Westlake Church Lausanne

Deborah
Judges 4-5

So, we're looking at the Book of Judges, and today we've got to the story of Deborah. You've heard the historical account, the historian speaking, in chapter 4, but in chapter 5 you get the same story told by a songwriter.

Judges 5:1-31.

Now, when you're a parent, there are times when one of the children plays up again. And you thought you'd got this area of disobedience sorted, but they go and do it again, and you roll your eyes and think, 'here we go again!' And you'd be forgiven for thinking that as chapter 4 opens, wouldn't you: Chapter 4:1, 'And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died.' So Ehud, the last judge, dies and here we go again, Israel falls into sin.

The Oppression of Idols
In v2, the writer tells us, 'The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.' Now, do you know how ironic that is? You see, the Canaanites are the very people whom God promised the Israelites victory over; the people who God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt to disempower. And here they are under their power. Because of the Canaanites gross sins, Israel was to take possession of the land, but here they are having their possessions looted by the Canaanites.

And not just by any old Canaanites, but by one King Jabin, who reigned in Hazor. And that's doubly ironic, because decades before there was another King Jabin of Hazor, who had rallied all the pagan Canaanite tribes against Joshua and the people of Israel, but who had been decisively defeated by Joshua in battle. And yet now, here is Jabin the second, defeating them.

So why are they under Jabin's boot? Well, in her song in chapter 5, Deborah tells us: verse 8, "When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gate." So the people of Israel had swapped God as the thing they worshipped, as the ultimate in their personal and community lives, and exchanged him for idols – the gods of the Canaanites: gods of power, of sex, of harvest success.

And no doubt they thought that their lives would be better – they'd have better better harvests, better sex, more children, if they made these things the ultimate in their lives. And yet the very opposite happened: war was in the gates. In verse 6 of the song, Deborah says, 'the highways were abandoned, and travellers kept to the byways' – in other words, law and order broke down and it wasn't safe to walk the streets. In v7 she says, 'The villagers ceased from Israel', so community life has collapsed, it's every man for himself. In v30, Deborah puts words into the mouth of the mother of Sisera, the Canaanite general, boasting over his spoil: 'A womb or two for every man.' So the Israelites worshipped gods of sex and fertility, but the outcome was that their women were objectified, raped, and used as sex slaves. And in v8, perhaps most damningly of all, Deborah says, 'Was

shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?' In other words, nobody did anything about it. Why? Because idolatry made them moral cowards, or at least morally compromised – and they lost the guts for the fight against evil.

But think about it: this is what idols always do, isn't it. Without God at the centre of their private and public life, Israel experienced this internal collapse. And whenever we make anything other than God our ultimate, we risk doing exactly the same, and our inner life collapses. I mean, think of your semester ahead. What if you make academic success your ultimate, so you can please your mum and dad, or feel better about yourself? What if you make getting a girlfriend, or boyfriend your ultimate – and that's what becomes the defining thing for you? Or what if in the future it's the making of money that drives you, or your appearance? What will those things do to you on the inside? You see, here are the people of Israel, failing to be all that God would have them be, because they run after all these other things and think 'this will be my god'. But if you chase after idols, if you make good things God-things, you'll never flourish, you'll never be all that God has made you to be.

Worship success, thinking it will make you feel good about yourself, and you'll find yourself needing ever more success, always comparing yourself to others, always on edge. Worship power and you'll feel weak, and ever more fearful - war is at the gate. Worship sex, and you'll objectify women, or men, and it will rob you of the very intimacy you long for. Worship a relationship or a friendship, and you'll become controlling, and as a result your community life will fall apart, just as village life ceased here. And just like the Israelites – make something other than God your god - and you'll compromise your moral compass, of what's right and wrong - and at the end of that road lies moral cowardice, and you wont fight against evil because you won't know what evil is.

In other words, substitute other stuff for God, make that your ultimate, and your inner life will collapse, and it will suck the life out of you.

And here are the people of Israel reap the result of their idolatry: the oppressive power of Jabin, and Sisera, and his 900 chariots of iron, for 20 long years. So what do they do? Verse 3, 'Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help.' Sometimes it takes us to reach rock bottom before we come to our senses doesn't it? Sometimes God is the last place we turn, when he should be the first.

And what does God do? He raises up a judge.

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The Call to Fight
There are three key characters in the battle that follows, and we're going to look at each one.

Deborah
Chapter 4:4, 'Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.' And Deborah was a remarkable woman – she stands out like a beacon in the book of Judges. And that's not because she was the only female judge, or that she combines the roles of prophetess and judge, or that she of all the judges didn't lead the people in battle - but because she is the wisest, most godly, most mature character arguably in the whole book.

In 5:7 she calls herself, 'a mother in Israel'. And she was. She was a prophetess, she brought God's word and God's wisdom to multiple situations. And people sought that out – they would come to her for her advice and for judgment. And she lead, not by force, but through her wisdom and character, and by speaking God's word. And whereas men like Gideon and Samson, with all their baggage, seem to point away from God, Deborah does the opposite. As we'll see, she relentlessly points us toward God. So it's no exaggeration to say that she is the most godly of all the judges.

Now, do any of you know who this lady is? This is Boadicea. And Boadicea was the queen of a British tribe, and she led her people into battle against the Romans around 60AD; and despite the fact that it ended in failure, she went down in history as a hero. We British like our failures!

But Deborah was no Boadicea. She didn't lead the tribes into battle. Instead, the Lord gives her a message for Barak. So let's look at him.

Barak
Verse 6-7, 'She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the Lord commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor…. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army… and I will give him into your hands'?"

And how does Barak respond? Verse 8, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go."' What do you think of an army leader refusing to go into battle unless his mother figure comes too? Is he just being timid, is he a coward? Before I went to medical school I went to see a respected pastor and I sat in his office, and told him I felt called to Christian ministry, but I was concerned what my parents would say, and rather bluntly he said, 'listen you can't stay tied to your mother's apron strings forever!' So is this Barak wanting to hold on to mother Deborah's apron? Is this how low Israel has sunk that the men won't fight unless mummy comes too?

Well, what's fascinating is that in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, in that great hall of fame of faith in chapter 11, is it Deborah or Barak who get's commended for their faith? It's Barak. Hebrews 11:32, having put before us the great heroes of the faith, the writer says, 'And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson…' Why is Barak an example of faith? Well, we're not told. But listen: when Moses led the people of Israel in the desert, he said something very similar to God – I won't lead these people unless you go with me. Moses knew he wasn't up to the task of leadership on his own; that unless God went with them it was pointless. And here, Deborah is God's mouthpiece; she's the one speaking God's word, bringing God's encouragement, and challenge. And maybe Barak is saying, 'I want that, I need that, with me in battle, which means, you've got to come with me.' I mean, think about it: when has real faith ever been cocky, thinking you can do it on your own?

True faith is recognising your weakness, maybe even your fears, and then trusting God with all you've got. And Barak is facing an army of 900 chariots, that's like a modern tank army, it could easily destroy 10,000 footmen. And yet, Barak did charge down Mount Tabor, with his men, against that army, he did throw himself into the teeth of the battle, and that's not the action of a coward.

And Barak did it knowing that he would not get the glory. As Deborah says to him, v9, "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."

Now there are plenty of us who will risk, if we think we stand a chance of gaining at the end of it, aren't there? We'll risk others' opinions, or our money, maybe even our safety, if we think we're going to come out of this looking good and covered in glory. But Barak heads down that mountain, leading his men, knowing the glory is going to go to another. And that's faith, because true faith doesn't have your own glory as your goal, it trusts God with the outcome. As Michael Wilcock says in his commentary, Barak will do his duty, let others have the glory.

And contrast Barak's response to that of the tribes of Israel who didn't take part in the action. Chapter 5:15, 'Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.' And they stayed with their sheep. And the tribes who lived in Gilead, safe and sound on the other side of the Jordan, stayed put; And the tribes of Dan and Asher stayed with the boats, enjoying the seaside, whilst, v18, 'Zebulun… risked their lives to the death; Naphtali too." So why, when they clearly thought about it, maybe even agonised about it, did these other tribes fail to join the battle? Maybe they decided the risk was just too great. Maybe they gave way to fear. Maybe they thought God couldn't do it. Maybe they preferred life as it is.

And the tragedy is, we can be the same can't we? We can grow complacent in our sin, and stop fighting it. We can become passive in our faith, and stop believing

that things could be different with God. We can become accustomed to our idols, and why rock the boat?

But with God's word of challenge ringing in his ears, Barak did act and through him God brought about a stunning victory: Chapter 4:15, 'And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. … Not a man was left.'

And yet, the final, decisive blow wasn't struck by Barak, but by a second woman. Let's look at her.

Jael

Now, Jael's husband was a man called Heber the Kenite, and he was an ally of King Jabin the Canaanite. So when Sisera fled the battle and found his way to Jael's tent, he thinks he's come to a safe hiding place. In fact, that's exactly what Jael promises him: v18, "Turn aside, my Lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid." And he rests in her tent. But as he sleeps on the floor, Jael takes a tent peg and drives it through his head.

Now what do you think of that? This is an act of treachery, isn't it? Jael promised Sisera rest and protection, and instead she kills him. She offers him hospitality, but instead smashes his head. At that time to break hospitality like that would be like shooting your friend in the back. And yet, as treacherous as this act is, it's also deeply ironic isn't it?

You see, when you go camping with your family, whose job is it to put the tent up? In this day, putting up the tent was women's work. So a tent peg and a hammer were considered women's utensils, women's tools. What might that be today – a typically female tool? A knitting needle? A sewing machine? A make-up bag? Well, it's as if Jael takes that and smashes Sisera's head with it. So this man, who has spent his military career abusing women – a womb or two for every man, according to his mother – dies at the hands of a woman. A man who objectified women is brought down by a woman's object. And God uses even Jael's treachery to rescue and deliver his people.

So, of these three characters: Deborah, Barak and Jael, who's the decisive rescuer? Deborah can't do it without Barak. Barak won't do it without Deborah. And Jael strikes the final blow, but by then the battle is over. And the truth is that neither of them is the real rescuer. There's a fourth character here – working behind the scenes.

The True Judge

Now when she was younger, Naomi had a book, called Improve your Survival Skills. It was excellent preparation for being married to Lukas. But one of the greatest life lessons Naomi learned in that book, that she faithfully passed on to

the rest of us, is Never Camp in a Wadi. And a wadi is a valley, or ravine, that's dry in dry season, but floods in rainy season. So you find this lovely flat place to pitch your tent, but in the middle of the night, the flash flood comes and washes your tent away.

But Sisera hadn't read the book, and he made the fatal mistake of camping his army in a wadi, by the River Kishon. And as Barak marched his army down Mount Tabor to engage Sisera's chariots, with the odds hopelessly stacked against them, it started to rain: 5:4, 'The heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.' And it seems that River Kishon swelled and a flash flood hit the area with devastating consequences for Sisera: v21, 'The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.' And either the chariots were physically swept away, or they got bogged down in the mud and the wet, and there is nothing more useless than a chariot stuck in the mud.

And so Deborah and Barak were in no doubt as to who the Rescuer really was that day. It was God who in 4:7 said he would draw the army of Sisera to camp by the river. In 4:14, Deborah says 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?" I mean – this may just look like storm clouds to you, Barak, it may just look like rain, but this is God marching out before you. And so it's God who gets the glory for the victory: 4:23, 'So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan.' And the response of the leaders and the people to God's call to arms is not something simply to slap one another on the back for, but to thank and praise God: 5:2, "That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord!" He did it!

So who gets the ultimate honour for the rescue? It's not Deborah, or Barak or Jael - it's God. And ultimately He's the victorious warrior. Because that's what God does – he rescues his people. And as a result, chapter 5 ends by telling us, v31, 'And the land had rest for 40 years.'

But what do you think when you read that? Here we go again! And Deborah and Barak will die, and the people will go back to their idols – because what the people really need, what we all need, is a rescue by God that doesn't just change our circumstances, but our hearts. A rescue that, in the words of an old hymn, takes away our love of sinning.

But you have to wait for the coming of Jesus for that rescuer. And Barak heads down Mount Tabor, knowing that the glory will go to another. And Jesus left his Father's glory, knowing, in Paul's words, that equality with God, God's glory, was not something to be held on to, but let it go that he might rescue us. And here Barak charges down the hill, but Christ climbs it, carrying the cross, to pay the price for all those times we run after idols. For all those times when, like Sisera, we objectify women; for all those times when, like Jael, we break our word, and

do others harm. And if Barak wins the battle at the bottom of the hill with his 10,000 men, Jesus wins it at the top, hanging alone on the cross, as he pays for it all.

And here the final blow of victory is struck by Jael, a woman, crushing Sisera's head, as God uses the weak to bring down the mighty. And at the cross, Christ is crucified in weakness, and he's the one crushed, but in doing so he crushes satan's head. And here, God uses Jael's treachery to bring about the final act of rescue. And at the cross, God uses the treachery of Judas, and the moral cowardice of Pilate, and the sin of the leaders, to rescue us. And God becomes the victim of sinful deeds, to save us and set us free, as three days later he rises again.

And why does he do it? Because he loves you. And if you let that love of God for you in Christ fill your heart, idols will lose their attraction. And you won't spend your life pursuing them, or your own glory, you'll spend it pursuing God and his glory.