

The Story of Barak and Jael

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Today, we're going to be considering a story from what's probably the most troubling and obscure book in the entire Old Testament, and that's the book of Judges. If you've ever read the book of Judges, you know what I'm talking about. If the book of Judges were to be made into a movie, not only would the movie likely be rated R, but it would probably win some awards, because, you know, it's edgy, it pushes the boundaries, and it tells quite a powerful story about the real nature of humans, and what happens to people when they reject God's rule over their life and do what is right in their own eyes.

The book covers a period in Israel's history where there was no king. It's kind of like if we were in Canada here and we had no federal government and all we had was provincial governments – that's kind of what was happening at this time. And it was during this time in Israel's history that we really begin to see how unfaithful they are to God. God had taken Israel – a totally random nation, out of all the nations in the world – and had chosen them to dwell with, to dwell with humanity again. But they showed no concern at all about living in relationship with God. Instead, they decide that they're going to do what is right in their own eyes. And the author of the book of Judges, what he does is he takes a bunch of stories throughout this period that illustrates how Israel had failed in this way. And they take place in kind of like this cyclical pattern: you have Israel starts doing really bad and God hands them over to an oppressor. They then cry out to God for deliverance because the oppression is bad. And so then, God, out of His mercy, raises up individuals who are called judges to lead Israel and to free them from the bondage that they were under, and then they come free... only to then sin again, and the cycle continues and continues throughout the whole book until, at the very end, Israel becomes just the same as any other nation. And so the stories, they're not clean, and they're not rosy-colored; they show us humans at varying stages of sin. And yet, God still delivers them, and the judges He uses to deliver them are sometimes just as morally questionable as the nation they're saving. And that's particularly true for the story that we're considering today.

If you have your bibles, please turn to Judges Chapter 4. Judges Chapter 4. It's found on pages 172 or 192 in the bibles in the seats in front of you. This is the well-known story of Deborah. And so, you might be wondering, in a series that considers more *obscure* stories, why would we be considering a more well-known story about Deborah? Well, the issue is that Deborah actually isn't the focus of this passage. The passage is *actually* focused on a guy named Barak, and another lady, whom you'll see in the story. So for that reason alone, it would be good just to reconsider it and see what it has to say to us. And there are also a few pretty troubling elements that happen in the story, as well, which we will definitely see. So yeah, Judges Chapter 4. The story is set up for us in verses 1-4 – I'm reading from the NIV.

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.

(NIV)

So here the author is setting up the story for us. After a guy named Ehud – he was the previous judge, he delivered Israel – but once he died, Israel went back to their old ways. So God handed them over to this guy named Jabin, who cruelly oppressed them and now they're crying out for God to help them again. You'd think, "If I were in that situation, if I were God," – I mean, that's definitely blasphemous – but if I were, I would probably not want to show mercy, right? But our God is a merciful God, and He desires to show mercy, and so He, in spite of their sins, begins to deliver His chosen nation again. And that starts in verse 4:

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

(NIV)

Here, the Lord begins the process of delivering the nation, and we're introduced to the prophetess named Deborah, who is apparently judging Israel at the time. She's the judge, and so, if we're reading the book of Judges, we would expect *her* to be the one that's going to raise up the nation of Israel and expel Jabin from oppressing them. But surprisingly, that is not what we get. No, instead, she calls *Barak* to act as judge and to deliver Israel. And we should be a little bit confused here. Why on earth would God pass up on Deborah, who seems to be in a natural position here to lead Israel and kick out Jabin, why does He pass over her in favor of some guy named Barak, who's from the tribe of Naphtali. It doesn't make a lot of sense. If you were just reading this you'd be thinking, "Hmm, Deborah's in a position where she could exercise leadership, and yet she then goes to Barak and says, 'God calls you to deliver the nation.'"

Why? Why would Deborah be okay with this? It's because Deborah is listening to the commands of God. Even when it seems hard to understand *why* God would command it. God doesn't give a reason; He just commands that Barak is the one that's supposed to be delivering it. And Deborah, you know, who's apparently a competent individual to deliver Israel, she was willing to listen to and obey God *even when* it would seem like it's replacing her position of authority. Deborah was faithful to God even when the command of God didn't make a lot of sense. If I were Deborah, there would be a lot to complain about there, but her only concern is to be faithful to God. And this is entirely opposite of Barak. Barak, on the other hand, in contrast to Deborah, is *failing* in his duty and is acting *unfaithfully* to God. Verse 6 reveals how much of a salty dog Barak is, because here's the thing: Barak was commanded – so you look at verse 6 here. Verse 6. It says that Deborah, you know, says: "Israel commands you." That's how the NIV translates it there. It seems like it's a new command, but the reality is it's actually a command he's already received. The ESV translates it a little bit differently, and this more accurately gets across what it's saying. Deborah actually says:

“Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you...?”

(ESV)

This was a command that Barak already had, but he was failing to obey. He was supposed to be the judge, but he was not fulfilling his role as judge, and Deborah, as a prophetess, was naturally filling the role, but it was God’s role for *Barak* to lead. Why on earth was he faltering at this point? Verse 8 tells us the reason:

Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

(NIV)

Barak is a coward! Or, maybe. to put it another way, Barak isn’t stupid. If you look at this, right? God had commanded Barak in verse 7, He says this. God says to him in verse 7:

“I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots...”

(NIV)

“Yeah, the 900 iron chariots that have been cruelly oppressed in Israel for 20 years? Yeah, I’m going to lure them and his entire army to the Kishon River, and you’re going to fight them.” Yeah, that’s pretty much the opposite of what a rational person really wants to hear. So, yeah, I understand why Barak is kind of scared. But why does Barak ask *Deborah* to come with him? Why is Deborah’s presence such a big deal for Barak? Why is that the determining factor whether he’s going to go and fight Sisera or not? It would be easy to say that Barak is kind of just being cowardly and he wants more people to come with him, but I don’t think that’s what’s happening here. The whole book of Judges is focusing on whether the people will trust the words of God. Whether the people will hear what God has to say, and act accordingly. And Israel’s problem throughout the whole book of Judges is that they fail - they constantly fail - to trust God’s word and act. And here, Barak suffers from the exact same vice. Barak knows what God is telling him to do, but he is *unwilling* to trust and act on the mere words of God, like Deborah was. Deborah was willing just to hear what God has to say and act; Barak, however, was *not* willing to do so. And then he sees. He sees Deborah, who’s a prophetess, and says, “Hmm. I need *her* to come with me,” because Deborah, as a prophetess of God, speaks the very words of God to His people.

So what I believe Barak *wants* here is he wants Deborah’s presence because she can be a constant source of divine guidance for him. The simple word of God – that God would deliver Sisera into Barak’s hands – seems kind of a little unspecific, right? It seems like you want more information. And he sees Deborah as being able to provide that for him. Because this is... basically, it would be essentially a suicide mission for him, right? And if God is just telling him, “Go and do this,” he wants more information. He clearly did trust *God*, but he did not trust God’s word alone. He wanted something more immediate and more comforting than simply God’s promise that he would win. He wanted God’s guidance – on a moment-by-moment basis – a specific guidance from God’s mouthpiece on earth. And in doing so, he devalued the word of God, because it wasn’t enough to motivate him to act.

And that reality really hits home to *me*, because I can't help but feel as though I would live differently if Jesus Christ appeared right now and told me to do something. I would feel as though my life would somehow be radically changed if I actually *saw* Jesus and He actually told me to do something, and that's sad because the bible is supposed to be doing that for me right now. I should be radically changed, but I just can't help but *feel* as though it would be different! You know, the bible commands me to love my enemies, right? And, I mean, sure, I want to do that, but I feel it would be a little bit different if I heard it from Jesus' mouth Himself to me. "Jeremy, you have to love your enemy." I feel like that would be different, but it *shouldn't* be because God's word is supposed to be *enough* for us. But I can't help but feel like I'm lacking that kind of faith. And the reality is it kind of seems like I *do* lack that kind of faith. And, you know, one day our faith will be sight, right? And we will have immediate access to God and everything that He's commanded us to do *will* make sense. But right *now*, we have to live by faith, and that is tough! We're supposed to exercise faith in God by trusting in His word *to* us even when I can't see Him right now!

You know, the bible commands me to believe in God, but it's hard to believe in someone I've never seen. You know? The bible commands me not to act how my friends who don't know God act; but it is *hard*, because it is so much easier just to live like everybody else! The bible commands me to resist temptation, but temptation seems like it's much more real than God's command; I can't see the payoff sometimes, right? And yet, faith is the evidence of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. And faith in God's word should be motivating me to act just as if Jesus were right here right now telling me to live and act according to how He wants me to live and act in relationship with Him.

Perhaps this might be a lot to read out of Barak's simple statement, but it certainly is understandable. His desire is completely understandable. Simply because God told him so, Barak would embark on a suicide mission? That's...whoa man, it's a little spicy there! I mean, I would probably want more information. There's a lot of variables that are left up in the air that God does not tell Barak. He just says, "I'm going to hand Sisera into your hands." That's it. "And you're going to have victory." But, I mean, okay. "How am I supposed to attack?" Right? "When am I supposed to attack? Did God change His mind? How am I supposed to know?" There's a lot of variables left up in the air and God's mere promise seems really hard to believe in when you're going to be facing against 900 iron chariots. You're going to be going against them just because God says so? Just because God says you're going to have victory? That is an incredibly hard thing to do.

And I don't know about you, but sometimes I would like the bible to be more specific, right? Because I don't trust my own judgement. I would want the specific, step-by-step instructions for every single moment of my life, but that's not what God gives us. He gives us His word, He gives us His commands, and He gives us the Holy Spirit that guides our actions. But there's a lot there that, man, that is tough. And yet, God's word is still enough. And instead of asking Deborah to make the way clearer and easier for him to follow, Barak should have asked for the faith necessary to act in faith, knowing that God was with him every step of the way. It kind of reminds me of the story when Jesus was coming down from the mountain after His transfiguration in Mark Chapter 9, and He finds that demon-possessed boy, and His disciples are unable to cast out the demon, right? And so the father comes up to Him and he says this:

“...if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

(ESV)

That’s what Barak should have asked for, and that’s what each one of us needs to ask God for. Because it’s incredibly hard to hold fast to God’s word, and, I mean, I know I am so prone to lack trust in God’s word. And so, like the father of that boy, I need to ask God to help my unbelief, and to help me act in faith, trusting that God is God and that His word is enough. And then, this leads to what happens next in the story. So, we’ve got in verse 9, Deborah responds and says:

“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.”

(NIV)

Because Barak failed to trust in God’s word, God would give the glory for the battle to another person, to a woman. Now, this is really fascinating, the author is kind of messing with us here. Because if we were just reading through this story on the first go or whatever, we would be thinking the woman Deborah is talking about is herself. “I’m going to hand the glory of this battle to a woman.” And the only woman that’s been mentioned thus far is Deborah! That’s what we would be thinking. That’s the natural thought. It’s like, “Ah, since you failed to trust God’s words and exercise leadership here, I’m going to take over and I’m going to get the glory.” That’s what we’re thinking she’s saying, but we find out that’s false as the narrative progresses, which we will see. So, continuing on.

So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

(NIV)

Kind of interesting. The author tells us twice that Deborah went with him. I don’t know why he has to say it twice, right? Kind of seems like it’s redundant. But he’s just emphasizing the fact for us that Barak got what he wants, *and* he’s also setting us up to keep thinking Deborah’s going to be the one who’s getting the glory here. And then we get something that’s really, really random. In verse 11 we get this:

Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh.

(NIV)

What?! It’s just totally out of the blue and makes no sense there. It’s like, okay, all right, there’s a guy named Heber the Kenite who left the other Kenites, they’re related to Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law... Why on earth do I need to know this? It seems completely irrelevant. But the author is actually doing something quite ingenious here. He is setting us up for something that’s going to happen later on; it’s actually incredibly relevant. But continuing on. The action continues in verse 12 here:

When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

(NIV)

Interesting. And then what Deborah then says is this:

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?”

(NIV)

So the Lord has done His part; He has brought Sisera with all his chariots and all his soldiers to the Kishon River area, and now Barak gets what he was wanting. He is getting the guidance that Deborah can give him: When to attack. He's getting more information than he would have simply got from just God's word. He's feeling more confident that now he's going to be able to win this battle because he knows exactly when to attack. He has more information than he had before and now he's more confident. And he's about to lose the glory for the battle. And again, we as readers are thinking, 'Now Deborah's going to step in and she's going to win the day.' But then we read this:

So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left.

(NIV)

So here we got literally almost the complete victory of Barak, and, for some reason, Deborah is nowhere to be seen! Which is totally blowing our minds here! We're just thinking, 'Well, what are you talking about?' Barak was supposed to have forfeited the glory for the battle, but it seems like, oh man, Barak's won the battle! It was almost a complete victory, right? He's routed all the soldiers. What is going on? It seems like the glory has gone to Barak, and then we get this kind of twist ending here, where Deborah's not in the scene – that means, well, how is this glory going to go to somebody else? But we get, like, straight-up M. Night Shyamalan – if you've ever seen any of his movies. We get a twist ending here, right? Sisera escapes. Sisera escapes, and that means the battle hasn't been finished yet. As long as Sisera is around and kickin', the right-hand man of Jabin, the cruel tyrant, Israel will never be safe. The battle was supposed to go to a woman, but what happened here? Sisera is escaping. Well then we get verse 17.

Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite...

(NIV)

Now, we as readers should just stop and think for a second that, uh-oh, this is bad news for Sisera. Because now we're getting introduced to another woman into the picture, and the glory for the battle is supposed to go to a woman. Sisera is kind of getting on a knife's edge there, right? We're also introduced to the fact that Jael is the wife of Heber the Kenite, which the author has sneakily introduced for us in verse 11 as being related to Moses. Moses's brother-in-law. So it seems like, man, Sisera's kind of going in for trouble here. But he can't be. This can't be the woman that will get glory by defeating Sisera in this battle, because, as verse 17 tells us, there were friendly relations between Jabin, king of Hazor and Heber the Kenite. They were allies! There's no way Jael's going to be the one that kills Sisera; they're friends! So we must be mistaken. There must be another woman that's going to appear later on. But then we get verse 18!

Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid."

(NIV)

If anyone tells *you* that, run, okay? That is very shady, all right? I mean, sure, she could be pretty nice, but no one's ever really that nice, all right? So, already we're kind of thinking, "Mm. Mm. Don't go in there, Sisera!" But then we get:

So he entered her tent – oh, way to go, Sisera – and she put a cover over him.

(NIV)

She's gaining his trust. He then says:

"I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

(NIV)

He asks for water, and she gave him milk? Which, you know, kind of makes a person relax and want to sleep, and then gets him nice and cozy. Like, you get warmed up and then you can go take a little nap there. Mmm, it's not sounding good. But Sisera has total confidence in Jael. She even said, "There's nothing to fear." You know? They're allies, right? Then we get verse 20. He has totally bought her and has total confidence in her. He says:

"Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"

(NIV)

Sisera completely trusts Jael, and we, as readers, would likely also trust Jael, kind of, right? But we're not totally sure. His entire confidence is in Jael. But Jael has other plans. Her name, by the way, means mountain goat. I wouldn't call my daughter "mountain goat," but apparently she's a woman of hardy stock, right? She has lived her entire life in the desert. She has set up her tent thousands and thousands of times. Her hands are callused because of how many times she's had to hammer in the tent pegs. Her arms are strong, and she's about to do something that's incredibly interesting. Verse 21:

But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

(NIV)

God delivers Israel through the hand of a lady named Jael. And it wasn't clean; it was messy, it was certainly morally questionable, and I can't help but feel like this was first-degree murder. Jael should be going to jail! Kind of works like that. But the author doesn't even tell us Jael's motives! All the author tells us is verse 23:

On that day God subdued Jabin...

(NIV – emphasis added)

How on earth do we make sense of that?! *God* is the one that's using this event? How on earth do we understand it?! It seems like another case where God creates good out of human actions. It's kind of like what happens in the book of Genesis. If you remember the story of Joseph, Joseph gets sold into slavery by his brothers. But in Genesis 50, he can reflect back on the event and he can say this to his brothers, to his brothers, to their face:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...

(NIV)

The brothers in the book of Genesis, they did something that was so horrible, so terrible, they lied to their father, saying that, "Yeah, Joseph's dead," while they sold him into slavery. Joseph can reflect on that and he can see how God used that as the means through which He fed the entire nation of Egypt and kept thousands of people from starving during a famine. God brought good out of evil. And the same thing is kind of happening here. I mean, we don't know what Jael's intention is, right? It seems like it's murder to me. She kind of puts him at ease, makes him fall asleep, gets him all comfortable, and then jams a tent peg into his temple. Seems like that's kind of hard... I don't know how to understand it. Sisera's clearly not a good guy, right? But do the ends justify the means? And yet, God brought good out of it.

And maybe Jael's actions are kind of understandable. You know, verse 17 tells us that there was a friendship between Jabin and the Kenites, but I think it's highly unlikely that this was an equal partnership here, right? Jabin is a cruel tyrant, and the Kenites are related to Moses. I'm not sure that they're going to be on even terms here. If Jabin's a cruel oppressor, I'm sure he's also a pretty bad ally to have, as well. *And* they see what Jabin is doing to all the Israelites. And then also you think Jael's children would have the prospect of being this abused sidekick to this unbearably evil guy. Hmm. And then God brings Sisera – that commander who's bringing all this about – into Jael's tent. And she has an opportunity to end that evil man. It's kind of like, you're just living in your house, and then up to the door comes Hitler, who wants to stay in your house. What do you do? It's kind of tough. Do you kill Hitler? I don't know. I mean, don't take from the sermon that it's okay to kill people; that's not what I'm getting at there. But the bible captures the messiness of life! This is an epical conundrum! Jael could end the entire oppression of Israel, and this guy is the Hitler of her time!

Whatever we think of Jael's actions, it's clear that God used her to end the oppression. I mean, I don't know how to think of it. I don't know how else to understand it. But both Barak and Jael are faulty instruments. The judges who deliver Israel are just as morally questionable as the nation that they're saving. And yet, God brings good out of the messiness of life. She may have intended it for evil, but God took it and made it the means through which all Israel was saved. This just shows the remarkable nature of our God, who is constantly making good out of the sinful world we're living in. He doesn't throw away Barak for his lack of faith; rather, He still uses Barak and he does win a victory in a battle! But he doesn't get the glory. And Jael – whatever her motives might have been – God did not let her sinful action have the last say! No, rather, her action was the means through which God liberated a whole nation.

God is constantly in the process of making life out of our dying world. And this characteristic of God should be very comforting to each and every one of us. Because life in this world is so completely full of sin, that it's hard to make sense of it. It's hard to make sense how any good could come out of a world where we have people who are kicked out of their lands, we've got people who are... there's wars happening, it's crazy! How on earth can good come out of this world?! Every one of us has private pains in our lives that we're kind of – what do we do with it? How do we understand it and how on earth can God bring good out of it? And yet, God does know and He tells us in His word in Romans 8 that He is working all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. His word tells us that. And what else *can* we do but trust in that? Trust and obey, even if we don't understand. Just like Deborah did. God's word should be enough. Trust in that, at the end of time, you know, everything will make sense. But now, *now* we have to exercise faith; faith that God *is* making good out of this world, out of every hardship each and every one of us faces. That through all of the uncertainty, we have a Heavenly Father we can trust. And when family and friends let us down or we let them down, when the government fails and we take the blame for it, when life disrupts us and puts us into confusion and despair and uncertainty, when nothing makes sense, our God holds the whole world in His hands, and He holds our lives in His hands. And He asks us to trust Him, to have faith *in* Him and in His word, and if it is possible for all the things in this world to come together for good, God would be the one who knows that. And He calls us to trust Him. And with a God like that, with the God of Deborah and Barak and Jael holding the world in His hands, our faith *in* His word is justified. We have to just believe *in* Him and trust *in* His word, and may God help us in our unbelief through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[congregation sings hymn "Trust and Obey"]

As we leave today, may this word from Numbers Chapter 6 comfort us:

***“The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”***

(NIV)

Amen. Don't forget to pick up your kids.