

Sermon 4: Judges 4-5: The Servants of God

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

How will a nation respond when it is called to war? Today, in the West since the Vietnam War, there are a number of responses that we could expect. Student protests; willing conscripts; the media debating the merits of going to war. Whether the war was being fought at home or away; a defensive or offensive fight; individually or in an alliance, we are familiar with some of these matters. If NZ were called to war today what would your attitude be? Would you embrace the war time restrictions and preparations upon your life? Would the young men eagerly and willingly sign up or have to be coerced? Judges 4-5 are set in a time when the prophetess Deborah calls the people of Israel to war, calling upon Barak to take the lead and gather the men to fight. Once again Israel has sinned v1, 'And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died.' And once again God administers His justice according to the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, v2, 'And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim.' Hazor has been defeated by Joshua earlier but apparently a small seed remained which has resprouted. More important that Jabin is Sisera his general, the one who led his armies and represented his strength. And once again the people of Israel cry out as their punishments intensify, v3, 'Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.' And once again God sends a deliverer, this time it comes in the form of Deborah; who mobilizes Barak; who is outdone by Jael.

Judges 3:1-2 reminds us of the purpose of God in allowing these nations to oppress Israel, 'Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan.' ² It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before.' V4, 'They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.' In this chapter when God calls His people to war we will see a number of responses. We are under marching orders, we are called to war, each one of us is in a fight and has a part to play in the war effort. As we go through this text observing the willing participation of each servant we will be testing our own hearts as well.

The willing servant

V4-5, 'Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.' ⁵ 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 means 'bee'; She is an Ephraimite; the wife of Lappidoth which we know nothing about. But here we see that she is both a prophetess and a judge. Apart from Othniel Deborah is one of the few 'good' judges, though she is not a judge in the full sense of the word because she alone is not a warrior

among the judges. Deborah has always been a bone of contention because the NT clearly teaches that only men can be elders and who can preach the word in the public gathering of the church. The feminist movement and egalitarian movements have loved to leverage Deborah as a figure who overturned the patriarchy and whose existence puts a lie to male headship in the home and church. Sadly, trying to appropriate Deborah for such a political purpose is anachronistic and will inevitably twist the bible in ways it is not meant. Deborah is not a perfect moment of light in a dark world meant to realign every other statement in the bible. Rather Deborah is a sign of the times. We are to read these events through the lens of scripture. In Is. 3:11-12, God is promising judgement upon His people, listen to the form that God's judgement takes on a disobedient people, 'Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have dealt out shall be done to him. My people—infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your guides mislead you and they have swallowed up the course of your paths.' This is what God does to a people who have become like Sodom, Is. 3:9. Deborah is a mixed blessing. She is a prophetess and the presence of God's word through her is an incredible boon to the people of God; she is even a wise judge whose counsel is sought out. But she is a judge during the dark days of the judges and any OT reader of the Bible would not miss the absence of godly men taking the lead. In fact Barak's reticence is an indictment against him in these chapters.

Deborah is an unexpected leader to liberate Israel because she is a woman. She is not Wonder Woman an Amazonian warrior goddess who overcomes the enemy by strength of arms. Nor is the secret to her success the fact that she is a woman and brings a women's perspective. No the thing that marks out the success of her rule is the fact that she is a prophetess, she is anointed by God with wisdom and speaks God's word. God's word and Spirit are the necessary elements for success not oestrogen. We see that she is a humble wife and does not rule and judge from a palace but from underneath a tree. She is the first judge who is said to rule using wisdom.

Let's speak about the elephant in the room, is Deborah proof that women can fulfil any ministry in the NT that men can fill? There are various things we need to say in answering this question. Firstly, the book of judges is not a book that outlines the normative practice for the NT, nor even the OT. The bible often records things that it does not necessarily approve of. Secondly, the fact that God used a woman is likewise not normative, God is His sovereignty can ordain things that are part of His permissive will and not to be seen as perceptive. Thirdly, Deborah was a prophetess and a judge in a time when Israel was a theocracy. The offices of civil government and responsibilities of a religious nature were mixed, today we recognise a separation of church and state. Fourthly, Deborah may have been a prophetess and a judge but no woman was ever a priest, there were roles reserved exclusively for men in the OT and we must not think that Deborah makes all gender specific roles irrelevant. Fifthly, we see Paul allowing for women to pray and prophesy in the NT, but with the ceasing of the gift of prophecy with the close of the Canon, this does not necessitate women in leadership roles today. Sixthly, Paul calls women to silence when it comes to leading and having authority as well as other eldership functions such as testing the prophecies. Seventhly, the NT is very clear about women not being elders in the church and fulfilling their responsibilities. In conclusion we can say that all eldership functions are restricted to men. And let me say that all women and the majority of men are not allowed to be elders. Deborah's advantage lay not in her woman's intuition but the fact that she was a

prophetess and led by the Lord. It must be stressed that the overall success of this era is because of God's intervention, the presence of a prophet, and God's word was heeded and obeyed.

Without trying to make Deborah all about woman's rights and focus on who the real Saviour of Israel is, we can say a few things about issues related to men and women. Deborah is a good example to women in that she does not usurp authority roles, but does serve the people of God with her gifts. We have noted that she did not hold official court in the town where the Ark of the Covenant would be; nor even in a town where official business would ordinarily be done in the gates of a town. Some have suggested that she has made herself available to judge because the priests who would ordinarily fulfil this role in the absence of a prophet were corrupt and this is God's provision of faithful counsel at a time when there was corruption in the priesthood. The Levite in chapter 19 being an indication of the state of the priesthood. If this is the case then we have an incredible picture of faithfulness when others are being corrupted. Woman can continue to take inspiration from her to be a voice of faithfulness in a corrupt generation. She is someone who was sought out for her wisdom and judgments. Her willing service when others are corrupt or drawing back is a challenge for us all. There is also a challenge for men here. It is an indictment upon this generation of Israelites that God raises up a woman to be a faithful judge, where are the men? Even today it is women who buy more Christian books; who attend church services more than men; who initiate spiritual discussions with their children; who organise themselves to get things done in the church volunteering without having to be asked; where are the faithful men who are being godly leaders in the home and the church.

The unwilling servant

V6-9, '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." Deborah does not lead the men into battle but the Lord uses a man, Barak who is called to the task. We see that he is given a prophecy that God is giving him a victory with details about who should fight, where they should gather, and where Sisera will meet them. Barak however does not trust the word of the Lord, he is reticent and seeks assurances. He will only go if Deborah goes with him. This leads to the result that he will not receive all the glory for the victory, but a woman will deal the defining blow. Some have suggested that Barak has been given a raw deal and is not untrusting as almost everyone says, but I think the traditional interpretation is correct. A lack of trust in the Lord is a serious thing. God is made small and untrustworthy. It looks like He needs to prove Himself because His word cannot be trusted. Barak could have received confirmations by the fact that 10000 men would follow him and that the battle would be fought at Kishon. However, he sought extra security, like Gideon later on. This is not commendable but an action driven by doubt. If we have a small view of God we will be controlled by fear, we will not attempt the impossible, we will not obey those commandments that appear too difficult.

The battle is recorded for us in v12-16. We see that all works out exactly as the Lord predicted, these details are not the vain repetitions of a bad story teller but theological clues to Barak's faithlessness, v12-13, 'When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon.' Barak was then given a push v14, 'And Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him.' The battle is recorded in one verse with the result of Sisera fleeing, 'And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot.' The superior technology of Chariots is irrelevant if the Lord is fighting for you. It seems from 5:21 that the banks of the Kishon flooded and either the chariots got stuck in the mud and were useless or they were washed away. Although Barak got off to a shaky start we see that he finishes well and he obeys the word of the Lord in the he wipes out the whole army to a man, just as should have been done in the conquest, v16, 'And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.'

What are the lessons we learn from Barak? The first lesson is obvious, don't question God's marching orders wondering about their sanity or their likeliness to succeed, this is a time to trust and obey. The church has been given marching orders. Barak who was probably a man who planned things carefully was allowing his good sense to overcome the faith he should have been exercising. The second lesson is that though he did not start well, he did get going and started obeying and led the people of God in a great victory. He was not covered in glory for being responsible for taking out Sisera, but as a leader he did rally God's people; he did brave things by confronting chariots, and he did a thorough job, for not a man was left. Don't let past faithlessness or disobedience prevent you from putting in a good effort now.

The unwitting servant

We are then introduced to the heroine of the story, Jael, which means mountain goat. God is overseeing all the events and this includes the place of Jael's tent. Sisera fled there because of a peace between Jabin and Heber, v17, 'But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.' As with Ehud we have a description of Jael's subterfuge. The narrative is not casting a judgement on whether the things she did were right or wrong but is simply recording them. We do not even know whether Jael is a believer. She was an unlikely hero in that she was a woman where a male warrior would ordinarily have been the one to finish off the enemy general. She is not even a Jew, she is a Kenite. And she would have had to violate the laws of hospitality by killing the one in her care. And she invited a man into her tent, which was not done. She did not use a sword but the household tools of a hammer and tent peg, and incidentally it would have been the women's role to pitch the tent so, the peg was part of a woman's work bag not a man's warrior belt. What is the lesson of Jael, the Lord causes His purposes to prosper through unlikely instruments. We have recently studied the topic of God's providence and a key part of the bible's teaching is that God is able to use evil people and evil acts to cause His good purposes to prosper. When we think about who should get the glory for the

victory on this day the issue not whether a man or a woman gets the glory, not even if it was a believer or unbeliever, but that we see how God made His plan to deliver His people. When we are faced with a war that it looks like we cannot win God uses the faithful Deborah's even though the majority are corrupt; He uses the weak Barak's and can still do great things through them; He can even use unbelievers to make way for us. When we see how God orchestrates things here we should take courage and respond to the call to war that we have received. We see that this event roused all of Israel to then rise up against Jabin, with their advantages gone, their general dead and their armies depleted Israel fought and won. This event with Jael was the turning point which opened up the way for the victory. V23-24, 'So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. 24 And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.'

We come now to chapter 5. And this is a most interesting chapter because it is one of the few places in the OT where we have a historical narrative, and then we see that historical narrative reflected upon in a poetic way. If you want to gain a deep insight into how biblical poetry works then study these two chapters together. The only other instance where this happens is the parting of the Red Sea followed by Miriam's song in Ex. 14-15. We could preach a whole sermon on this song but we won't, let me just touch upon the details and draw your attention to some salient points.

We see it is the song of Deborah and Barak though Deborah takes the leading role v1. V2 gives us an introductory analysis that praises the obedience of leaders and people alike. This helps us understand the significance of the song. Rulers are called in a poetic fashion to hear about the victory v3. It all begins with God's march from Seir and Edom in the Wilderness into the promised land v4-5. This was the march of God through His armies in the conquest through Joshua. This is a poetic interpretation of those events. Verses 6-7 paint the scene of how things got bad before the recent victory painting a picture of people living in fear until Deborah became judge. This is the sort of description that really adds body to the descriptions of the oppression Israel brought upon themselves by their idolatry. V8 tells us that because of Israel's idolatry war came. V9 speaks of the difficulty of obedience and leading in this terrible situation and in v10-11 the rich and poor are called upon to tell the story. The last line of v11 records the moving of God's people in conquest, the recording of a golden moment that harkens back to the conquest.

First mentioned are the leaders Deborah and Barak. Then ten of the 12 tribes and their involvement in the battle, Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher are all singled out for apathy and disobedience while Zebulun and Naphtali are praised v13-18. The kings came but got no plunder v19. The stars are poetically spoken of as leaving their course to aid in the battle, and the river overflowed its bank in a flood. These would have been things that the Canaanite gods should have been controlling but were serving God's will. This is a victory song of God over the idols of those being defeated. V22 records the confused sound of the horses hooves. 23 records a curse upon a town that did not aid the armies. And it all climaxes in praise for Jael the Lord's unlikely instrument by which He gives the victory. There is a lot of dwelling upon the defeat of this man by a woman and the facts are embellished to enhance the defeat. 28-30 records a situation where Sisera's mother is worried but does not entertain the idea of defeat. The details reveal the justice of the Lord where a man who raped women was killed

by one. It ends with a call for all God's enemies to have their heads crushed a prayer that keeps with the promise of Gen. 3:15. Christ will finally crush the devil's head and all our enemies will suffer terrible defeat at the hands of an unlikely Hero, the God man who conquers by being killed.

Let me end by making a few remarks about willingness. The song opens in v2 summarizes part of why Israel had the victory, yes they cried out to God, yes God gave them the victory, but notice the means that God used. Willing leaders and willing followers. Godly leaders doing their job and the people of God following. This cannot be ignored. The second point worth highlighting in this song along these lines are the descriptions of the tribes in v13-18. There were the faithful tribes, those tribes that did not answer the call, those tribes that risked their lives. In v16 we see Reuben searching their hearts, there they were thinking hard about it, on the brink of answering the call, giving it due consideration, but then they don't act. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan not willing to leave their comfort zone to enter the fray. Dan and Asher stayed with the ships, one foot out the escape door. But then Zebulun and Naphtali are commended for risking their lives in faithful service. We cannot help but stop and think about our own answer to the call to war. V23 even has a very strong curse for the town of Meroz who likewise should have responded but did not. Think then upon the willingness of Christ to answer the call to war. Think of His willingness to lay down His life. Think of the cost that He was willing to pay; or how He was willing to leave heaven to come to earth to rescue us from our enemies. If ever there is an example we must follow it must be His. Whose food it was to do the will of His Father; who gladly laid down His life and did not need to be threatened to have it taken from Him; for the joy of our salvation and God's glory set before Him He endured it all.