

Deborah & Barak - Self-effacing Saviour

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Preacher: David Calderwood

[0 : 0 0] We're going to look at Judges again. We're back into Judges for three weeks over the holiday period. Judges is both incredibly depressing and also incredibly encouraging.

So it's depressing in the sense that we just see over and over again the rebellion of God's people. And the thing about it is it's pathetically unoriginal.

But it inevitably brings God's people to their knees as a nation. On the other hand it's encouraging because we observe the Lord's dealings with his people.

And as our sin is pathetically unoriginal, then God's dealings with his people is endlessly resourceful. It's unexpected and displays repeatedly God's faithfulness and grace, which is the dominant thing we see through this book of Judges.

The story of Deborah and Barak is the fourth cycle in the story. It happens two generations later if we take, and there's good reason to do so, if we take 40 years as a generation rather than literally 40 years.

[1 : 1 5] Regardless of that, the story of Deborah and Barak is an intriguing drama. And what we have in chapter 4 and 5 is the same story told in two very, very different ways.

So chapter 4 is a very measured matter-of-fact historical narrative, almost devoid of emotion. And then chapter 5, it's hard to think of how it could be even more different than it is.

We've got extravagant picture language, extravagant descriptions. We've got brutal pictures in chapter 5 that aren't there in chapter 4.

And chapter 5, as it were, puts the flesh on the factual skeleton of chapter 4. And then among all that, then there are twists and turns and subplots.

And what those things do is they suck us into the world of illusion. A world of illusion that had trapped God's people in Deborah's day.

[2 : 2 2] And it makes us think about what's really real. The characters, likewise. We meet characters and they invite us to form conclusions.

But then no sooner do we start to form a conclusion than we get told that our conclusion probably is wrong. And that conclusion is actually an illusion. And again, making us as God's people today question what's really real for us.

And I'm going to use a line this morning repeatedly I picked up a couple of weeks ago at the conference. When it comes to this sort of stuff, nothing is as it seems. Nothing is as it seems for God's people in God's world.

So let's dive into the text and ask the question, who is the enemy in this story? Who is the enemy or the villain? And the obvious option would be King Jabin and his military commander Sisera.

Now what we know about Jabin is he was a Syrian king, reigned at Hazor, the largest city in the region. And so most probably Jabin was the king of a military coalition of Canaanites.

[3 : 3 6] Sisera was the commander, a very powerful coalition army. And as an army with the latest, the very, very latest technology, iron chariots.

In other words, the story is telling us this is such a formidable military force that it's beyond conception that it could be defeated by anything the Israelites could throw up against it.

Huge tactical imbalance. Huge military superiority to the Canaanites. And added to that, there was deep hatred towards these northern tribes of Israel because just over 100 years earlier, when Joshua occupied the land, Hazor was the only city that Joshua and his people burned to the ground.

It was totally decimated as a sort of public humiliation of the Canaanites. Eventually it was rebuilt and became really powerful and influential again. There's a lot of scores to settle here and perhaps that explains why this particular period of time was so brutal under Sisera.

Perhaps they're the enemy because they're just ravaging through the country seeking revenge for something that happened 100 years ago. And it was a severe revenge.

[4 : 55] But things aren't as they seem. Because the reality is that God's people are their own worst enemy. The cruelty of Sisera caused them to beg God for deliverance.

But as you read the story there, something sort of just slips through. It took them 20 years to beg for deliverance. To get to the point of desperation and turning back to God.

That's a long time. A long time to decide, well, okay, look, all the other options have gone. Now we've got, in a sense, nothing left but to go back to God.

Once again, you see, the real enemy was their bad hearts. Look at verse 1 again. We've got this repeated cycle. And the people of Israel again, again, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. If we look over to chapter 5, verse 8, and we get the detail of that statement. Remember I said chapter 5 comes with all the emotion and the depth and the flesh. Well, chapter 5, verse 8 puts it like this.

[6 : 12] When new gods were chosen. When new gods were chosen. Then war was in the gates.

So, what's described in a sort of formal way in chapter 4, verse 1, we get the reality of it.

Chapter 5, verse 8. This people of God had abandoned their covenant God. The God who had brought them to himself, who had loved them, who had made them a special people, who had brought them into his special promised land.

They had just turned around and abandoned him. Even while they were in the place that God meant for them, they abandoned him. And decided to choose to pursue the good life through worshipping local Canaanite gods.

And that was a particularly vile expression of worship that involved child sacrifice and engaging with temple prostitutes, male and female. And the idea was that if you had regular sex with them, then your ground would grow good crops and you would be secure and your family would flourish.

[7 : 27] I mean, it wasn't just as if it was a little bit to the left of center. It was a huge choice they made to turn their back on the Lord.

And the direct consequence, look at verse 2. Again, we see something very, very strong in verse 2. And the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jebron of Canaan.

The word there is a word for God signing a contract. God actually signed a contract with this Canaanite king for the punishment of his people.

It's a very formal statement. And you can't help thinking that. Once that contract has been signed, then in a sense what happens in history is just coincidental.

Because we see the unseen hand of God at work in that word. And that fits with Judges chapter 3. Flip back to chapter 3 verse 1.

[8 : 35] And something that I think we often get overlooked in Judges. Because it says in chapter 3 verse 1. Now these are the nations that the Lord left. Okay, the unseen hand of God.

The Lord left. Why? To test Israel by them. And jump down to verse 4. They were, at least among them the Canaanites.

Verse 4. 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 the very next verse. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites. Verse 6. Their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons and served their gods.

The Canaanites were told, again, the unseen hand of God was that were there to test the faithfulness of his people. And guess what? They failed spectacularly.

[9 : 38] Instead of being a distinctive reflection of Yahweh, their covenant God, to the Canaanites out there, they became a distinctive reflection of the Canaanites to Yahweh up there.

They had become enslaved within the Promised Land.

In God's own place, they had become enslaved. If you look again at chapter 5, verse 6 and 7, and we see something of what that enslavement looked like, it's hard to know exactly what these verses mean, but it seems to be that ordinary life, as it was known, had ceased to be.

The whole system had collapsed and become immobile. Rather than the Canaanites producing the good life, it had just led them in to death and destruction as a nation.

How sad is that? And here's another illusion. Their bad hearts deceived them into a situation where there was nothing more than an illusion of intimacy with God.

[11:12] Yes, we're God's people. We're in God's special place, the Promised Land. But it was just an illusion of intimacy with God. Trapped by their own hearts.

It's not Cicera they most need deliverance from, but their bad hearts. Again, you see, things are not as they seem.

Okay, let's meet the other characters in the drama and ask then, as Marty asked, who's the saviour? Who's the hero? And we get three contenders. The most obvious one, I think, is Deborah, given that she holds the title to this.

And Deborah, we see in chapter 4, well, she just pops up. Now, you might expect if she's the soon-to-be heroine, then we might get some sort of special introduction. But no, Deborah just appears.

But then again, as soon as we start to think about Deborah, then she just appears, but then she's really, really unique in her culture. She's a prophetess and judge.

[12:18] In other words, Deborah was an important social and religious leader in the nation. And I think it's interesting that, again, her cultural uniqueness, her formidable character, is highlighted by this contrast.

Her husband's mentioned, but just stays in the background. She's presented as a formidable, godly woman, called into a very, very unusual role by the Lord.

And I think, by contrast, cleverly, the writer's saying, well, okay, if we look at Deborah, we're actually being told something about the men who are behind Deborah.

She exposes, in a sense, the ineptitude, the failure of the men to fulfill their role as godly leaders.

So Deborah is presented as both a unique, formidable servant of the Lord, but it's also saying much more to us than just about Deborah.

Anyway, verse 4 and 5, a deputation comes to Deborah to get her advice on what to do in response to their suffering. Again, you see, an action that would normally be, brings shame to the men.

[13:38] To be advised by a woman in the culture of the day was shameful in the extreme. But they're so desperate, they don't seem to even realize that. They come to Deborah seeking her advice.

And Deborah doesn't take a backward step. She tasks Barak quite probably an existing local resistance unit, militia commander or something like that.

Anyway, he's tasked with raising a force of 10,000 fighters to take on Sisera. And they were to deploy to the foothills of Mount Tabor, a 140-meter hill at the north end of the Esdralen Valley. So they're to sit up there and await the order to attack. Now, militarily, we just need to feel for Barak. Because I think militarily, this would have felt like a suicide mission.

At best, if you look at chapter 5, verse 8, again, we get another little clue. The end of verse 8, was shield or spear to be seen among the 40,000 in Israel? I think what that's telling us is that because the Canaanites had such a ruthless subjection of the land that Barak's 10,000 men, at best, were only very, very lightly armed.

[14:57] They couldn't hide heavy weapons from the Canaanites. So at best, they probably just had swords, maybe a few daggers, but most likely, crude farm implements that were sort of commandeered for weapons.

And this up against the most mechanized army in the world at the time. 900 chariots, a rapid deployment mobile strike force.

They had no heavy weapons to engage the chariots. And most likely, very little training and probably no combat experience.

Militarily, as I say, this would have felt like a suicide mission. Yet Deborah assures Barak of complete victory. Not just a possible victory or a shade of victory, but a complete victory.

Confident in God's promise. And look at verse 9 of chapter 4 and see again how things are never as they seem. Chapter 9, verse 4, she said, I will surely go with you.

[16:04] I'll come back to this in a minute. 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.

The Lord's got his pen out again and he's about to reverse the contract that he had written with Sisera and Jaban. And now the Lord's going to put a different contract in place.

A contract that will just as surely be the undoing of Sisera. the unseen hand of God. Again, nothing is as it seems.

So it appears that Deborah is going to be the hero and get the glory. But again, things are not as they first seemed. Glory, verse 9, glory will go to a woman.

It doesn't actually say glory will come to me, Deborah. It just says glory will go to a woman. And so we're left hanging at that point in the story. Then is Barak. He's obviously got to be a contender as well for the Saviour Award.

[17:11] But then we run into some trouble because his response to Deborah initially usually means that he's labeled as a faithless coward. Poor old Barak comes up for a bit of a hiding when people will consider him.

And so the argument is that when Barak says, off you go and take on the Canaanites, and Barak says, well actually I'm not going to go if you won't go with me. That argument is usually that, well, Barak knows jolly well that there's going to be inevitable defeat.

And so he wants Deborah there as a fall guy. He wants Deborah there to sort of blame in the event that things go pear-shaped. And then Deborah's response to him is seen to be punishment and public humiliation.

Well, because you're faithless, then I'm telling you now that you won't get any glory for this. That's not actually what the Hebrew says really. There's a better alternative.

And that alternative also explains why Barak is actually included in the gallery of faithful servants in Hebrews 11. And here's the alternative. I think Barak's response is meant to echo the response of Moses.

[18:26] Remember when Moses was set aside by the Lord to go up and rescue his people from Egypt. Moses also expressed an incredible sense of inability and caution and fear.

And Moses said to the Lord, unless you go up with me, I won't go. I won't do it. And the Lord said to Moses actually, yes, I'll go with you. There's a parallel here.

So I actually think Barak's statement here is actually a statement of faith, not a statement of cowardice. So Barak is actually expressing supreme confidence in the success of his task in spite of his own inability if the Lord's representative, which in this case is Deborah, goes with him as a sign that God is going with him.

And then Deborah's response in the Hebrew is just a statement of God's plan, not censure. Okay, so I'm going to go up with you, but you should know this ahead of time, Barak, you should know that this mission you're setting out on will not bring glory to you.

If you read in brackets in between, in fact, you will experience shame because a woman will get the credit for this particular mission that you're going to lead. Now at that point, I think we see why Barak's included in the gallery of faith in Hebrews 11, because he could have then backtracked and said, well actually, okay, second thoughts Deborah, you just stay here because I actually do really want the glory for this, so you stay here, I'll go and do, we'll reverse back, we'll re-have this conversation and you stay here and I'll go and do it, yep, and I'll get the credit.

[20:10] No, Barak doesn't do that, he just accepts the situation. And I think thereby displaying the sort of faith in God's promises and the type of leadership that God wanted to see among his people, a leadership that was about concern for God's glory, not his own reputation.

And then moving on, verse 12 through 16, the story just continues, the complete destruction of the Canaanite army and in fact, complete destruction of Canaanite domination for the next couple of hundred years, such was the size of the defeat.

But again, tucked in there is that notion of things aren't as they seem. Barak actually led the army on the battlefield, actually saw the victory, but didn't get the normal benefits of such a great victory. And so we come to Jael, the third contender for heroine. Now, Jael isn't actually presented initially as a major character at all.

but she becomes a key player in the story because she's the one who actually kills Sisera and actually fulfills God's promise.

[21:30] But again, we see another parallel through the judges, and that is Jael is very much likened to Ehud. She's a very unsavory character. Her weapons were seduction, and that's how we should read how she got Sisera into her tent.

She was a seductress, smooth words, lolling him into a sense of false security. Deceit, lies, breaking every rule in the book in terms of cultural hospitality and integrity.

And she lures Sisera to a horribly violent death. Every bit is jarring on us as what do you call them, run the king through.

Yep. But again, you see, things are not as they seem. Jael gets the credit for killing Sisera, but if you look at chapter 5, verse 24 through 27, she gets the credit for killing Sisera, but she doesn't get the credit for delivering God's people.

Look at chapter 5, verse 24 to 27, and it's graphic and it's gruesome. Most blessed of women be jailed. Now how can somebody like that be called most blessed of women? The wife of Heber, the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women, most blessed.

[22 : 58] He asked water and she gave him milk. Deception. She brought him curds and a nobles' bowl. Seduction. She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workman's mallet.

This is just gruesome. She struck Sisera. She crushed his head. This has been spun out for us. We're meant to feel every gory detail. It's like the old-fashioned slow-mo.

She shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank. He fell. He lay still. Between her feet he sank.

He fell. He says it for a third time. Where he sank, there he fell. Dead. Dead. Pretty blood Thursday account, isn't it?

Jail. Jail, however, is only significant in that, like Ehud, she delivers the decisive blow by which God completes the deliverance of his people.

[24 : 15] And it has to be like that because the real deliverer is God. God, the real deliverer is God. It's totally clear when we now move into Deborah's song, it's totally clear that Deborah doesn't think for a moment that she's front and center in this great deliverance.

Deborah is singing God's praises because she knows that God was the great deliverer. Chapter 5, verse 2, she recognizes there that God's people play their part, that the leaders took the lead in Israel, the people offered themselves willingly.

Bless the Lord. So the Lord used his sinful people in this great outcome. The people were sort of rallying to restore the honor of God among his own people.

But even then there's illusion and things are not as we seem because if you look at chapter 5, verse 16, through to 18, and verse 23, not all God's people were prepared to fight for God's honor.

So not all of God's people were so desperate to rise up against the Canaanites and restore God's honor. Some of them actually stayed at home. Some of them chose safety and comfort over God's honor.

[25 : 32] So again, any illusion, any thought that there's unity across God's people is just that, an illusion. Some chose their own comfort over God's honor.

But look at verse 4 and 5 of chapter 5. It was the Lord who orchestrated the Canaanite defeat using an unseasonal thunderstorm, it would appear.

A thunderstorm which turned the normally hard, dry, flat plains, highly suitable for a highly mobile strike force of chariots, turning that into a sort of buggy quagmire.

Imagine 900 iron chariots and probably at least two if not four horses per chariot. I mean, it would just have turned into a mud pie. But importantly you see, the unseen hand of God in this unseasonal thunderstorm completely reverses the strategic imbalance.

The assets of a 900 strong rapid deployment force now becomes a liability. And the liability of only 10,000 lightly armed troops hiding behind the trees on the hillside now becomes strategic advantage.

[27 : 01] And so there's total victory. And Deborah will settle for nothing less than celebrating the covenant faithfulness of God.

His unseen hand was sovereignly seen and felt in every movement of their experience, including their suffering of 20 years. But friends, there's an even bigger picture to end being enjoyed here in chapter 5, verse 5.

And that's the beauty of poetry. We soar to lofty heights and make connections that you can't just make in a factual historical narrative.

Chapter 5, verse 5, 4 and 5. Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water, the mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.

Sinai pops up in there. And I think what we're being told here is that we're to read the story of Deborah and deliverance from the Canaanites like another Exodus event.

[28 : 19] Remember, through Moses, God delivered his people from bondage to sin, from slavery in Egypt, and brought them back to himself for new holiness and obedience.

And do you remember how he did it? He brought them through the Red Sea. And it was the water that destroyed the Egyptian army in totality. The Lord swept them away as well.

As a demonstration of his sovereignty and his power and his faithfulness to his people. And you remember, after that event, Miriam got alongside Moses and she wrote a beautiful song, Exodus chapter 15, to celebrate God's sovereignty and God's faithfulness to him.

This is a very, very close parallel. And we're meant to see it like that. A parallel song to the faithfulness of God. Because once again, you see, their faithful God has pursued his people even into the darkness of their sin and brought them back to himself.

Determined that they would enjoy the good life that only he can deliver to them, that he intends to deliver to them, in spite of their determination to turn away from it.

[29 : 41] What a picture of God's faithfulness. What a picture of God's faithfulness. And it dwarfs us in comparison to the majesty and the splendor of God.

And before him, here we are, sinful people, even as we're in God's place, constantly wanting to turn away and find something better, even as we're enjoying the best that the Lord has to offer us.

What a picture. Depressing and encouraging. Nothing will do for Deborah and Barak but to sing to the Lord.

Verse 3, Hear, O kings, give ear, O princess, to the Lord I will sing. I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel. And you see, Deborah in this song is putting things back how they should be. People all around, the nations all around should look at God's people and when they see God's people, then they should see God. That's not what it's been like for 20 years, but it is now once again with Deborah's song.

[30 : 55] And Deborah and Barak land this lesson with disturbing force in the last stanza of the song. It's a very, very left field picture.

Chapter 5, verse 27 to 31. I pondered this and pondered this for a long time over the last couple of weeks, and I think maybe I've got it right. You'll have to be the decider of it.

I've got nobody else to blame. Maybe Bo. Yeah, Bo. Bo will do. Yep. Okay, so what happens in verse 27 is that we get this gory, repeated, slow-mo description of Sisera dying.

And we're meant to just feel the impact of that. And then verse 28, we transition magically, as only you can do in poetry, to where?

To the lounge room where Sisera's mother is waiting for him to return from campaign. So follow through with me. out of the window she peered. Just a sudden transition.

[32 : 02] Who's this peering? The mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice. Why is his chariot so long and coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?

Her wisest princesses answer, indeed she answers herself, have they not found and divided the spoil? A womb or two for every man, spoiled of dyed materials for Sisera.

Spoiled of dyed materials embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil. So what's happening here? We're being transported from the grisly reality of Sisera's death to the palace where his mother and family are waiting for his return.

She's wondering, why is he late? Dinner's going to get cold. And we're again given some insight into illusion and how things are not as they seem.

She also is living under an illusion. Her assumption is that this powerful, ruthless, cruel son of hers, who has always been victorious and who charged out at the head of the most mechanized army the world had seen at that time, that he'll just come home as victor.

[33 : 24] And so she thinks, well, if he's not home already, then, well, okay, let's be honest, boys will be boys. And so they got a woman to who that is. I take it what they're saying is that Sisera and his men are busy raping their newly captive woman.

The result of victory. It doesn't occur to her that her successful son might be dead.

She also is living under illusion. Things are not as they seem. And verse 31 then sums up the whole song. So may all your enemies perish, O Lord, but your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.

Amen. Amen. The enemies of God, those who reject him and believe they can find a good life apart from serving and worshipping him will ultimately perish.

The unseen hand of God will make that happen. Even though they may appear invincible now. It will be the friends of God, verse 31, who will ultimately be seen to have both light and life and a future.

[34 : 48] So my friends, I think the main message of this is don't live under an illusion. Choose to live in God's reality of true life and true satisfaction.

Don't be easily conned by that which offered you all around you in this world. It might give you a false security.

It might give you an illusion of intimacy with God because after all my life's going well and because my life's going well then God must be favorably disposed towards me.

Things are not as they seem. Don't live in illusion. Live in reality. God's the real deliverer and his self-effacing judges and saviors whisper beautifully of Jesus.

It's interesting in chapter 5 verse 7 Deborah is called the mother of Israel. It's a lovely term. Again it took me a while I think to unpack this on my mind.

[36 : 04] So Deborah is the mother of Israel. Why? Because she's the one who demonstrated a mother's grief for the waywardness of her children, her people, her nation.

She's the one who's demonstrated a mother's care, a mother's concern, a mother's concern to protect, a mother's commitment to her children in spite of their failings and their waywardness.

And does anything whisper more of Jesus than something like that? Remember in Matthew chapter 23 verse 37 through to 39 Jesus comes and he looks down in Jerusalem and he says ah Jerusalem Jerusalem, would that I could sweep you up and bring you into safety under my wings.

Jesus was expressing a mother's concern for his people. Such fierce jealousy for them in their sin that he would literally die to protect them and deliver them.

a truer and better Deborah. Barak is prepared to forgo his reputation, forgo any glory that might be rightly claimed by him, even to the point of being shamed before his people.

[37 : 23] Why? Because his one focus was God's glory and the deliverance of God's people. God's people. All he wanted in life was not reputation but to be part of God's salvation program for his people.

That would be glory enough for Barak. And again, what a beautiful whisper of Jesus. Philippians chapter 2 verses 5 to 11 talks about how Jesus gave up his glory, gave up his reputation, accepted shame, even to the point of death.

Why? Simply that he might deliver his people and bring glory to his father. And you're probably wondering how is he going to twist the GL thing?

How is he going to spin that one? Well, in chapter 5 verse 24, GL is described as the most blessed of women. I think it works like this. She accepted that extreme violence, extreme violence, was required to deliver God's people from their tormentor.

And so, we have a picture of GL prepared to ruthlessly kill off God's enemy by nailing him to the ground. And that made me think of Colossians chapter 2 verses 13 to 15 where we're told that Jesus acted with a similar ruthlessness to destroy what held us in bondage and tormented us.

[39 : 01] That is in Colossians is told our record of debt and the ongoing demands of the law saying guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty. And like jail, Jesus nailed our deepest problem.

But again, you see, things are not as they seem. He did nail our problem. He did deliver us. Not by inflicting violence, but by being the victim of extreme violence.

The extreme violence, the violent death needed to kill off our greatest enemy by nailing the law and its demands to the cross. Again, a beautiful picture, a beautiful whisper of the Lord Jesus.

So friends, don't mistake, if you're not a Christian here this morning, don't mistake the self-effacing Jesus for a weak and insignificant Jesus.

Nothing is as it seems. Let's pray. Lord, help us to hear your word.

[40 : 14] Help us to appreciate the complexity of the way in which it's been written and the beautiful pictures it brings before us. Pictures, Lord, that nail us in our pathetic, unoriginal rebellion against you.

and yet, Lord, pictures that show your unexpected and creative ways in which you deliver us, your people.

Thank you, Lord, that the most unexpected, the most creative way is captured in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. Who would have thought, Lord, that you would nail our deepest problem at the cost of the life of your own son.

We thank you, Lord, that in that you've taken us from illusion into reality. And we pray, Lord, that we might live confidently every single day knowing that your unseen hand guides our every move and our every thought.

And I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.