instead, we trust only ourselves and believe we must take matters out of God's hands lest God fail.

We need to trust God and let him fight his battles his way.

And when he sends us into big battles and small skirmishes, let's only fight the ways he directs.

## LET'S CHOOSE THE RIGHT BATTLES.

### **Listening to God's voice about the right battles is not always easy.**

Frankly, I frequently wrestle with this question personally.

I frequently find myself asking God for wisdom on the right battles to fight.

And more often than I like, I find myself asking God for wisdom on the right time to fight!

I go to God in prayer, I study the Bible, and I seek wise counsel from Christians I trust.

Sometimes listening to God's voice is straightforward and clear. God makes plenty of things absolutely clear in the Bible, and any confusion we face is simply due to the fact that we don't like the clear answers that we're getting.

However, at other times, listening to God's voice can be difficult and confusing.

### **Still, choosing the wrong battle at the wrong time in the wrong way turns the world upside-down.**

When we rush into battles God doesn't want us to fight, God will not be with us, and we will fight those battles completely in our own power, sometimes against God himself.

When we fight the battles God gives us in ways that God doesn't allow, then we will find ourselves on the wrong side of God as well.

When we fight the wrong battles in the wrong ways, we will likely see life go upside-down: we will face big problems, our solutions will fail, and we will find ourselves losing hope quickly.

### **However, choosing the right battle at the right time in the right way can turn the world right-side-up.**

Fighting Sisera was the right battle at the right time; Barak fought it in the right way. Consequently, the Israelites' world turned right-side-up after twenty years of suffering.

What battles is God calling you to fight?

If the battle involves multiplying disciples of Jesus, then it's probably the right battle.

If the battle involves loving others, then it's probably the right battle.

If the battle involves loving God more fully, then it's probably the right battle.

Now is probably the time to fight that battle, instead of whatever battles you've been fighting.

### **As importantly, there are some battles we simply must let God fight for us.**

Some battles are not ours to fight.

Some battles are simply too big.

Some battles can be fought only when God is ready!

**The biggest of those battles is for our salvation.**

Paying the price for our sin; gaining our forgiveness; defeating sin, death, and evil; gaining our forgiveness; and gaining eternal life are all the right battles.

When the time was right, Jesus came into the world to fight those battle, to live, to die, and to rise again for us. And in the right time, Jesus is the one who will come and make the world as it is into the world as it should be.

We couldn't do any of that on our own.

Instead, let's fight the right battles—the battles God gives us to fight.

Let's fight at the right time—God's time.

Let's fight in the right way—according to God's Law and God's will.

Then, let's leave the rest to God.