

An Impossible Situation

Series: If It Feels Good, Do It (?)

by Ron R. Ritchie

I was invited to teach at a retreat at the Air Force Academy last year, one of many times I have been invited there by a dear friend named Dick Brooks. This time I was told there was a certain officer whom I should befriend. As God would have it, this officer and I ended up sharing the same room together. He told me that his wife had just left him and that he was in great despair. He was totally empty and didn't know what to do. He wanted his wife back, but he seemed to be captivated by his feelings of anger and bitterness.

As I talked to him over the weekend, I began to suspect that he was not a Christian, so one evening after one of the meetings I sat him down and we talked about the Lord. I asked him if Jesus Christ was his Lord, and he replied, "No." So I said, "Why not? Can you think of any reason why you shouldn't let him be Lord of your life?" He couldn't think of any, so I said, "Fine. Invite him in." He did, and he became a Christian.

We corresponded meantime, and last May I went back again to visit the Academy. He was one of the first people I met, and I asked him how he was doing. He told me that things were worse, that his ex--wife was now an alcoholic. She was bitter and empty; their children were not being treated properly. And to really complicate things he introduced me to a woman friend of his, a divorcee who was now a Christian. They were having a "meaningful relationship," he told me.

Before I left the Academy this time he said, "I need to talk to you. You know, I'm in a very difficult place. The whole situation is bizarre. I don't quite know what to do because, as far as I'm concerned, it just seems impossible to reconcile. If I go back to my ex-wife I have to remarry her, but she is a non--Christian. How can I remarry a non-Christian? I really care for this other Christian woman. I just don't know what to do. But I'm willing to go back. What should I do?"

Now I don't have time to share how we worked that all out, but here is the end of the story. I got a letter from him a month ago saying, in effect, "Dear Ron, I want you to rejoice with me because God is alive and well in Colorado Springs. My ex--wife went to a church that was holding a Divorce Recovery Workshop. She accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and we are getting married next week in a Christian ceremony. "

Now that was an impossible situation, from my point of view. I have to be totally frank and tell you that when I walked away from him after our first meeting, I said to myself, "I don't believe that anything can come out of this. This is one of those ridiculously impossible situations."

There are certain circumstances that look totally hopeless to me from my human vantage point. I just didn't have the heart to believe that God could salvage that situation. So I learned quite a bit from that beautiful rebuke from God, and I'm keeping that letter in my briefcase to read the next time my faith wavers.

Pressure On Every Hand

Let me show you another impossible situation, from the Book of Judges, chapter 4:

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth--- hagayim. And the sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.

Israel did evil in the sight of God. They did three things: one, they worshiped the Baals; two, they intermarried

with the Canaanites (a violation of the Mosaic law); and three, they forgot God. They adopted a mentality that said, "There is no king in Israel. Everyone does what is right in his own eyes." God had promised them (chapter 3:3-4), that if they didn't follow him he would give the Gentiles the right to be "thorns in their side," and "a snare" to trap them, so everything is right on schedule.

At this time Jabin was king of the Canaanites. (His grandfather was defeated by Joshua 100 years earlier. Joshua had seen the iron chariots and "the people as the sand that is on the seashore." But he had a relationship with God, so God told him, "Joshua, if you go in my strength and in my name, I'll go before you and I'll defeat this enemy. Jabin's army was defeated; Joshua burned the city of Hazor, and there was nothing left. But one hundred years later, because Israel didn't trust God, the Jabin dynasty surfaced again.)

Jabin was living in Hazor, and his army commander was named Sisera, a Philistine. The Philistines had a monopoly on the making of iron because they had the secret of how to manufacture it, and they would not share it with the Israelites. So the Israelites were under Sisera's power, and they had to go all the way up to "the city of the Gentile ironworks" to get their plowshares sharpened. In addition, they were forbidden to own any iron weapons. They were severely oppressed by Sisera's chariots, his army, by the iron monopoly, and by Jabin's fortified cities. We read in chapter 5 (in the song of Deborah and Barak), that the joy of Israel was gone--that the highways were deserted, and they had to travel through the crooked paths in the hills.

Now you would say, "That's an impossible situation." There was a king who knew what he was doing; an army that knew how to be an army, and a leader who controlled the iron chariots. On the other hand the Israelites faced fortified cities. They were afraid to even be seen on a main highway, and they were oppressed by taxes. But what is it that takes an impossible situation and changes it so that there is freedom and life and joy again? "Israel cried out to the Lord." That's the key.

There is a spiritual principle here which we can apply to our lives:

Overwhelming circumstances are not the measure of a situation.
A cry to God makes possible the impossible.

They were overwhelmed, but then they cried to God and God said, "I'll deliver you."

What is it in your life that is overwhelming you? What is it that is bearing down, what is it that doesn't seem to go away, that severely oppresses your Christian lifestyle? When Israel cried to God he made possible the impossible. And he does this in the strangest ways. That is why God is never boring. He never does it our way.

So in this situation with the Israelites God does a strange thing, from a man's point of view he uses a woman to deliver his people. How embarrassing this must have been to the men of Israel
Verse 4:

Judge Deborah's Admonishment

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment. Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and said to him, "Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded, 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun, and I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon; and I will give him into your hand.' " Then Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then 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 honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went

up with him.

The people had sold out their souls by committing spiritual adultery and running into the arms of another lover. Politically they were in just as much trouble--they had no army, no leaders, no king, no right to vote, no freedom to say anything but pay their taxes and go to the religious services that were destroying them. Yet with all this pressure going on, God had a righteous woman, Deborah, sitting under a palm tree in Ephraim.

Her name means "honey bee." (I think God's humor is just too much. There are 900 iron chariots running around, but God has "honey bee" sitting under a palm tree in Ephraim!) Deborah, had four different functions. First, she is called a judge. Now a judge is one who would call the people back to the truth and deal out wisdom and justice. She held court at a place called Bethel, "the house of God." Secondly, she is called "a mother in Israel (chapter 5), one who's nourishing her children, encouraging; them, building them up, bringing them into maturity. Thirdly, she is a wife, so she understands the relationship between man and woman. Fourthly, she is a prophetess, "one who stand!; before the Word of God and makes it shine"--not telling people what she thinks, but telling people what God thinks. That is where she got her authority, and that is why people came to her they wanted to know who God was.

So while "honey bee" is sitting under a palm tree judging the nation, she says to one of her friends, "I want you to go all the way up to Kedesh and ask Barak ('Lightning') to come and see me." (Kedesh is eight miles from Hazor where everything is happening politically.)

Well, Barak finally shows up and Deborah reminds him of who he is and what God wants him to do (verse 6). In the margin of the NAS Bible this is put in the form of a question, not a statement: "Has not the God of Israel commanded you' 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun?' " She reminded Barak that he had this responsibility--to show up. Then she told him, "God has a responsibility and that is that he will deliver you. He will draw out Sisera and you will defeat him and his chariots."

Now if you were in Barak's place. Living in Kedesh, near Hazor, and you saw the king and the army, and then you look around and see that after 20 years you still don't have an army, and then this woman comes along and says, "Remember what God said," you, like Barak, would probably say, "I'm trying to forget it!" Some situations are so difficult we are not sure what is going to happen. We don't want to test God with them.

So Barak's response probably went like this, "We don't have an army; we don't have any weapons, and they won't let us have any. We don't have any experience, in fact, we have never even tasted victory in my generation. We're not sure we want to try it. We don't want to be exhibit A. We don't want to end up in a museum and have people say, 'Well, this man tried but he didn't make it. But look, here's his uniform; here's his bronze knife. See how it's bent? It didn't go in.' But then here are the Philistines. See their iron, their spears, their shields, their chariots? I'll tell you what I'll do, Deborah, because it seems that you know more than me: If you'll go, I'll go."

And Deborah doesn't put him down. A righteous woman, walking in the Lord, she encourages him and says, "I'll go with you, but there's a penalty for that: you don't get the victory; it will go into the hands of another woman." God must have given Deborah a dream or a vision that if Barak didn't obey, another woman who didn't know she was to play a part in this prophecy would take the victory away from him because he was fearful. Barak's army hadn't left for the battle yet but God has already given the victory.

There is a principle here:

Fear can make overwhelming circumstances the measure of a situation.
Trust in God's Word can overcome that fear.

A couple of months ago my family was under incredible financial pressure. We had just gotten notice that our house taxes were going up 47% in one year. Then we were told our social security was going up. My wife came home from the grocery store and cried because of the high prices. It was hard to handle it any more, and I was really nervous. (The Scriptures would say I was really "fearful." There's a difference.)

No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't produce any more money. PBC really cares for the staff. They are a very generous and concerned body of people. They were doing everything they could for us, but I really don't think it's PBC's responsibility to keep up with every percentage point of inflation. I knew there was an enemy out there that was eating me alive, and there was no hope of defeating him. I shared my fears with my wife and prayed, "God, I just can't take it anymore. You're asking too much. I can't live like this. I can't submit my family to this. I'm going to have to do something, but I don't know what to do because everybody I talk to is in the same situation."

Do you know what happened? God in his grace and mercy solved my personal problems, one right after the other. Now this same God can not only solve our personal problems, but he can also start solving our community, national and world problems if his people will turn to him in prayer. Overwhelming circumstances are his specialty.

So Much For Nine Hundred Iron Chariots.

Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Arise! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the Lord has gone out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.

An incredible thing happened. Barak took 10,000 men and went up to Mount Tabor and hid in the forest on the mountainside. But it didn't do him any good because Sisera had spies all over the land. One of them told Sisera, "The men of Naphtali and Zebulun are all upset. It seems like we've got a little riot on our hands. About 10,000 of them went up to the Mount Tabor area, which is really silly because all we have to do is surround them. We'll get them one way or another." So Sisera called out his whole army, and his 900 iron chariots.

Deborah and the army of Barak are camped on the mountainside, and you can hear the men saying, "What do we do?" Deborah says, "Just relax. God says he is going to do something so let's trust him. I don't know why we're here. I don't know everything. I'm just a prophetess, but I know we're supposed to be here, and Barak knows we're supposed to be here."

Suddenly they hear the clank, clank, clank of the iron chariots, and they look down into the Megiddo Valley (where the Battle of Armageddon is going to be fought), and see Sisera and his army advancing. Sisera is cocky, confident, in charge, while "Lightning" is up in the hills, watching. And right in the middle of all this silence, while everybody is just kind of taken back by this whole scene below, Deborah yells, "Charge!" You can hear Barak saying, "Would you be quiet! What do you mean charge? Charge what? Charge with what?" She says "Listen. .. Listen. "

Turn to chapter 5 and you will read what they heard. Verse 20:

The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon, O my soul, march on with strength. Then the horses' hoofs beat from the dashing, the dashing of his valiant steeds.

The Giboa mountain range was being drenched by a summer thunderstorm. The water from that storm started to run down the dry Kishon river bed toward Sisera and his 900 iron chariots. Then Deborah understood what God was about to do: he would destroy Sisera with a flash flood, a wall of water--five to six feet high rushing

down those dry river beds. You can hear Sisera yelling "Whoa!" as he looked up at the wall of water coming toward him. Panic broke out in his army as his men tried to get to higher ground. It was at this moment that Deborah yelled "Charge!" Israel's army came down the mountain and defeated Sisera's panic--stricken army.

Sisera escaped in the midst of the confusion. He went all the way up to the border of Asia Minor and sought refuge in the tent of a woman named Jael, the woman to whom God promised the victory in Deborah's prophecy. When he lay down to sleep, Jael took a tent peg and drove it through his temple. (See verses 24-27.)

I think the principle here is this:

There is no power in overwhelming circumstances. The power is only in the hand of the true and living God. He alone is able to deliver us in every circumstance.

I talked to a wife this week who wants her husband to pay more attention to her. No matter how she tries it doesn't happen, and she is overwhelmed by this. I talked to a man who wants his wife and his children back and he looks at the situation and says, "It's impossible. I don't know what to do." [His wife accepted the Lord the following week and the family was united.] I listen to two children telling me they are so sick of their parents yelling at each other they don't know what to do. We are faced with all kinds of circumstances that are absolutely overwhelming from a horizontal level. They just consume us. What are we to do? Listen to these principles again. They might help:

First Principle:

Overwhelming circumstances are not the measure of a situation. A cry to God can make possible the impossible.

Second principle:

Fear can make overwhelming circumstances the measure of a situation. But trust in God's Word can overcome that fear.

Third principle:

There is no power in overwhelming circumstances. The power is only in the hands of the one and only true and living God. He alone is able to deliver us in every situation.

Our Heavenly Father, we'd like to take a moment to thank you very much for your Son Jesus Christ. We realize today, Lord, that we are faced with the same problems that Deborah and Barak were faced with. Yet at the same time, Lord, if we would trust you we could sing with Deborah and Barak in victory. So we ask that you would teach us a victory song this week. We ask that you would so fill our hearts with truth, so demonstrate yourself to us that no matter what army comes up the dry riverbed at us, no matter how many chariots or how many men, that you will place within our hearts the word "Charge!" so that we might defeat the enemy and be free and walk in love and freedom again. Thank you, Lord, for Deborah. Thank you for Barak. Thank you for allowing them to teach us this morning. In Jesus name, Amen.

Judges 4:1-16
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Fourth Message
Ron R. Ritchie

[Back to Index Page](#)

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