

Trouble from the Enemy

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of September 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Trouble from the Enemy and is based on Judges chapters 4 and 5. And you may like to have open the Bibles at page 191.

Judges chapter 4 and this was the first reading that Beverly read for us and this is the second in a sermon series from this book of the Old Testament.

I think it was Henry Ford who said that the only thing we ever learn from history is that we never learn anything from history. It was certainly the practice of ancient Israel. They would turn away from God, worship the idols or the gods of the other nations around about them.

That would lead them into being oppressed by those other nations and subdued by them.

Eventually they would cry out to God for help. God would then raise up a judge or a deliverer, a rescuer really, who would save the people from their enemies and defeat them, bring them some stability and rest.

[1 : 20] But then when in the end that judge or deliverer died, the whole cycle would be repeated again. Israel, it seemed, never learned from its mistakes, never learned from history.

And so round and round it went in a circle of doing the wrong thing, worshipping other gods, coming under the enemies, crying out to God, God raising up a judge, bringing them victory, giving them rest, the judge dying and then the cycle would recur again.

Although each time, though the cycle was in essence the same, Israel was a bit worse than before. And that's how this chapter begins, chapter 4, then the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

And the next two verses tell us that they therefore were brought under the domination of another nation, this time under King Jabin of Canaan in the northern part of the land of Israel and he reigned in a place called Hatzor.

The commander of his army was Sisera and then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help for the enemy, the Canaanites, had 900 chariots of iron and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly 20 years.

[2 : 37] Shows how long it took the Israelites to cry out for help. 20 years of being dominated by an enemy before they actually turned to God for help. The dating of this is about, around about 1300 BC into the 1200s BC I guess, the beginning of the Iron Age.

So clearly the enemy here with 900 chariots of iron has got the latest military technology. Israel has not and that's part of their fear at this enemy that's suppressing them through these years.

In the previous chapter 3, there are three judges that are mentioned who save Israel at different times. Each of them dealt with more briefly than what we're looking at here. Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar.

But each time God raised up that judge to deliver from a particular enemy and bring rest. And now in Judges 4, we come to the next of the cycles and this time the judge is Deborah.

But through this chapter, we see how unlikely the heroes and the leaders of the people of God are. Unlike the other judges in this book, Deborah is a woman.

[3 : 48] It's a bit unexpected in those times. Unlike the others in this so far, the Spirit of the Lord is not mentioned as coming upon her.

Unlike the others, she's already a judge when the situation needs a deliverer. Whereas the others, God raises up specially for the task of bringing about an end to the enemy.

And unlike the others so far in this book, she actually then almost passes the buck to her army commander to lead the people. She herself, it seems, stands back more or less from fighting in battle.

Her army commander, a man by the name of Barak, is reluctant. She tells him that he is to lead the people, that the Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, she says in verse 6, Go take position at Mount Tabor, bringing 10,000 from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.

I'll draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand. But Barak expresses his reluctance when he says, I will only go if you go, and if you don't go, I won't go.

[5 : 08] And thereby he expresses his fearfulness and his faithlessness in God's word and command to go and fight the battle.

Deborah responds in verse 9 saying, I will surely go with you, but the road on which you're going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.

And so Deborah goes off with Barak to get ready for the battle. Sometimes people think, and certainly I often have heard it said, that if we are disobedient to God's command, then he cannot work in us or work through us to fulfil what he wants of us or others through us.

I've heard it said by Christian counsellors, I've seen it written in Christian books about how we live the Christian life, I've heard it in sermons, that unless we are obedient and cooperate with God, then God cannot actually do what he wants.

So the onus is on us to be obedient, faithful and fearless. But that's actually not biblical. You see, God is bigger than that.

[6 : 28] God is never thwarted or stymied by our sin and fearfulness or faithlessness. And here is a good example of that. Barak is fearful and faithless and he's reluctant and resistant to obey God's command to go and take up the battle against the Canaanites.

Now Deborah, if she was a modern Christian counsellor, you might expect her to say, well look, unless you're going to do this, God's not going to bring us victory. Come on, get up there and go. That's actually not what is the case because God's purposes will be fulfilled regardless and despite the sins, the fearfulness and faithlessness of Barak.

God will still bring victory. It's just that it won't be through Barak that the glory goes. But as Deborah says, the glory will go because Sisera will fall into the hands of a woman.

And we expect that to be Deborah herself at this point. You see, God is bigger sometimes than we realise. He's not thwarted by our sins and our rebellion. Our disobedience does not mean that he can't work in us or even through us, but that God is big enough to work despite us.

Now at one level, that ought to be a great encouragement to us in our Christian lives. It means that despite the fact that we fail, and often we do, God is not thwarted.

[7 : 56] We're not somehow a blockage in the purposes of God for this world. But on the other hand, it ought not to lead to our complacency and think, well, it doesn't really matter if I sin and disobey.

God's going to do it anyway. So what's the point? There is always responsibility for us to be obedient and faithful and fearless rather than like Barak, faithless and fearful.

Well, Barak does then get his army of 10,000 because Deborah has promised to go with him. Only two tribes are mentioned, the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun in verse 10.

Maybe a slightly ominous note being sounded here. It seems that the national unity of the people of God is in some tension and maybe, as we'll see later on, other tribes reluctant to help.

And so we're beginning to see not only the cycle of problems coming externally onto the people of God, but now some internal divisions as well and disunity amongst the people of God.

[9 : 06] It's part of the downward spiral that the book of Judges reflects for the people of God. There's a little interlude in verse 11. It looks irrelevant if you'd never read the story before.

We're told about a man called Heba, the Kenite, descended from the father-in-law of Moses and he's left the very southern Arabian or Sinai Peninsula area where the Kenites had come from and now it seems that he's up in this area near Kedesh where Deborah and Barak have gone to in the previous verse.

We're not initially told the significance of that, although that comes out in a few verses' time. Mount Tabor which is where they come to for the battle is in the north of Israel in the area of Galilee.

It overlooks to the west the Jezreel Valley that heads towards Mount Carmel and Megiddo and then to the east you can see from the top of Mount Tabor the Sea of Galilee where so much of Jesus' life hundreds of years later took place.

The top of the mountain are the 10,000 troops with Barak and Deborah and at the bottom of the mountain the troops and the chariots of course that belong to Sisera under the kingship of Jabin the king of Canaan in Hatzor which is a little bit further north of Mount Tabor.

[10:22] Again, Deborah is the one who gives the commands. So she says in verse 14 to Barak Deborah it seems stays on top of the mountain out of the way and out of the battle.

So it's a slightly unusual job description for this deliverer or judge of the people of God. She doesn't even go into battle herself and sends off her reluctant army commander.

The promise is that the victory will be given because of God to Barak and to the army. It's just a brief description of the battle. There's actually a much longer description that we've seen of the build up to this battle.

The battle itself is passed over fairly quickly. Verse 15 The Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak. Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harasheth Hagoyim.

All the army of Sisera fell by the sword. No one was left. Deborah's word in verse 14 had been that Barak would take by his hands Sisera or he would be given into his hand.

[11:44] The battle's over. Everyone's dead apart from the army commander Sisera who's fled away on foot abandoning those acclaimed chariots. So much for the latest military technology.

And Sisera flees to safety for what he thinks is safety. And this is where that little interlude comes in because as he flees he comes to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite.

And we're also told in verse 17 there was peace between King Jabin of Hatzor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. So Sisera the fleeing army commander thinks that he's come to a place of safety.

He's come to the wife of an ally of his king. She goes out to meet him extending generous Middle Eastern hospitality although maybe breaking some of the male female protocols in the process.

She invites him into her tent. Turn aside my lord she seems knows who he is turn aside to me have no fear. And so he turned aside into the tent she covered him with a rug he asks for some water to drink she gives him much more than that something more precious in a sense some milk a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him and he said stand at the entrance of the tent if a man or anybody comes to you and asks is anyone here say no.

[13:08] He thinks he's safe the sense of safety that he senses is that he's prepared to sleep while she stays awake to guard the tent and ward off any pursuers.

Clearly Sisera expects that Barak is going to pursue him but he thinks that he's safe in this tent covered by a rug fed by a skin of milk it's like a late night drink that will send him to sleep and to sleep he goes it seems quite quickly.

But now the unexpected happens. This mild-mannered demure wife of Heba took a tent peg in one hand a hammer in the other and drove the peg into his temple until it went down until it went down into the ground.

Well that's not Middle Eastern hospitality at its best. The understatement at the end of verse 21 is and he died. And then comes Barak in pursuit too late to capture Sisera himself and as Deborah had said earlier on Sisera's the glory for defeating Sisera goes to a woman.

The surprise is what woman it goes to. It doesn't go to Deborah whom we might have thought initially. It goes to a woman who's not even an Israelite. She's actually the wife of an ally of the enemy.

[14:37] You'd expect her to be an enemy of the Israelites. But actually she saves the day. She's the heroine in many respects. A foreign woman who defeats the enemy of the people of God.

The result of all this is that the king of Hutzor, King Jabin, the king of Canaan in Hutzor is subdued by God, verse 23, and the Israelites eventually destroy him at the end of verse 24.

Now these are unlikely heroes. Barak, the army commander, is fearful and faithless, reluctant to go into battle, though in the New Testament he's actually listed in a great list of people from the Old Testament as a hero of faith.

Deborah, a woman, is an unlikely hero, but she just gives the orders it seems and sits back while the battle is fought. And Jael, another woman, is not even an Israelite.

Partly what this story is telling us is that the people of God can't even save themselves. It's a non-Israelite who actually defeats Sisera, the army commander. Now some people love watching their team's famous victories on replay over and over again.

[15:48] They're usually people who barrack for teams that don't succeed these days. Although, of course, if you barrack for a team that's last great victory was before television began, you're a bit stuck. In a sense, chapter 5 here is like an early version of a replay.

It's a poem or a song to sing and to recount, to rejoice in the great victory of chapter 4. It's there so that people would learn it, repeat it, recite it, sing it again to recall the victory, to remind themselves of what has happened.

But this poetic song balances, it goes as a couplet with chapter 4 because it also makes even more clearly the point who is the victor.

It's not Barak, the fearful army commander, it's not Deborah who just gives the orders, it's not even in the end Jael who drives the tent peg into the temple of Sisera. It's God.

And so this poem, this song, begins by directing praise to God. When locks are long in Israel, when the people offer themselves willingly, bless the Lord.

[16:58] Hear, O kings, give ear, O princes, to the Lord I will sing. I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel. Whenever in the Old Testament you see that word Lord in capital letters throughout, it is the name of God that's given to the people of Israel, the name Yahweh or Jehovah.

He is the God who is being praised in this song. And then the song recounts the circumstances of the victory. It envisages God himself as the army commander who's come from his home on top of Mount Sinai way down south beyond the borders of Israel where God had revealed himself to the Israelites in the time of Moses giving them the Ten Commandments.

There was thunder and lightning and cloud on top of the mountain. The people were afraid that they might see God and therefore die. It was quite an extraordinary experience in their life. It's as though God has come from his holy mountain of Mount Sinai to come and fight the battle up in the north of Israel.

So verses 4 and 5 say, Lord, when you went out from Seir, the area around Mount Sinai, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water, the mountains quaked before the Lord, the one of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.

But the recollection here in this poem of God coming from Mount Sinai is also reminding the people that the same God who's brought them victory here is the God who brought them victory over Pharaoh and the Egyptians when he brought them out from Egypt through the Red Sea to Mount Sinai to his holy mountain.

[18:37] Now the next paragraph it seems probably describes part of the effect of the victory. In ancient world you'd have to travel to do trade in order to get all the foodstuffs and clothing stuffs that you'd want.

But now we're told in verses 6 and 7 that in the days of Shamgar, the previous judge, and the days of Jael, caravans ceased and travellers kept to the byways.

And the reason for that is in verse 7, the peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder because you arose Deborah as a mother in Israel. That is because you've defeated the enemies and gained all the plunder you don't need to travel to trade, you've got everything you want.

Now it's probably a slightly exaggerated way of speaking about the glories of the victory that's been won in a poetic form being described here. But also this poem and song reminds us of the warnings about why there needed to be a battle in the first place.

Verse 8, when new gods were chosen, that is when the Israelites went after a different god, then war was in the gates. That is, it's part of the cycle we've seen in this book, you go after other gods Israel, God will give you over to your enemies and they will bring war upon you.

[19:56] And so the rest of verse 8 and 9 talks about rallying for war. Was shield or spear to be seen among 40,000 in Israel? My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people, bless the Lord.

Tell of it you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way. To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the triumphs of the Lord, the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel.

Then go down, then down to the gates, march the people of the Lord. So it's a rally cry to battle but it's reminding the people to keep remembering the victory that God wins in this battle and in this war.

It rallies Deborah in verse 12, Barak at the end of verse 12 and then down the mountain they go to fight the battle. It lists some of the tribes that have helped in fighting this battle.

The tribe of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir which is half of the tribe of Manasseh and the tribe of Zebulun at the end of verse 14 and the tribe of Issachar at the beginning of verse 15.

[21 : 04] There's some of the 12 tribes of Israel that have joined together to fight against the enemy. But the song is realistic. It acknowledges that some tribes have refused to help.

So the end of verse 15 and verse 16 describes the tribal clan of Reuben as having great searchings of heart. And the picture is that this tribe's decided in the end by inaction not to go and help.

That is it's almost as though they meet and discuss and meet and discuss and meet and discuss they've got great searchings of heart. They're not really quite sure what they do. They have endless committee meetings and in the end therefore they do nothing.

Gilead, Dan and Asher in verse 17 they're too busy with their own affairs, their own trade and so on. So they don't go to help in battle and therefore as a result Zebulun and Naphtali that do fight are actually scorned by the other tribes.

Now despite this lack of help, well this is sounding an ominous note because the tribes of Israel are not united but despite this lack of help victory nonetheless comes.

[22 : 16] Verse 19 The kings came, they fought, then fought the kings of Canaan at Tanakh by the waters of Megiddo. They got no spoils of silver and then it lifts the battle that's been fought into a bigger sphere.

It's not just people fighting against people down on the earth but it's God fighting and so it goes on to say in verse 20 the stars fought from heaven from their courses they fought against Sisera.

That's in effect saying that God's actually behind all this battle, that God's actually behind the victory and the way in which God has been behind the victory in particular is by bringing rain.

So the Kishon which is just a wadi that is a river that only ever flows when there's rain but is dry for the rest of the year. We're told in verse 21 that the torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.

That's why Sisera fled on foot. The chariots are bogged in the mud. So much for latest military technology. God can deal with all of that.

[23 : 27] Always. His hand is always greater than the combined hands of human might. At the bottom of Mount Tabor indeed, it's a very rich soil and I've been there when it's been wet and the mud is that claggy, gluggy mud that sticks to your shoes and gets bigger and bigger so that you feel as though you're walking with great big snow boots when you're walking through the mud.

God's the victor. He has foiled 900 chariots of iron. He's foiled the might of a fairly strong nation of the early Iron Age.

God's the victor. But then we get an odd note in verse 23. Cursed Meroz, says the angel of the Lord.

Meroz was probably a town of Israel that had, for whatever reason, declined to join its brothers and sisters in battle. So it comes under curse because they did not come to the help of the Lord.

Not the help of other people, but to the help of God. Their refusal to fight was defiance of God. And so they stand under a curse. But the contrast is made when Israelites are cursed in verse 23.

[24 : 51] A non-Israelite woman is blessed in verse 24. Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heba the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women, most blessed. And then it recounts in rather beautiful poetry her killing of Sisera.

He asked water and she gave him milk. She brought him curds in a lordly bowl. She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workman's mallet.

She struck Sisera a blow. She crushed his head. She shattered and pierced his temple. And then one of my favourite verses. He sank. He fell.

He lay still at her feet. At her feet he sank. He fell. Where he sank, there he fell. Dead.

No doubt. It's emphatic. You can see that by its repetition. It's also poetry because he was killed in bed.

[25 : 59] So at one level he didn't quite fall to her feet. The next paragraph rubs salt into the wounds of this victory I think. It imagines the mother of Sisera.

Sisera. Like any mother, mine included, when you're out late at night, when you're a teenager or a young adult, sitting up anxiously, unable to sleep, waiting for you to come home. Out of the window she peered.

The mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice, asking herself, why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots? Just like any mother these days, they'd be saying, you know, why is his holden commodore not quick in coming or something like that?

And her maids, her wisest ladies or neighbours, whatever, they answer, indeed she knows the answer herself. You see, she's not actually worried for him. She actually thinks that he's enjoying the spoils of victory.

She thinks that he's out raping all the Israelite women whose husbands have just been killed in battle. She thinks that he's actually looting and pillaging their houses and picking off all their finery. And indeed she actually thinks, arrogant woman, that he's actually trying to get some nice embroidery for his mother.

[27 : 13] So this song mocks her saying, are they not finding and dividing the spoil? A girl or two for every man, spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera, spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil.

She thinks the battle was safe. She had no doubt that her son would bring victory. We know that he's dead.

We know that he failed. And it's mocking the arrogance of the enemy. The song finishes with a prayer that what happened to the enemy of Sisera and Jabin, the king of Canaan, will happen to all the enemies of God's people.

You see, the recollection of this victory is to remind the Israelites what God has done, so that they trust him when other enemies arise in the future. The song was never to depart from them.

So it finishes in verse 31, There's no doubt about it, at the end of both the description of chapter 4 and the song of chapter 5, that God is the one who's brought the victory.

[28 : 31] It doesn't go, the glory for victory doesn't go to Barak, the fearful commander. It doesn't really go to Deborah, the leader or judge or deliverer of the people. Jail gets the most human praise for driving in the tent peg, but in the end, the victory belongs to the Lord.

Deborah acknowledges that in this song, as does Barak, its co-author. The song reminds us that Israel, God's people, could not save themselves. Its army commander was fearful, not all its tribes even participated and it was a non-Israelite woman who actually kills the army commander.

And so this account and the poem look to God for rescue. And it's rescued despite the sins of its people.

Because the people cry out for help after 20 years of oppression, but they don't even repent of their sins of idolatry. God didn't need to save these people, they deserve judgement.

But God, who's rich in mercy, comes to their deliverance and he saves them and defeats their enemy. Exactly what these helpless people of God were unable to do for themselves.

[29 : 49] And that is what God is like. God is a God who consistently comes to the rescue of his people even when we don't deserve it. God's people are helpless.

He doesn't help those who help themselves, but he helps the helpless people of God. And that is the God of the New Testament as well as the God of the Old.

This victory is praised in song. That's because the victory was not to be forgotten. It was to be retold, recited, or sung for future generations so that they would not forget what God has done and they would praise God for that same victory.

You see, this song functions like most of scripture to remind us again and again because we're so forgetful of who God is, what he's like, and what he's done.

And it seems that ancient Israelites were to recite and know this song and keep it in their national memory. And the same for Christians today.

[31 : 06] For we have even more reason to praise God than ancient Israel did because the deliverance and rescue that God has wrought for us does not bring us like the very end of chapter 5 says, rest for 40 years, but rather through the rescue Christ has brought an eternal rest in heaven.

The place of praise is an essential ingredient for Christian living. We are to be people who are constantly praising God and in so doing reminding ourselves of what God has done because it's easy to forget.

It's easy to take it for granted. And as soon as we forget and as soon as we take it for granted, as soon as we realise how much God has done to save us, we quickly drift away and find other gods or idols to put in his place like ancient Israel did.

So this song of praise reminds us that we must praise. We must praise God and bless the Lord for the eternal victory he's won over our greatest enemy, Satan. and all that he brings against us. For that victory is already won. We're not looking forward to it but we're to praise God that it's already occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. [32 : 34] So as this song clearly says, let us bless the Lord. Amen. Amen..
Amen. Thank you.