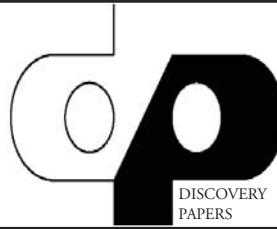


RIGHT DECISION, WRONG RESULTS

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 20:18-48
26th Message
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Lucy invites Charlie Brown to kick the football while she holds it in place for him. He says no; he's not going to fall for that one again. She says it's Thanksgiving, football is a Thanksgiving tradition, and the most important tradition is the kickoff. "It's a big honor for you, Charlie Brown." He reasons that she wouldn't trick him on a traditional holiday, so he changes his mind. He sprints toward the ball, shouting, "I'm going to kick that football clear to the moon!" Just as he's about to do so, Lucy pulls the football away, and Charlie Brown falls flat on his back—again. And we all have a laugh at the expense of the longsuffering Charlie Brown, the protagonist in "Peanuts," the cartoon strip by Charles M. Schulz.

I wonder: when we laugh at Charlie Brown, are we laughing at ourselves? At certain times, anyway, do we think of ourselves as Charlie Brown? If we're Charlie Brown, who is Lucy? Could it be that at certain times we think of God as Lucy? God makes us think that good things will happen if we listen to him, but when we do, he pulls the football away from us, and we end up flat on our backs. In Judges 20:18-48, the Israelites do what God tells them to do and suffer for it. They do the right things, but they get the wrong results. Is this the way life is supposed to work? It's the way it works in Judges 20:18-48, anyway, at least for a while.

In Judges 20:1-17, the Israelites, at the behest of a man who hailed from the tribe of Levi, assembled to decide how to respond to the rape of the Levite's concubine in the city of Gibeah, which belonged to Benjamin, a tribe in Israel. The Israelites believed the testimony of the Levite, even though it was filled with lies and half-truths, and demanded that the Benjamites hand over the rapists, but the Benjamites refused. As a result, both sides prepared for war. The eleven tribes vastly outnumber the tribe Benjamin, so they would seem to have the advantage.

Day one

Judges 20:18-21:

¹⁸The Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of God. They said, "Who of us is to go up first to fight against the Benjamites?"

The LORD replied, "Judah shall go first."

¹⁹The next morning the Israelites got up and pitched camp near Gibeah. ²⁰The Israelites went out to fight the Benjamites and took up battle positions against them at Gibeah. ²¹The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day.

The Israelites, assuming they have God's blessing to go to war with the Benjamites, don't ask God whether they should engage their brothers but who should engage them first. The Israelites made a similar inquiry at the beginning of the book of Judges, but that was when they were going against the Canaanites, in response to the commandment of the Lord. Furthermore, they inquire of "God," a word that could be applied to any of the pagan gods, and not specifically "the Lord" (YHWH)—signaling that they differ little from occupants of the land. After all, the narrator has already observed that all the Israelites, not just the Benjamites, did what was right in their own eyes during the period of the judges (Judges 17:6).

Nevertheless, the Lord answers the petition and directs the Israelites to send the tribe of Judah into battle first, just as he directed them to send Judah into battle first against the Canaanites. The Lord promised victory against the Canaanites, but he promises nothing against the Benjamites (Judges 1:2). The Israelites unify for holy war, but for holy war against themselves, not against the pagans! And though rape is an offense that calls for moral outrage, where was the outrage—where was the unity—in part one of the epilogue, where idolatry was paraded for all to see? (Judges 17-18)

Judah was effective against the Canaanites in Judges 1:3-10, but the Israelites, despite their superior firepower, suffer devastating losses against Benjamin.

Many of us, assuming that we have God's blessing and believing that we have heard from him, undertake a certain task only to fail miserably. But wait a minute, didn't God say something like, "Judah shall go first"? Maybe he did. If he did, then why did you get clobbered? Many of us start out following Jesus with great hopes only to fall flat

on our backs some time later. Lucy—er, God—pulls the football away.

Day two

Judges 20:22-25:

²²But the Israelites encouraged one another and again took up their positions where they had stationed themselves the first day. ²³The Israelites went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and they inquired of the LORD. They said, “Shall we go up again to fight against the Benjamites, our fellow Israelites?”

The LORD answered, “Go up against them.”

²⁴Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day. ²⁵This time, when the Benjamites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords.

In the aftermath, this time they inquire of “the Lord” (YHWH), not “God,” and this time with tears, not to ask who shall engage the Benjamites but whether they should engage the Benjamites. Furthermore, they identify the Benjamites as their fellow Israelites, literally as “the sons of my brother Benjamin.” It’s almost as if they’re reminding the Lord of what they’re doing—not going up against the pagans but against their fellow Israelites. Although the Israelites have encouraged each other and arrayed themselves for battle, they’re giving themselves, and the Lord, an out. However, the Lord doesn’t give them an out and commands them to engage the Benjamites again, even if they are fellow Israelites.

If the Israelites erred in their first inquiry, surely they corrected their mistakes in the second inquiry—weeping, petitioning “the Lord,” asking not who should engage the Benjamites but whether they should engage the Benjamites, and appreciating that they’re going up against brothers, not enemies. Surely, then, if the Lord leads them into battle this time, they will be victorious, right? Wrong. Again, the Israelites suffer devastating losses, faring only slightly better in the second battle. Twice the Lord guides them, and twice he doesn’t help them. What gives?

After falling on our backs, we might ask ourselves, “What did I do wrong?” A little soul searching might lead us to conclude that we, like the Israelites, had presumed upon the Lord. We might realize, at such a time, that we sought the Lord in a narrow way and acted mostly on our

own. Such conclusions might even provoke tears and make us more aware of what’s at stake. Then we might approach the Lord again, with a little more humility and a little more openness to his will, and ask him something like, “Are you sure you want me to proceed?” The Lord answers yes, or at least we think he answers yes. We recognize the error of our ways, we make the appropriate corrections, you might even say we repent, we hear from the Lord, we head out again, and . . . bam! We fall flat on our backs again. Second verse, same as the first. You do the right thing this time and still get the wrong result. Doggone that Lucy!

A friend once suggested to me that God “tricks people into getting married.” His premise was that people get married because of strong feelings, believing that their needs are going to get met in this relationship, but that at some point after they’re married, they discover, to their chagrin, that the relationship falls woefully short of their expectations. In the musical *Les Misérables*, Madame Thenardier laments the state of her marriage: “I used to dream / That I would meet a prince / But God Almighty / Have you seen what’s happened since?”¹ Much of life, not just marriage, tumbles short of our dreams. And even if you manage to make your way through life relatively unscathed, what are you to make of all the misery you see in the world? Is God a trickster?

Day three

Judges 20:26-28:

²⁶Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the LORD. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD. ²⁷And the Israelites inquired of the LORD. (In those days the ark of the covenant of God was there, ²⁸with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, ministering before it.) They asked, “Shall we go up again to fight against the Benjamites, our fellow Israelites, or not?”

The LORD responded, “Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands.”

The Israelites, in crisis, respond to their second defeat in an even more intense way. Now “all” the Israelites go up to Bethel; they don’t just weep before the Lord, they sit and weep for an extended period; they fast for an extended period; and they sacrifice to the Lord. The narrator, meanwhile, brings us up to date on what and who are present at Bethel—namely, the ark of the covenant and Phinehas the priest.² At one point during the period of the

Judges, the ark, which symbolized the Lord's presence with his people, was located in Shiloh, along with the tabernacle or possibly a more permanent structure (Judges 18:31). It appears as if the Israelites have moved at least parts of their meeting place with the Lord to Bethel to be closer to Gibeah, with the ark of the covenant perhaps serving as a sort of good luck charm.

The Israelites inquire of the Lord a third time but this time even more tentatively: "Shall we go up again ... or not?" The Lord again answers yes but this time promises victory, employing the same sort of language he used when they inquired of him about engaging the Canaanites: "Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands" (Judges 1:2). Which begs the question, if the Lord promises victory tomorrow, why didn't he come through yesterday or the day before yesterday? And if he led them into crushing defeats on the two previous days, can he be trusted to deliver on his promise of tomorrow?

We try to follow the Lord and fall flat on our backs. We see the error of our ways, we repent, we do it right this time—and we fall yet again. Now we're in crisis. This time there is an even more intense response—more tears, fasting, spiritual disciplines, whatever. We return to the Lord but with far less confidence in ourselves, and he sends us out again, only this time, perhaps, we sense that he is with us in some new way to produce a different result. Really? A different result? Why today? What was wrong with yesterday or the day before? After first falling flat on our backs, was our repentance not thorough enough? Is it thorough enough now? And why should we believe that this time will be any different? Lucy's holding the football and makes us believe that if we have a go at it this time, we'll kick it to the moon. How about it?

Third verse, same as the first ... and second?

Judges 20:29-34:

²⁹Then Israel set an ambush around Gibeah. ³⁰They went up against the Benjamites on the third day and took up positions against Gibeah as they had done before. ³¹The Benjamites came out to meet them and were drawn away from the city. They began to inflict casualties on the Israelites as before, so that about thirty men fell in the open field and on the roads—the one leading to Bethel and the other to Gibeah. ³²While the Benjamites were saying, "We are defeating them as before," the Israelites were saying, "Let's retreat and draw them away from the city to the roads."

³³All the men of Israel moved from their places and took up positions at Baal Tamar, and the Israelite ambush charged out of its place on the west of Gibeah. ³⁴Then ten thousand of Israel's able young men made a frontal attack on Gibeah. The fighting was so heavy that the Benjamites did not realize how near disaster was.

The Israelites respond to the Lord's affirmation and promise not only by engaging the Benjamites again but also by changing tactics—inspired by the Lord's affirmation and promise but not, apparently, at the specific direction of the Lord. The Lord may have promised victory, but the early reports from the battle on the third day are not promising: the Benjamites "inflict casualties on the Israelites as before." However, the Israelites attempt to turn their two earlier defeats into an advantage by making the third battle look like a repeat. The Israelites retreat, and the confident Benjamites take the bait, pursuing the Israelites and leaving the city of Gibeah undefended.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the Benjamites, a contingent of Israelites was poised to ambush Gibeah. While the ambushing troops charge the city, ten thousand troops from the main Israelite force turn and take the fight to the pursuing Benjamites. As the battle becomes particularly intense, the narrator gives us his perspective on the perspective of the Benjamites: they are unaware that they were on the verge of defeat. How could they be aware? Everything up to this point has gone their way.

The tide turns

Judges 20:35-41:

³⁵The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites struck down 25,100 Benjamites, all armed with swords. ³⁶Then the Benjamites saw that they were beaten.

Now the men of Israel had given way before Benjamin, because they relied on the ambush they had set near Gibeah. ³⁷Those who had been in ambush made a sudden dash into Gibeah, spread out and put the whole city to the sword. ³⁸The Israelites had arranged with the ambush that they should send up a great cloud of smoke from the city, ³⁹and then the Israelites would counterattack.

The Benjamites had begun to inflict casualties on the Israelites (about thirty), and they said,

“We are defeating them as in the first battle.”

⁴⁰But when the column of smoke began to rise from the city, the Benjamites turned and saw the whole city going up in smoke. ⁴¹Then the Israelites counterattacked, and the Benjamites were terrified, because they realized that disaster had come on them.

The Israelites, for the first time in three days of fighting, now inflict heavy casualties against the Benjamites, but they don't do it by themselves. In fact, the narrator makes it seem as if the Israelites had nothing to do with it, reporting that the Lord, not the Israelites, inflicted the casualties.³ The Lord, who did not help them in the first two battles, though in each case he sent them into battle, finally comes to their aid. And the Benjamites, who earlier didn't realize that defeat was at hand, finally recognize their impending downfall.

What happens next in the account is a flashback. The narrator recounts the entire battle up to this point in order to insert some details that he previously excluded. Reporting the battle in this way allows him to convey the perspective of the Benjamites, who were unaware that while they were pursuing the retreating Israelites, a separate contingent of Israelites was attacking—and sacking—Gibeah. Turns out that the Israelites had arranged for a signal—a great cloud of smoke from the city of Gibeah—to be sent from the ambushing contingent when the city was defeated. When the Benjamites, who had assumed that they were waltzing to another victory, saw the city of Gibeah going up in smoke, their hearts melted. That's the point when the Israelites counterattacked with their ten thousand choice troops, and that's when the Benjamites recognized their downfall.

Gibeah, which had recapitulated the sin of Sodom when some men threatened to gang-rape the visiting Levite and when they actually gang-raped his concubine, goes up in smoke, just like Sodom, which the Lord destroyed with burning sulfur after some men from that city attempted to gang-rape two visitors (Genesis 19:28). We may take it that the Lord, who led the Israelites into battle—and to victory—against the Benjamites, was judging Gibeah, and the Benjamites for tolerating and defending the sin of Gibeah, just as he judged Sodom.

What price victory?

Judges 20:42-48:

⁴²So they fled before the Israelites in the direction of the wilderness, but they could not escape the battle. And the Israelites who came

out of the towns cut them down there. ⁴³They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them and easily overran them in the vicinity of Gibeah on the east. ⁴⁴Eighteen thousand Benjamites fell, all of them valiant fighters. ⁴⁵As they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, the Israelites cut down five thousand men along the roads. They kept pressing after the Benjamites as far as Gidom and struck down two thousand more.

⁴⁶On that day twenty-five thousand Benjamite swordsmen fell, all of them valiant fighters. ⁴⁷But six hundred of them turned and fled into the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, where they stayed four months. ⁴⁸The men of Israel went back to Benjamin and put all the towns to the sword, including the animals and everything else they found. All the towns they came across they set on fire.

Earlier, the Israelites fled—or pretended to flee—from the Benjamites. Now, the Benjamites who were fighting against the main contingent of Israelites flee, for real, from the Israelites. As the Benjamites flee to the wilderness in the east, Israelites who had participated in the ambush of Gibeah emerge from Gibeah to cut off their retreat.⁴ A few Benjamites, six hundred, managed to escape to the rock of Rimmon in the wilderness. Meanwhile, the Israelites do to Gibeah and the rest of the Benjamites what they were supposed to do in holy war to the pagans and their cities: they destroy everything.

The Lord leads the Israelites to victory, but victory comes with a price. First, the Israelites suffered devastating losses in the first two battles. Then, even after the Lord promised victory, they suffered losses during the third battle, though their fortunes eventually turned. Throughout the account in Judges 20, the narrator has depicted the loss of choice soldiers on both sides. Israel as a whole, which includes Benjamin, has been weakened for future encounters with the Canaanites, their true enemies.

In one sense, all Israel suffers for the sin of one city. In another sense, all Israel suffers for the sin of all Israel, for everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes, not least by parading and tolerating idolatry in Judges 17-18. Moreover, in Judges 20:1-17, the Israelites believed the lying Levite without checking out his story, jumped to conclusions, refused to listen to the Benjamites, overreacted, and deemed all of Benjamin guilty, not just the rapists. Furthermore, though the Israelites obeyed the Lord, who was judging the Benjamites for tolerating and defending the rapists of Gibeah, they were far more

willing to follow the Lord into battle against their own than against the Canaanites.

Why did the Lord twice lead the Israelites to defeat before finally leading them to victory? What is God doing? It seems he was doing something much deeper than any of the Israelites had imagined. He was judging Gibeah and the Benjamites, yes, but he was also judging Israel as whole.

Likewise, President Abraham Lincoln, commander-in-chief of the North in the U.S. Civil War, came to believe that the conflict was God's judgment on the entire nation, not just the South, for the sins of human slavery:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." (Second inaugural address)

Falling flat on your back

If God leads us to defeat, as he twice led the Israelites to defeat, does that mean he's judging us? Is that what he's doing when he seemingly pulls the football away? Perhaps. We can't automatically dismiss such a possibility. God put to death Ananias and Sapphira, two early followers of Jesus, for lying to the Holy Spirit and for agreeing to put the Holy Spirit to the test (Acts 5:1-11). The apostle Paul says that some believers in Corinth brought the judgment of God on themselves and that some of them therefore become weak and sick and even that some of them died (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). The apostle Peter says, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Jesus told the apostle John to warn churches in Asia to repent or else he would come to them in judgment (Revelation 2-3). What's wrong with us, just like what's wrong with Israel in Judges 20, can't be corrected with the wave of a wand.

Is God judging us when he seemingly pulls the football away? Perhaps not. As Lincoln might observe, also in his second inaugural address, "The Almighty has his own purposes." And that's the confounding truth to reach for when you feel as if God has pulled the football away from you: he has his own purposes, and those purposes are more intricate, more far-reaching, and more sublime than we could even begin to imagine.

Defeat is part of the plan, even if we're obedient to God. Was there ever a more obedient human than Jesus of Nazareth? And what did he get for his efforts? A date with a cross outside in Jerusalem. Was there a more obedient disciple of Jesus during World War II than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, author of *The Cost of Discipleship*? What did he get for his efforts? A date with the gallows in Flossenbürg.

Kicking it to the moon

And what if, perchance, God finally leads us to victory, however we might define it? What if he comes to our aid? What if he finally holds the football in place, and what if we kick it to the moon? What will that do for us? Not enough. Victory won't do enough for us because we want too much from it. We want victory, or success, to fill some kind of void, but it's not quite up to the task. You'd think we'd have caught on to this by now, but we haven't.

Listen to so-called successful people, and you will hear stories like this one from Madonna:

I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. ... I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and I think I'm mediocre and uninteresting. ... Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.⁵

You will also hear stories like this one from Tom Brady, who no one thought would amount to much when he played football at Serra High School in San Mateo but is now considered by many to be the greatest quarterback in football history: "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what it is. I've reached my goal, my dream. ...' Me, I think there's got to be more than this."⁶

Sure, victory gives you a sense of satisfaction, but if your sense of satisfaction is dependent on victory, you have to keep producing, as in the case of Madonna. Or the satisfaction that comes from victory is so inadequate that you wonder what all those dreams were for, as in the case of Brady. Think of the Israelites. It wasn't enough for them just to defeat the Benjamites; they had to crush them. When their fortunes turned, they couldn't stop. They nearly wiped Benjamin off the face of the map, and they weakened the nation as a whole. They had not the maturity to deal with getting what they wanted. They

couldn't handle victory. And they wept bitterly for what they had done (Judges 21:2). A character in one of Harry Chapin's songs concludes, "It's better sometimes when we don't get to touch our dreams."⁷

We might like to tell Madonna and Tom Brady to try Jesus, but many of us who have tried Jesus still find ourselves wanting something like what they have.

Deep and wondrous mysteries

Is God really like Lucy, pulling the football away at the last second? I think not. He knows, with all the pain and love in his heart, that we need to taste defeat, and to sometimes fall flat on our backs, in order to begin to appreciate purposes greater than we could have imagined. Flat on your back, you get a different perspective; you can see things you can't see when you're upright. And if one fine day, long about Thanksgiving, perhaps, you run as fast as your feet can carry you, the finger of God holds steady, you connect with the sweet spot, you watch in awe as that football sails into the stratosphere, clear to the moon ... and at the end of the day you shrug your shoulders and say, "There's got to be more than this." Same thing: deep mysteries are at work.

What is God doing? He's creating a new world. No easy task, that. How's he doing it? Some things we know; some things we don't know. We know that he's using us, and we know that our suffering plays a part, but mostly, we don't know how he's using us. How could we know? How could we know how to make something beautiful of this mess? How could we know how to vanquish Satan, sin, and death once and for all? How could we know how to wipe away every tear from every eye? How could we know how to transform the desert of evil into the garden of God? More to the point, if he's using us to create a new world, how could we know what defeats we must suffer or what victories we must mourn as if they were defeats?

Bow low in worship, or, if you're flat on your back, enjoy the view for a while, for deep and wondrous mysteries are at work.

NOTES

¹Herbert Kretzmer, "Master of the House" (London, England: Cameron Mackintosh Overseas Limited, 1985).

²If the narrator is not telescoping his account of the generations, then this story is from early in the period of the judges, within one hundred years of the death of Joshua. The presence of Phinehas at Bethel may be an indication that the Lord's answers to the Israelites' inquiries have come through the priest's use of the Urim and the Thummin (Deuteronomy 33:8, Leviticus 8:8, Numbers 27:21). How the Urim and Thummin were used to determine the Lord's answers to inquiries remains unclear.

³The word translated "defeated" is the same word used of the Lord's defeat of Egypt, which liberated the Israelites (Exodus 7:27; 12:23, 27).

⁴An alternative reading of the original text, which makes more sense, has the Israelites emerging not from "towns" but from the "town": Gibeah.

⁵Lynn Hirshberg, "The Misfit" (Vanity Fair, April 1991), 160.

⁶*Sixty Minutes* (CBS News, December 2007).

⁷Harry Chapin, "Sequel" (1981).