

Salvation - Telling the Story

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[0 : 00] Friends, I'll pray while I remain standing. Father, thank you for your word and we pray today that you would help us to understand it and understanding it. We pray that you'd be at work by your spirit to drive us to faith and obedience.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I need to say that I begin today's Bible talk with a little bit of fear and trepidation.

You see, across the Anglican Church in Melbourne and around Australia, there has been a struggle that has been going on for decades now to come to a common mind on a particular issue.

And that particular issue is the role of women in ministry. And for many, that necessarily involves the role of men and women in marriage. And that necessarily impinges upon the role of women and men in society as a whole.

Anyway, when I accepted the position here at Holy Trinity, I determined I would not shirk from the matter when the time came. I also decided that I would also not make a big issue out of the matter.

[1 : 04] So in order to try and reach some sort of balance in all of this, I reasoned this way. I said to myself that as much as possible, I would only address the matter when it was raised through my regular systematic exposition of Scripture.

Well, let me tell you that my regular systematic exposition of Scripture, Scripture, particularly the book of Judges, will necessarily raise the issue. You see, within the Old Testament, it is somewhat unusual for the focus, Judges is unusual, for the focus that it gives to women.

Let me illustrate this by way of comparison. The book of Exodus only names six women in 40 chapters. More women are mentioned, but only six are named in 40 chapters.

In the book of Judges, we have already had a focus on women, if you've been reading carefully.

And as we go on, that will continue. In its 24 chapters, there are at least 22 individuals or groups of women singled out and mentioned.

Some are named, some are not. Some are minor characters, others are not. One biblical scholar speaks of a remarkable assembly of women and of the multitude of roles that they play within the book of Judges.

[2 : 19] Now, even though I don't agree with this current quote, one author posits that the book of Judges was even written by a woman. Anyway, our chapter today introduces us to two major female characters within the book as a whole.

Both in their own way, I think, are the heroes of these two chapters. And in the coming weeks, or this week and next week, we're going to explore these two women and find out a bit more about them.

And even though these chapters don't directly address the issue of women in ministry, they do address the issue indirectly. And what's more, one of the women here is exercising public ministry. And for that reason, I've committed to myself today to make some observations on this whole matter in the course of the Bible talk today. So when we get to the end, I am going to comment on those things.

But I thought I'd warn you ahead. So having started in this way, let me briefly introduce you to these two great chapters from Judges. You see, what we're going to look at this week and next is not just unusual because of its focus on women.

[3 : 28] It is unusual because it tells this story that we're going to look at in two ways. It tells it in narrative. That is, it tells it with a story. And then it goes on to tell it in poetry or in song.

There are only a few places within the Old Testament where this particular thing happens. One happens when you cross the sea in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus, chapter 14, which you then celebrate in song in chapter 15.

It also happens in the opening chapters of the book of Samuel with Hannah and her story, which starts off the book, and then her theological reflection in prayer, which happens in poetry in chapter two of the book.

All three poetical versions have women actively participating in their composition or their production. So I think we are really in for a treat this week and next, a text where the human heroes are women, a text where we get to hear it in story and in poetry, in case we miss it in one or the other.

And what a delight it is. So let's get down to work. And today we're going to cover the story. Next week, we're going to look at the song. So let's have a look now. So open your Bibles.

[4 : 41] Be very helpful for you to have your Bibles open at Judges, chapter four. First thing to notice in these verses is that there are no real surprises. Let me explain what I mean.

You might remember Ehud, our last major leader in Israel. We looked at him last week. Now Ehud, we're told, is dead. And the pattern we've seen established in the last few chapters continues.

And Tina, I'll now have that diagram. Thanks. It's there. Thank you. This pattern that we've seen established in the book of Judges continues. Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord.

The Lord responds in the normal pattern. That is, he sells them into the hand of a foreign aggressor. This time, we find the foreign aggressor is a Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigns in Hazor, which is a fortified city in the north of Galilee.

However, it's not Jabin who's the focus of these verses or the two chapters to come. No, it's the commander of his army, a man called Sisera. And according to verse two, you'll notice there, Sisera is based in Harash Hagoyim, which means Harash of the nations.

[5 : 48] Anyway, Jabin is noted for a particular thing. He has 900 fearsome iron chariots. Now, I used to think their chariots were the sort of stealth bombers of, you know, the ancient world.

But actually, they're not. They're the cleanup machines. And that is, they're the machines that come in after the battle. They move so quickly that they can just wipe out survivors.

That's sort of what's happening here. So they are fearsome machines, iron chariots. Sisera has them at his disposal. And Jabin harshly oppresses Israel for 20 years.

Now, there are two things to notice about this comment. First, the years of oppression and subjugation are growing as we get further into the book of Judges. In the Othniel cycle, eight years are mentioned.

In the Ehud cycle, it's 18 years. Here, it is 20 years. That's not all. The word oppression is used. That is the word that was used in Exodus chapter 3 verse 9 of what was happening to the Israelites in Egypt.

[6 : 59] And we're told that in that context, the Israelites cry out to the Lord and help comes from him. God sends deliverance. So when we combine all of this, what do we have?

We'll have a look at the diagram. We have item 1. Israel has done evil. We have item 2. The Lord has given his people into the hands of an oppressor and his commander.

In verse 3, we add item number 3. Israel cries out to the Lord for help. And then we have the echo of Egypt in the reference to the oppression. And then with all of this, what do you think is going to happen now?

Item 4 should follow, shouldn't it? That is, we should expect God to raise up a deliverer, a judge. And with that expectation, we turn to verse 4, looking for a judge.

So that's what you're meant to be doing now. You're meant to be watching, waiting, seeing how God's going to raise up a judge. And the very first word in the Hebrew text has the word and combined with the first prospect, Deborah.

[8 : 03] And we wonder, could it be the next judge is going to be a woman? Is it going to be Deborah? We've had men. We've had non-Israelites.

Why not? A woman. And the next text stimulates our expectation. You see, she's not just any woman. She is a prophet.

Now, apparently women prophets are not uncommon in the Old Testament and in the world of the Old Testament. So Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, was a prophet. Huldah was a prophet in the time of the great king Josiah.

There were false prophets in the time of Nehemiah. In the New Testament itself, the four daughters of Philip the evangelist were prophets. Anyway, our writer tempts us to wonder even more.

Look at verse 4. We're told that Deborah, the prophet, was leading Israel at the time. Now, the Hebrew word for judge, noun for judge, has the same root as the verb for judge.

[9 : 07] And the word leading here is the verb for judging. It might more literally be translated that Deborah was judging Israel at the time. So let's investigate just a little bit further.

You see, I think our writer is wanting us to ask the question. He's led us to anticipate a judge. He's presented us with Deborah, the prophetess, and he's used the verb for judging of her.

And he wants us to ask this question. Is our next judge, our God-appointed deliverer, this woman, will she be God's agent of rescue? Is she God's intervention by which he will save his people?

My short answer is, I think not. That is, there is no reference here to God raising up Deborah, nor is there a reference to her being inspired and empowered by the Spirit, nor is she ever said to save Israel.

And as we'll see, Sisera is not given into her hands. What's more, she doesn't do any of the actions of a judge. So let's look closer at what she does do. Look at verse 5. Our translation says that she holds court.

[10 : 14] That's not literally what the text says. The English Standard Version is probably better at this point. It says that she used to sit under a particular palm tree, and people would come to her for judgment.

Try and imagine it. There she is. She's found this palm tree somewhere, way out in the middle of nowhere, perhaps. And she's sitting under it. And all of Israel comes to her seeking judgments.

I think one option is that she's judging like the judges that Moses appoints in the book of Exodus.

However, the word here is not that one, the one that's used of judges in Exodus.

So perhaps there's another option here. Perhaps they're coming to her as God's representative.

Perhaps they're seeking God's justice through her and from her. Whichever it is.

She's clearly a woman of stature. She is clearly exercising leadership within Israel.

[11 : 13] She is clearly the one to whom the nation of Israel looks as God's representative. But let me say, I do not think she is our judge. So we've got to look for another.

And that brings us to verse 6. So follow with me in verse 6. Look at it. Verses 6 and 7. Deborah acts. She sent for Barak, son of Abinon, from Kedesh and Naphtali and said to him, The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, Go, take with you 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor.

And 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. Did you hear? She isolates one man, Barak, and she commands him.

And she uses the words of the Lord, giving Sisera into his hand. And we've seen that language of hands before. It's cleverly used in the story of the left-handed Ehud.

And there we heard that Ehud told Israel that their enemies would be delivered into the hands of them. So here's our second candidate. Deborah, you see, is not our judge.

[12 : 23] So we think perhaps it is Barak. It certainly looks as though that's what God intends. Let's see what happens. Look at verse 8. Barak responds, If you go with me, I'll go.

But if you don't go with me, I won't go. It's a very inauspicious reply, isn't it? It could be read in a couple of ways.

It could be the words of a coward, a wimp, a man unwilling to trust God. Or it could be an invitation for God's prophet. Oh, come with me, you know, as God's representative. In other words, it could be a request for the presence of God.

We don't know. Let's see what Deborah does with it. She might give us a clue. Look at verse 9. She says, Certainly I will go with you. But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours.

For the Lord will deliver a scissor into the hands of a woman. So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. Now, again, there's a little bit of ambiguity here. You see, at the very least, Deborah is assuring Barak of her presence.

[13 : 20] She may also be giving Barak a mild rebuke and issuing a punishment for his cowardice. Alternatively, she might simply be stating the facts of what's going to happen. I think the writer is just drawing us in, you see.

He's inviting us to make an assessment. What do you reckon? And as I do this, you know, where I put the weight of my reckoning? I suspect that Deborah is telling him that he's got a job to do.

And he wants Deborah to hold his hand. And Deborah is saying, It's man's work and be a man. And because you're not willing to do it without this, a woman's going to get the honour because you haven't been willing to be a man.

I think that's what's going on. So she will go with him. But there's a price to be paid for his resistance and reluctance. Anyway, all of this is enough for us to get the sense that Barak might not be our judge either.

Deborah goes with him, though. And verse 10 tells us that 10,000 men are gathered under his command. And again, Deborah is said to be with him. Now, I want you to notice verse 11.

[14:31] It seems out of place, doesn't it? You see, all of a sudden, in the middle of this narrative, we're told about Heber the Kenite. Now, we've met Kenites before in the book of Judges. They're non-Israelites who had historical ties with Israel.

The father-in-law of Moses was a Kenite. And so we ask ourselves, what on earth are we doing with this man, Heber the Kenite, who just sort of appears in the middle of this text? Is he with Israel? Or is he with Jabin and his henchmen?

What's he doing here? Well, later on, in verse 17, we'll find that this Heber had an alliance with Jabin. Anyway, we're just left pondering that for a moment. While verses 12 to 16 tell us about the battle.

Deborah exercises her leadership. The leadership that Barak wanted, telling him where and when to advance. And then in 15 and 16, we get the result. With echoes of the Exodus, we're told that the Lord routed Sisera with all his chariots and his army.

They're diminished. They're pursued to the heart of Jabin's rule. And not a man is left. However, twice we're told that Sisera leaves his sign of glory behind.

[15:34] And he gets down from his chariot, that big war weapon. And he flees on foot. He has been brought low. Now look at verse 17.

Here is Heber again. Now Heber has a wife called Jael. And Sisera is diminished as a man. And Jael welcomes him. Welcomes him as Lord. She smothers him with motherly care.

His diminished state is rubbed in, in that he's treated almost like a child. Given a blanket. His request for water is met with sedating milk.

He's protected, tucked into bed. Protected from the monsters outside. And in deep irony, he gives instruction. And most English translations don't capture it.

The NIV doesn't. But the original has him saying that if anyone asks, Is there a man here? Not anyone. The text actually says, Is there a man here? Jael is to answer, No.

[16:32] No. Again, our author is having a subtle go at men in the chapter. Men do not get a good serve in this chapter, let me tell you. Barak needs his hand held.

Sisera is reduced to a no man. And then we're introduced to our third possible candidate for a judge, another woman. After all, Jael has the oppressor's military general in her house.

With deception that matches the deception of Ehud, she breaks all the customs of hospitality. With a weapon that makes the weapons, that looks a bit like the weapons of Ehud, she takes a tent peg and a hammer.

And with an unusual weapon that matches the ox goat of Shamgar from the previous chapter, she creeps toward Sisera. And the tent peg is driven through his temple and into the ground.

And he, unsurprisingly, dies. Now, Deborah's word is fulfilled and Barak is shown the evidence in verse 22. And there we have it. Three possible judges.

[17:33] Each has echoes of the profile of a judge. But none exactly matches the profile. Now look at verse 23. Here we get the hero of the story.

For on that day we are told God subdued Jabin, the king of Canaan, before the people of Israel. And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin, the king of Canaan, until they destroyed him.

No human being is going to take the credit. A coalition of humans are God's agents. But God is responsible. So there's the story. Some of the detail that makes it sing.

And next week we're actually going to hear the story retold in majestic and ancient poetry. And we're going to get some nuances that aren't in the story part of it. However, let's see if we can wrap things up and see some of its relevance for us.

First, as I've intimated throughout the story, the storyteller is drawing us in. He's urging us to see a saviour. And he gently lets us down.

[18 : 33] The judge and saviour is not Deborah. It is not Barak. It is not Jael. No, it's God. And he is a sovereign God.

And he uses bold women, prophets like Deborah, cautious men like Barak, men like Heber who side with the enemy of God's people, wives like Jael who are willing to break conditions of and conventions of hospitality and side with God, even though their husbands break allegiance with God and his people.

And this God, you see, works through the complexity of human disposition with all its mixed motives. And through this, he works his purposes out. And that's seen in Bible history in one critical place.

And that critical and important place is where we see God's ultimate purposes of deliverance. That is executed in Jesus, the unflawed deliverer.

Because Jesus is arraigned by sinful humans, even those he came to save. And yet God is at work. Even through sinful people, God's purposes are achieved.

[19 : 41] Friends, there's an incredible comfort in this notion, isn't there? Even in our frailty, even in sin, God can and does work out his purposes. Friends, none of that condones human sin or weakness, but it does give us some comfort.

Even our weakness can be used in the service of God. However, friends, let me turn to where I started. You see, I want to use this passage to address the question of men and women that I raised at the beginning.

You see, there is within this text, I think, an implicit, in fact, it's probably explicit, critique of men. Think of the men in this passage.

There is Sisera, the man of chariots, who is diminished to a man on foot before he's diminished to a whimpering boy. There is Barak, who needs his hand held and appears to be unwilling to take God at his word and to get on with it.

He's presented as a weak-willed, indecisive and somewhat afraid of entering the fray under the hand of God. Then there's Heber, the Kenite, who breaks long allegiances and sides with the opponents of God.

[20 : 50] That's the first point. Whoever our author is, they are having a go at men here. This is a humiliation of men. It is a humiliation that is replicated in much of Christian mission and ministry, where women are often seen stepping in where men are afraid to go.

It is a humiliation that is replicated in the churches of this world, where men are often so consumed with work and achievement that they leave growth and leadership in the hands of women alone. What is wrong is not that women exercise leadership, but that men abdicate from it. As a result, Christianity in Australia has a definite feminine feel to it.

That is because men are absent or because they are silent or because they fail to step up to the mark. So let's read this text and hear what it is critique of men, because it may be a critique of us as well.

Sorry, that's for the men amongst us. Now let's turn to the place of women in Judges 4. She is not an imperfect figure, but Jael is undoubtedly to be praised as much as Ehud before her.

[22 : 03] She does break some conventions. She does go against the allegiances her husband has made. She is guilty of deception like Ehud. However, she does side with the people of God and wage war against the enemies of God.

However, if there is one unflawed hero other than God here in chapter 4, it is Deborah. In fact, let me say, if there is one unflawed hero in the book of Judges, it has to be Deborah, I think.

She is one of the most remarkable women in the Old Testament alongside those such as Hannah. She may not be a judge, but she is certainly a ray of hope and a bright light in the dark world of the judges.

No, she's not the centre of power. She's not in the centre of power. She's not sitting on a throne as a king or a queen anywhere. She's not ministering in the seat of priests in a temple.

She's nowhere near the Ark of the Covenant. No, she's sitting out under a palm tree. Outside of seats of power. And there she is listening to the pleas of God's people and bringing them to God.

[23 : 16] And she commissions God's man to do the task of God and the task of a man and even accompanies him in battle as God's representative. Friends, I want you to notice this.

She does not, however, displace men in their officially designated positions of leadership. And she does accept that her gender disqualifies her from leadership amongst the people of God.

She leads. She exercises her leadership within God-ordained boundaries. And she does so with an integrity that puts the men of judges to shame.

What a ray of light this woman is in this dark world of judges. And what a ray of light her followers will be in a world darkened by sin and by power.

Friends, one of the great difficulties I have in our day is that in many ways our days are like the days of the judges. Our social fabric is falling apart.

[24 : 17] People at all levels of society are feeling bereft of power and seeking power. Boundaries, traditional boundaries that have been accepted are being broken. And within church life, many men are wimps who fail to lead or make hard choices of leading God's people.

And the great risk for women is that they reflect the culture of their day. That is, that they do what is right in their own eyes and not in the eyes of God as he is revealed in his word.

Friends, I think that God is clear in his word. That he pours out his gifts upon his church to both men and women. However, I also believe that it's implicit, and I think it's implicit in this passage, that some ministries and responsibilities have specific boundaries as to who might exercise them when and where.

You only have to read through the New Testament and 1 Corinthians in particular to see this. And that, I think, raises many risks. One of them is that these God-given boundaries are crossed.

I think Deborah refuses to do this. And Barak fails to step up to the task. Now, I want us both, men and women alike, to note this.

[25 : 35] And I want to urge us to consider carefully how we might respond to this scripture and the ungodly and godly examples that we have here within this text. Finally, I want to reflect on the glory of our God.

The immediate context of this passage is the increasing depravity of Israel in the face of Canaanite incursion and accommodation. And in that context, we see humans with all their frailty and their foibles.

Some of them are set against God with their hands raised in fists, defying God. Some line themselves up with God but do so with tainted hands.

Others reluctantly operate as heroes. However, the hero at the end is undoubtedly, undoubtedly God. That's what our writer wants us to hear. In the end, that is what we should aim for as well.

That is, in our actions, in our responses, in our lives, our ultimate aim is the aim of this text. That is to see the glory of the Lord and the proclamation of his name and his honour.

[26 : 42] It is he alone that is to be glorified whatever ministry we exercise. And this will involve us in hard decisions and difficult moments.

You see, the road of obedience is the road to God's glory. He will glorify himself without us and apart from us and even through us. However, he will be most glorified through our obedience and submission to him and our lives lived before him in this way.

So let us pray that that's what we'll do. Father God, we thank you so much for the stories of these people within Scripture.

For you have said that these things written are written for our example, that we might learn from them. So Father, we pray that you'd help us to learn from them today.

Both the good and the bad examples and also your own action to rescue your people.

[27 : 53] Please help us to learn these things, to put our faith and confidence in you, to live for your glory and to not live up to these bad examples and to mimic the good ones.

Please help us in this, we pray, for the glory of you and the glory of your Son. We pray this in his name. Amen.