



THE MIGHTY HAND OF GOD

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 4:1–5:31

4th Message

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As we continue our summer series, we come to the story of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4 and 5. For the young people this story might read like a fantasy or science fiction movie—maybe Lord of the Rings or another story that features battles and horses. For the older generation it reads like a classic John Wayne western. This is now the third judge cycle, following Othniel and Ehud. It is a unique account because we get both a prose version in chapter 4 and a poetic version in chapter 5, with the song of Deborah. One is logical, the other figurative and abstract. Each version provides a different lens to view the same event. Both include things not shown in the other account. The only other time this occurs in Scripture is in Exodus 14–15, the account of the crossing of the Red Sea and the song of Moses. Mostly we will look at chapter 4 but will also draw from verses in chapter 5. Here we go again with a new cycle:

And the people of Israel again did what was 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. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. 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. (Judges 4:1–3 ESV)

Another cycle begins—doing evil by serving the Canaanite gods, Israel being oppressed by an enemy, the people crying out to the Lord for help. The oppressors this time are Jabin and his commander Sisera. They were located in the north, by the sea of Galilee. The main battle takes place at Mt. Tabor just north of the Jezreel Valley. The river Kishon runs through this valley. Sisera is the main antagonist, perhaps a mercenary. He commands 900 chariots of iron, an overwhelming and insurmountable enemy. These chariots were killing machines. His oppression is cruel, and very strong. The poem gives an image of the deadness that Israel experienced:

**In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned,
and travelers kept to the byways.
The villagers ceased in Israel (vv 5:6–7)**

Idols make for cruel masters. Idols not only make you miserable and enslaved, but they also lead to isolation from community, feelings of aloneness, and fearful hiding. A couple of things catch our attention.

First, again and again. Round and round. This is what we see in Israel, and often we see it in our own lives. We do the same things over and over, going to the same idols for comfort, pleasure, love, acceptance, or worth. We know God's word. We know we are God's covenant people, and yet we so easily forget and turn away. Why do we do this? It is absolutely crazy, because idols are powerless to

deliver. This is why we need constant renewal, constant fellowship, and constant encouragement. Instead of turning to idols, we turn to the Lord again and again.

Second, there are enemies with iron chariots. In chapter 1, iron chariots kept Judah from taking the plains from the enemy, and here we see them again. Iron chariots represent powerful idols or areas of sin that seem overwhelming. They are incredibly powerful and have a hold on our lives. They can leave us depressed and anxious. We feel trapped, helpless, having no chance of gaining freedom. I know the cruel power of iron chariots, and some of you do as well. These are dark, oppressive enemies. And so we ask, how can I change the patterns? How can I overthrow iron chariots? This is what this account is all about. God can help us if we are willing.

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. (vv 4:4–5)

Deborah is a prophetess, like Miriam and Huldah in the Old Testament, and Anna in Luke. Her name means “honey bee” and she is married to “torches.” Deborah is a spokesperson for God. She is judging, but she is not a warrior judge who delivers like the other judges. People are coming to her for judicial decisions. She is governing. In the poem she describes herself as the “mother of Israel.” Sisera sits/rules in Harosheth-Haggoyim while Deborah sits/rules under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, quite a distance away. Also, she is not in Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant is located, and yet people are coming to her.

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?’” (vv 4:6–7)

Deborah calls Barak, meaning “lightning,” to lead the people against Sisera. Barak is the counterpart to Sisera. The indication is that God has already spoken to Barak—“has not the Lord commanded you?” And now Deborah is seeking to empower him. She knows God's plan and is confident of the outcome. Deborah tells Barak to gather men and go to Mt. Tabor. Sisera will come to the river Kishon in the Jezreel Valley and God will give Sisera into Barak's 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. (vv 4:8-9)

Barak is reluctant. He wants the assurance of the prophetess, and Deborah complies. However, even though Barak gets the victory he will not get the glory. Rather the Lord will give Sisera into the hands of a woman. This is a shameful thing for Barak to hear. At this point, one would think that it will be Deborah, but that will not be the case.

Barak is characterized as passive, weak, indecisive, and reluctant to follow God. Passivity has long plagued men in general. On the other hand, Deborah is confident in God’s word and stands as God’s presence who calls God’s designated leader to take action. I can relate to Barak’s timidity, and many times my wife calls to me to do something way outside of my comfort zone. She will come to me and say, “God has told me (or us) to do such-and-such.” Now that, is hard to challenge, but so often I sense confirmation in my own heart and she empowers me.

I don’t think we can make generalizations about men and women, or extrapolate this situation to the role of women in the church. But what we can say is that Deborah is a gifted, spiritual woman who was obviously a leader among the people of God. We see gifted women in the gospels and the New Testament. And today we have gifted women in the body who have great hearts for the Lord, who make an incredible contribution to the body of Christ. Women should be encouraged when they look at the character of Deborah.

In my early days with the singles ministry here at PBCC, there were three women who were an incredible blessing to me: Grace Kvamme, Thoa Charkowsky, and Debbie Tucker. They were so good at what I was not. They set me free to shepherd people. We are blessed that they are still involved here at PBCC.

And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him. When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 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. (vv 4:10, 12-13)

Barak calls the troops and goes up on top of Mt. Tabor. Then Sisera calls his troops and also goes to Mt. Tabor. Barak is doing something that would be totally absurd. Sisera is licking his chops. The Israelites are on top of the hill, making them totally vulnerable. Sisera can surround them. It will be an easy victory, or so he thinks.

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?” (v 4:14)

Again Deborah puts a charge into Barak—this is the day. And she uses the same language we saw in verse 6, “has not the Lord gone out before you?”

So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. 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. 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. (vv 4:14b-16)

What happened? The narrative doesn’t tell us but the poem supplies the answer:

**From heaven the stars fought,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!
“Then loud beat the horses’ hoofs
with the galloping, galloping of his steeds. (vv 5:20-22)**

When I read this I remember Tennyson’s famous poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Do you know that poem?

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred. ¹

Barak and the Israelites did not die. When Barak and his troops charged down, the skies opened up. Water flooded the banks of the river where the chariots had assembled and the chariots were stuck in the mud. The Israelites charged down the hill and routed the confused army of Sisera. This is a great, unexpected miracle. And the reason we get two accounts is because God is working through nature to reveal his great power and deserves the praise of his people.

Despite Barak’s reluctance, he still stepped out in faith to do something totally illogical. He is a flawed man, but Hebrews 11 lists him as a hero of the faith. By faith Barak, like others, was “made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb 11:34).

What is faith? Certainly it is not believing the right doctrines or attending a Bible study. Or having it all together before we do anything. Rather it is stepping out, risking, when the evidence for success is lacking. It is an active trust in God and his provision. And sometimes somebody has to push us into it.

The issue in Judges is idolatry, which is the root of all sin. Faith means to actively believe that God can provide what an idol promises, when there is no evidence of the outcome. Faith is a willingness to take on the iron chariots in our life, even though the odds seem insurmountable. Faith is responding to the call of God on our lives to live holy lives, when it is so much easier to do what is right in our own eyes. Faith is actively living for the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of the world.

One of the big issues for children in our world today is bullying. Many children face a powerful bully, or other kids ganging up on them, or a mean teacher. Adults might face a horrible boss or difficult family situations. These can be iron chariots. The people are not enemies, per se, but rather the fear, the conflict, the emotion, the places where we go when those things happen. Faith is believing that God will be with us in those battles.

David Jones has blessed us at PBCC for the last 20 years. But prior to that, David and his wife were missionaries with MAF and served in Central America. He and Laurie heard the call of God to go overseas when it would have been much easier to pursue

a more comfortable life. They had to face the idols of comfort and materialism. In my day, many young people who came to Christ thought they were going to the mission field. We were not materialistic. But today I think it is more difficult for young people, because of the idols of comfort and wealth. I wonder if young people today hear the call to go to some remote place in the world, learn a foreign language, and share the gospel. I can't make any judgment, but I am just saying, God's call might seem totally illogical and will require facing powerful enemies. What we need in these situations is faith.

That is not the end of the story.

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. And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. (vv 4:17–18)

Heber was mentioned in verse 11 as foreshadowing. He is a Kenite. The Kenites were non-Israelites, but became associated with Israel through Moses' marriage to Zipporah. Heber had separated from the other Kenites, physically and spiritually, and become a friend of Jabin. Therefore when Jael greets Sisera, he thinks Heber's tent will be safe and secure for him.

And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, "Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" (vv 4:19–20)

Jael is extending lavish hospitality. She makes him comfortable and gives him milk to drink, sets him at ease, and volunteers to guard the tent. She is violating several cultural norms by inviting a man into her tent, putting a covering over him, defying her husband's peace agreement with Jabin.

But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. (v 4:21)

Since Jael was a nomadic tent dweller, she was very skilled with a tent peg and mallet. The poem describes this scene very graphically:

**She sent her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the workmen's mallet;
she struck Sisera;
she crushed his head;
she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet
he sank, he fell, he lay still;
between her feet
he sank, he fell;
where he sank,
there he fell—dead. (vv 5:26–27)**

We also find out in the poem that Sisera abused women and used them for his selfish gratification. Ironically, he is killed by a woman.

Ehud and Jael share similarities. Ehud deceives Eglon; Jael deceives Sisera. Both Eglon and Sisera are gullible. Deception is

part of war. Ehud drives/thrusts a sword into Eglon; Jael drives/thrusts a tent peg into Sisera's head.

And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple. (v 4:22)

Like she did with Sisera, Jael greets Barak and invites him into the tent. Eglon's servants discover Eglon fallen on the ground dead; Barak discovers Sisera fallen dead. Barak tried, but he could not get the glory. Barak is humbled. Deborah's prophecy comes true. Eventually Jabin is destroyed and the land has rest.

Unlikely People

Two takeaways this morning. First is the involvement of unlikely people. Jael is a Kenite, a non-Israelite and yet she is loyal to the Lord and is willing to follow him. In the poem she is praised:

**Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed. (v 5:24)**

The poem also praises six tribes who were willing to engage in the battle: Naphtali, Zebulun, Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh, and Issachar. However, the tribes that did not participate are shamed: Reuben, Gad, Dan, and Asher. The city of Meroz is also cursed.

God uses unlikely people, flawed people, weak people. In his kingdom, nobodies are somebodies. God can use anyone that is willing to be faithful to covenant and engage in the battle to possess the land, our life in Christ, and be a part of what God is doing. It does not take a degree or charisma. All it takes is a willingness to show up.

The apostle writes:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor 1:26–27)

The Hero is God

Second, we see that God is the hero. Deborah, Barak, and Jael are all involved in the victory, but the real hero is God. He is the one who brings the salvation and deliverance. Look at the thread that runs through this story. God's hand is behind everything that happens.

**2 The Lord sold them in the hand of Jabin
6-7 The Lord commanded...I will draw out...I will give him into your hand
9 The Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman
14 The Lord has given Sisera into your hand...the Lord goes out before you
15 The Lord routed Sisera
23 God subdued Jabin**

What is the answer to iron chariots, to insurmountable enemies, to addictions, fears, anything that keeps us enslaved and isolated? The answer is the power of God. Salvation is the Lord's.

The word "hand" is a symbol of power. God is the one who can deliver us from the enemies we face—sin, temptation, idolatry.

Faith is trusting in the mighty hand of God to do what he promises. Faith is relying on the power of God to do what he has called us to do. What can keep us enslaved is relying on our own resources instead of God's power.

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:28–29)

Communion

Today is our designated Sunday for communion, and it is so appropriate because the deliverance of Israel in Judges is foreshadowing of a greater deliverance. Christ took our place on the cross. Ironically, what happened to Sisera also happened to Jesus—nails were driven into his body. But Jesus did not stay in the grave. The mighty hand of God raised Jesus from the dead, a greater act of deliverance than we see in the Judges story. And God raises us to walk in newness of life and life by faith. In the poem of Deborah, she remembers and praises God for his salvation. And that is what we do when we partake of the bread and cup. The poem is a remembrance and so is this meal. We remember the cross. We remember the resurrection. We remember our salvation.

May God give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him...that you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead. (Eph 1:17–20)

1. Alfred, Lord Tennyson "The Charge of the Light Brigade" Online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45319>

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