

Chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Judges are very interesting for a couple of reasons. For the first time in the Bible we are introduced to a woman honoured, called and appointed by God to a prominent position in the life of Israel - Deborah, the prophetess and judge. In addition, each chapter deals with the same events - one from the perspective of the historian, and the other from the perspective of the poet. We will focus mainly on chapter 4, although at the same time noticing how the emphases in chapter 5's song provide us with a richer, deeper perspective.

With the death of Ehud, "the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (4: 1). So the cycle begins once more, with the Israelites finding themselves under the heel of Jabin, a king of Canaan - a ruler who, if Israel had trusted and obeyed God fully back in chapter 1, would not even have been there. Jabin's main agent of oppression was Sisera, the commander of his army, who had "nine hundred iron chariots" at his disposal (4: 3). The oppression is worse than under Eglon - it is "cruel" and it lasts 20 years. And so Israel "cried to the Lord for help".

And so in vv. 4-5, we are introduced to "Deborah, a prophetess". As prophetess, she delivers the word of God (v. 6 - "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you...."). And she is "leading Israel" - "she held court". This was a place where Israelites would come to have their "disputes decided". Clearly, she was recognized as a wise counsellor and judge, and people came to her to settle all sorts of social, legal and relational cases. In this way, Deborah was very different from all the other judges, before and after her. She led from wisdom and character, rather than sheer might. Where Othniel "went to war" (3: 10) and Ehud made his assassination plan (3: 16), Deborah counselled and guided the people. So she comes closest to being a godly leader of the people, instead of simply a general. She was a judge who led beyond the battlefield. In all this, we are reminded that God's chosen leader does not simply rescue, but also rules. Deborah was in this sense the greatest pointer to the monarchy and even to the Christ.

In fact, Deborah was (alone among the judges) not a warrior. She is not the one who, in God's strength, rescues the Israelites by defeating those who are oppressing them. Deborah fulfils her important service for the Lord in alliance and partnership with a leading man. And so in v. 6 we are told that "she sent for Barak" and passed on God's commission to him. It is Barak who is to take 10,000 men to Mount Tabor, and it is he to whom God will give victory over Sisera. The ruler will not be the rescuer, and the rescuer is not the ruler. And, as we see in vv. 17-21, neither Deborah nor Barak will be the one who has the honour of removing the main enemy, Sisera. In every other case in the book of Judges, from Othniel on through to Samson, there is only one single human "hero". Here there are three. And, as the song in chapter 5 makes clear, this means that we can see where the ultimate honour should go - not to one, or two, or three people used by God, but to the Lord himself, who works through those whom he chooses to rescue and rule his people.

Barak's response to God's call through Deborah in verse 8, and Deborah's reply to him in verse 9, have been read in 2 ways - one more pessimistic about Barak, the other more optimistic. The more pessimistic view sees Barak asking Deborah to go with him, and refusing to go if she doesn't, as a timid lack of faith. This makes sense of the way the NIV renders verse 9, namely Deborah agrees to go with him and says, "but because of the way you are going about this (ie: refusing simply to trust and obey God), the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman". The more optimistic view rests on the fact that the Hebrew in verse 9 can also be translated as: "On the expedition you are undertaking, the honour will not be yours...." (as the NIV footnote has it) or "nevertheless the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory...." (as the RSV has it). So Deborah is not rebuking Barak, but simply telling him that though he will have to charge down Mount Tabor into the teeth of nine hundred chariots, he will not get the honour for

it! It is a prophetic statement of fact, not a verdict on his faith. On this reading, which I favour, Barak is a hero and example of faith not only in verse 14 but throughout the whole story, which is what the commendation of his faith in Hebrews 11: 32 implies. His desire to take Deborah with him is not disobedience. No, rather it is done out of recognition that Deborah is a godly woman who speaks God's words. Why wouldn't he want her with him? So first, Barak shows us that faith is listening to God at every stage of life, and in every circumstance of life.

Second, faith is showing courage in the face of humanly overwhelming odds. An iron chariot could cut through foot-soldiers like a hot knife through butter. 900 chariots would beat 10,000 men every time. But Barak still fights. Third, faith is humble and not honour-seeking. Barak obeys God and leads his men down the mountain, knowing that the victory will be given to someone else, and that the rule will not be his afterwards. In his faith, Barak foreshadows God's great Deliverer, who though in very nature God (Jesus Christ was the rightful Ruler, unlike Barak), still "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing....he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2: 6-8).

On Mount Tabor, as God's obedient servant goes into battle against an enemy who seems unbeatable, "the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword" (4: 15). Barak's forces were no match for Sisera's - but Sisera's were no match for God! Sisera, so secure in his chariots, abandons his own and flees on foot. All his troops "fell by the sword" (4: 16). The victory is almost complete. All that remains is for Barak to catch up with the fleeing Sisera. But by the time that happens, Sisera will be dead.

Before we look at what happened to Sisera, one comment about Deborah and women's leadership and ministry in the church. In Old Testament Israel, there were three great "offices" - prophet, priest and leader (judge/king). Some women such as Deborah and Huldah were prophets. Some women such as Deborah and Esther were judges/queens. But none were priests. Only the priesthood was excluded to women because the priests represented the people as a whole, especially in the case of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The priests also taught the Law to the people with God's calling and authority, the very principle that the apostle Paul is upholding when he restricts the New Testament church function of teaching/ruling elders to qualified men in 1 Timothy 2: 12 and 3: 2. The Old Testament shows us that women were free to use their gifts in any role but that of priest. The New Testament pattern is the same as the Old. Women are free to use their gifts in every role except the one God has reserved for men: priests in the Old Testament, and then those who teach-with-authority in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2: 12). God forbids one kind of role in the church to women, as he did in Israel. So we must not jump to forbidding all teaching and tasks to women - and we shouldn't assert all sorts of specific tasks are off-limits such as working outside the home or reading the Bible, praying or speaking in other contexts from the front in worship services. The whole of the New Testament indeed encourages women, as Kathy Keller puts it, "to be active, verbal participants in the life of the church - teaching, exhorting, encouraging, and contributing in every way except in the office of elder....where teaching and doctrine are judged according to canonical deposit of truth, the Scriptures".

Returning to Sisera, he flees on foot to "the tent of Jael", which meant safety, because King Jabin and Heber the Kenite were allies (4: 17). But, with echoes of Ehud's assassination of Eglon, Jael, Heber's wife, deceives Sisera. She welcomes him, gives him a drink and lets him go to sleep. Then she picked up a tent peg and a hammer....and "drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died" (4: 21). Some people are bothered that the saving of Israel comes through the treachery of Jael (4: 18-19). Sisera came into Heber's camp because a treaty bound Jabin and Heber. Therefore, Sisera expected asylum there, and Jael's warm welcome and hospitality confirmed his expectations. However, the Bible does seem to approve Jael's act. For in the Song of Deborah in chapter 5, Deborah commends Jael - "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife

of Heber, the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women” (5: 24). It seems to me that the Bible itself is pro-Jael. Frankly, that does not bother me at all. Sisera, who “cruelly oppressed” (4: 3) Israel and probably enjoyed raping captive Israelite girls (5: 30) was a wicked and evil man. Even if this narrative does bother you, put the problem on the back burner for a while, for the story does not intend to raise a moral problem but to rehearse for us God’s salvation. Our God is indeed mighty to save!

Throughout the story one finds great emphasis on the source of salvation. Deborah clearly states this in her call to Barak in 4: 6-7: Barak is to go with 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun to Mount Tabor and the Lord God of Israel will lure Sisera with his chariots and troops to the Kishon River and give him into Barak’s hands. When Deborah orders the attack, she assures Barak that “the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?” (4: 14). The writer of Judges himself attributes the decisive action to God, both in 4: 15 (“The Lord routed” Sisera and his forces) and in 4: 23 (“On that day God subdued Jabin the Canaanite king”).

Notice how this saving God is described in 4: 14. Deborah’s words in this verse may well be the hinge of chapter 4. She assures Barak with a rhetorical question: “Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?” She is depicting God as the warrior who fights for his people. Perhaps we have lost this imagery in the modern church of today. But the only real hope of God’s afflicted people is in a strong Lord who “with justice....judges and makes war” (Revelation 19: 11). God is the Rescuer, acting according to his will and not his people’s merits. So he deserves the glory.

Though God is clearly the source of salvation, he frequently uses means to bring it about. How did God defeat Sisera? Why did Sisera abandon his chariot and flee on foot from the battle? We have a clue when 4: 15 says “The Lord routed Sisera”, for the Hebrew verb used is sometimes used in situations in which God sends a thunderstorm or hail (Joshua 10: 10-11; 1 Samuel 7: 10). That is why God lured “Sisera....with his chariots and troops to the Kishon River”. Chapter 5 reveals that indeed God’s hand was behind it all. There was a rainstorm (5: 4, 20) and the Kishon swelled, overflowed and flooded the area (5: 21) so that Sisera’s tactical advantage went down the drain as Barak’s infantry charged down from Mount Tabor. Truly this was God’s victory. Sisera would never have arranged his chariots next to a river if he had been expecting rain. This must have been the dry season, not the wet - but God, through Deborah, told Israel just where to fight, luring Sisera’s army to the place where he would destroy them. Knowing how the Lord delivered his people does not diminish in the least the fact that it was the Lord who rescued them. If anything, we marvel all the more as we ponder the precise timing of God in sending the rain!

Again, though God is the source of salvation, he frequently uses human instruments to bring his saving help - but in such a way that the instrument reveals rather than hides God as the giver of salvation. Deborah teaches this in 4: 9 when she discloses to Barak that “on the expedition you are undertaking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman”. This prophecy is given beforehand. So no one could say, “It just happened to turn out that way”. No, before the event, God through Deborah clearly declares that Sisera will meet his end in a most unexpected way. So then, when it occurs, there can be no doubt that it is God’s doing. Moreover the normal expectation would be that Barak would bag Sisera as his prize. All our human conventions and expectations about how things should happen are shattered when we learn that a woman will kill Sisera. Nothing was more mortifying than having a woman slay a warrior. By this unexpected and strange twist, God leaves his mark upon the occasion and testifies that this is no normal situation. As he displays his glory in delivering his people, God takes pain to keep anyone from obscuring that glory. No warrior among the Israelites, no matter how great, must place the true Warrior of Israel, God himself who fights for his people, in the shadows. Perhaps for personal application we could take Deborah’s words to Barak as the RSV translates them in 4: 9 - “The road on which you are going will not lead to your

glory". This is a necessary reminder for us - in the ministries and service that the Lord calls us to and gives us in the life of his Church, we are not to seek glory for ourselves, to strive after "success" and worldly praise, to build our own little kingdom. No, the glory belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, and him alone.

Even in the trivial or small details, God is working out his salvation. Look at 4: 11 - "Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites.....and pitched his tent by the great tree in Za-ananim near Kedesh". Who on earth cares about that? Why insert that fact into an otherwise interesting story? Yet verse 11, dry as it seems, points to the providence of God. According to 1: 16, the Kenites settled in the south of Judah's southern territory. Heber separated from this group and moved north to Kedesh. But this is not just a piece of geographical trivia, is it? For we discover in verses 17 and following that Jael, the woman who nailed Sisera, was Heber's wife and that she was precisely where she needed to be when Israel's oppressor, Sisera, ditched his chariot and ran for his life. The God of the Bible still injects those incredible bits of providential trivia into the lives of his people. In what a wonderful way God prepares for our deliverance! Many Christians can see this as they look back and reflect on God's ways with them. As you look back on your life perhaps there has been some little piece of divine trivia, something that seemed at the time quite unrelated to anything, something that even escaped human notice because it was so small, so trifling. And yet it turned out to be the means of God's saving help for you. A God like that surely ought to be praised and adored! We can, and should, order our lives and our memories not only historically but theologically - not simply recollecting what happened or what we did, but searching out what God was doing. This keeps us from over-honouring ourselves in success, or despairing in our struggles. Part of the key to enjoying peace is to be continually praising the Lord for what he has done, and is doing, for us, because the story we tell of our lives is not so much about us, as about him.

Judges 4 and 5 show us that God wins. And so blessing is to be found in fighting for and with him, putting ourselves in his service whatever the odds or likely cost. Conversely, as we see from the Israelite town of Meroz in Naphtali and its refusal to help in the battle against Sisera and his forces, there is a curse for those who stay at home and refuse to help (5:23). As we have seen, it is not that the Lord requires help but that the Lord allows his people to "help". We have been saved by the Lord and brought into his Church that we might fight and serve in the cause of the gospel. Let us embrace that task in faith and joy.

Amen

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