

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
November 15, 2020

## **We're in This Fight Together**

Judges 4:1-10

Before God's people Israel had their kings, they had their judges. We meet one of them in today's text. Her name is Deborah. It's tempting to picture her as a Judge Judy figure, in her outdoor courtroom, seated under the shade of a tree, arbitrating disputes and issuing rulings. There's some truth in that perception of her. But she's more than just a mediator. She's also a "prophetess," delivering the word of God to the people. What's more, the Hebrew term "judge" goes beyond judicial responsibilities. It means "ruler," particularly someone who leads Israel in fighting oppressive enemies. So Deborah's responsibilities involve more than just a black robe. She's a judge/leader/warrior.

In our text, Deborah is functioning primarily in the legal world. But her military connections soon come into play. She summons general Barak and conveys to him a divine command. The Lord wants Barak to take ten thousand warriors and go fight the Canaanites, who are under the leadership of general Sisera. God promises to make Barak and the Israelites triumphant, which leads us to believe that Barak will, without hesitation, step up and march forward, as previous judges have done, to give Israel victory over its oppressors.

By this point in the book of Judges, the pattern has become pretty familiar. While living in the land of Canaan, Israel sins and worships other gods. God becomes angry and allows enemies to attack Israel. The Israelites cry out for help and God has pity on them. God raises up a judge who delivers Israel and returns the people to proper worship of their true Lord, the one who loves them and has entered into a covenant with them. But then, when the judge dies, God's people return to their old disobedient ways, and the cycle starts all over again. A lot of the story in the book of Judges unfolds in the midst of this interplay between God's justice and God's mercy.

In today's text, it looks like general Barak will be the hero who leads the Israelites out of the consequences of their latest round of unfaithfulness and back toward a restored relationship with God. But strangely, Barak expresses some caution and hesitation. Before he will put on his helmet and boots, and grab his sword, Barak wants assurance from Deborah that she will go with him to lead in the battle. "Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go'" (v. 8). Deborah agrees to go, but warns that the battle will not lead to his glory.

There are different ways to interpret Deborah's response, depending not just on the words but on her tone. She could be telling Barak that yes she'll go, since this is God's battle, and she's a prophet of God, and that's what she would expect to do. Or she could be telling Barak that if he insists, she'll go, though his request really reflects a lack of trust in God. What's more, Deborah goes on to tell Barak that he'll lose some of his glory because the Lord will give Sisera and his army "into the hand of a woman" (v. 9), another statement that's open to interpretation, especially in the patriarchal culture of that time.

The bottom line is that by this point in the story we're not sure if Barak is the primary judge, or hero, or if it's Deborah, or as it turns out, a third individual who appears. As we read the rest of the chapter, a new possibility emerges. Her name is Jael, a non-Israelite who's related to the father-in-law of Moses. We might assume that she's an ally of Israel in this battle, if it weren't for the fact that her husband, an iron smith, helped craft the hundreds of iron chariots for Sisera's army. So whose side is Jael on? The answer eventually becomes clear when she shows hospitality to general Sisera, and then assassinates him. Are you following all this?

It's no wonder that one commentator has characterized the book of Judges as "one of the most exciting, colorful, and disturbing books of the Bible. It combines stories of political intrigue and assassination, lies and deception, rape and murder, courage and fear, great faith and idolatry, power and greed, sex and suicide, love and death, military victories and civil war."<sup>1</sup> As the story unfolds, we see that in the end, only the mercy of God sustains his relationship with his people, and opens the way for redemption and the eventual accomplishment of God's saving purposes as Israel transitions away from judges and into its experiment with kingship.

With so many ambiguities and unresolved questions operating within this story, it might be tempting to conclude that God has exited the scene and left human beings, particularly his own people, to descend into violence and self-destruction. Though there was some initial success and faithfulness among the early judges, there was a lot of ineffectiveness and unfaithfulness among the later judges. Israel's sinfulness and idolatry caused them to disintegrate into religious and social chaos. In the final chapters of the book of Judges, we're told that "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). The trajectory of the narrative seems to move toward a completely godless situation.

And yet, the story still affirms that God has been present in mercy. He refuses to let go of his people and surrender his redeeming purposes. He has been and still is at work, not only in and through individual people but in and through networks of human activities. That may be why the story in today's text doesn't elevate one single person as the obvious hero in the unfolding narrative. Just when we think the undisputed hero is Deborah, or maybe Barak, or maybe Jael, we begin to see that each of them, and the network of activities and events going on among them, is somehow gathered up into God's providential purposes.

This is an ongoing dynamic in our own faith. As we look back over our own lives, or the life of our church, we may be able to see, sometimes faintly and sometimes clearly, that there was a divine plan at work. Somehow, in all the events, encounters, experiences, and opportunities, God was present in mercy, guiding us, individually and together, toward a larger goal.

Remember that God is present in, and works through, our interconnectedness, especially in our life together as his people. Our interrelatedness, particularly in the church, becomes a vehicle for God's unfolding purposes. During the coronavirus pandemic, we've gained a renewed sense of how critical it is to be networked with one another. COVID-19 has worked to distance us, to separate us, to isolate us from one another. So we've used other avenues, especially technology, to help us sustain, maintain, and nurture the connections that help make us human and alive.

Now, as much as ever, we see how much we need the connections that make us a true fellowship of believers and not just a loose collection of individuals who happen to show up at the same place on Sunday morning. No single one of us is the sole means of God's presence and action. It takes all of us, sharing life together in Christ, to be an instrument

of God's sovereign purposes. He works through me. He works through you. But he especially works through this Christ-centered network of relationships called "us."

And within this "us," God works in and through the ways that we share power and responsibility with each other. Years ago, Bethany and I were on our way home from the church. We were talking about how the church works. She asked, "Daddy, are you the one who runs the church?" Being a good Baptist and knowing that the local congregation governs its own affairs, I answered, "No, honey, I don't actually run the church. The people in the congregation run the church." Then I tried to get even more theologically correct. I said, "Actually, Bethany, the best way to put it is that God runs the church. God is in charge of our congregation." "No," she said with firmness and conviction, "I mean somebody down here on earth."

The ones down here on earth. That would be us, in our life together as a congregation, where power isn't centralized in one particular person, but distributed among the people as we each take responsibility for different parts of our church's ministry. True, our congregation has leaders who exercise unique roles in guiding us. But at the same time, the authority of the gospel, and the duties that come with it, get spread out into the fellowship. And this sharing of power and responsibility is one of God's most valuable tools for working out his plans and purposes, in our lives and in the world.

In addition to sharing the power and the duties, we also share the glory. In today's text, the glory for the victory doesn't go completely to Deborah, Barak, or Jael. There's an interdependence, a networking of their lives and activities, through which God works to deliver his people and preserve his purposes. No single one of them can claim the glory, because the glory ultimately belongs to the Lord and his sovereign ways.

John Ortberg tells about a time when he and his family lived in Chicago, and a friend would regularly give him tickets to Chicago Bulls games. Ortberg says:

Every year I would take my son, Johnny, to a game. The seats were located alongside the tunnel at the United Center, so when the Bulls ran out on to the floor, when Michael Jordan would run through the tunnel, everybody nearby wanted to give him a high five. They wanted to share his glory.

We all want to touch glory. We want to connect with it. We want to be a part of it, even though we know we are not worthy.

The Bulls had a reserve player named Stacey King. During the 1990 season King only started six games and averaged 15 minutes per game. But one night, during an overtime game against Cleveland, he contributed to an important victory. He said it would always be the greatest memory of his life: the night he and Michael Jordan scored a combined total of 70 points in a NBA playoff game. Michael Jordan scored his career-high 69 points, but King shared in the glory.<sup>2</sup>

During this ongoing battle with COVID-19, or any other struggles that we face, our hope is in the mercy of God that won't let us go. We're relying on his sovereign love and entrusting ourselves to his larger purposes. Whatever battle we face, as God's people one of our most important weapons is our interdependence and unity, the connectedness we have in Christ. God can use that and work through that. And in the end, though the story may have many heroes, the glory will belong to God, and we'll be blessed just to share in it.

<sup>1</sup> Dennis T. Olson. "The Book of Judges." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 723.

<sup>2</sup> John Ortberg, from the sermon, "For the Glory of God Alone," at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/august/7080612.html>.