

Deborah, A Mother for Israel

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- [0 : 0 0] We're going to read from the Old Testament. This is the text from which our teaching is based tonight in Judges chapter 4. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Eahud died and the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor.
- The commander of his army was Cicera who lived in Herosheth, Hagoim. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for 20 years.
- Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the pole of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.
- She sent and she summoned Barak, the son of Abinohim, from Kadesh, Naftali and said to him, I was not the Lord that God of Israel commanded you.
- Go gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naftali and the people of Zebulun and I will draw out Cicera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops and I will give him into your hand.
- [1 : 2 0] 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. And she said, I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will tell Cicera, for the Lord will sell Cicera into the hand of a woman.
- Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kadesh and Barak called out Zebulun and Naftali to Kadesh and 10,000 men went up at his heels and Deborah went up with him.
- Now Heber, the Kenite, had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Za'anamneem, which is near Kadesh.
- When Cicero was told that Barak the son of Abinuem had gone up to Mount Tabor, Cicera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Herosheth Hagoyim to the river Kishon.
- And Deborah said to Barak, up, for this is the day in which the Lord has given Cicera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you? So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him, and the Lord routed Cicera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword.
- [2 : 4 4] And Cicera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, and Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Herosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Cicera fell by the edge of the sword, not a man was left.
- But Cicera fled away on foot to the tent of Jail, the wife of Heber, the Kenite, for there was peace between Javen, the king of Hazor, and the house of Heber, the Kenite.
- And Jail came out to meet Cicera and said to him, turn aside, my Lord, turn aside to me, don't be afraid. So he turned aside to her into the tent and she covered him with a rug.

And he said to her, please give me a little water to drink for I'm thirsty. So she opened the skin of milk and she gave him a drink and she covered him. And he said to her, stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, is anyone here?

Say no. But Jail, the wife of Heber, took a tent peg and she took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and she drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness.

[3 : 50] So he died. And behold, as Barak was pursuing Cicera, Jail went out to meet him and said to him, come and I will show you the man whom you were seeking. So he went into her tent and there lay Cicera dead with the tent peg in his temple.

So on that day, 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 Jabin, king of Canaan.

Thank you very much, Corey. If you came here tonight to hear a wholesome story, this is probably not it, because it's pretty violent. And it also teaches us something about a biblical woman.

Sometimes you hear people telling women, you should be more violent. You're biblical. Now we learn that hammering a tent peg through someone's head is in the realms of possibilities here.

And we need to remember that in the book of Judges, we are in a very different time from our modern times. So we should remind ourselves of some of the things we have said in the last few weeks.

[4 : 56] First of all, it's a difficult book from our perspective and it's hard to grasp sometimes. And often we will wonder whether the God that we read about in the book of Judges is the same God that we read about in the New Testament.

And the answer is, of course, yes, but sometimes they can feel so different. But it's important to remember that the Bible doesn't sugarcoat what happened.

It's not trying to make things sound nicer than what they actually were like. And it's important to bear in mind that we are in a very different point in God's redemptive history.

So in the history of God saving his people, we are very... So we were quite a few years before Jesus was born and it was a very different time.

In the book of Judges, we read that it was a time where everyone did as they pleased, really, as they thought was right in their own eyes.

[5 : 58] We should also remind ourselves that like Tertullian, the great theologian, the church father who lived a few hundred years after Jesus said, in the book of Judges and in the Old Testament, we find rehearsals of the incarnation of Jesus.

So we see these judges, the deliverers of Israel and they are like Jesus in many ways. They are pointing forward to someone who will come and deliver Israel.

Actually the word deliverer comes from the word Yeshua. Yahweh saves and that's where we get the name Jesus from as well. And in this cycle, in this Deborah cycle, the cycle in chapter four and chapter five of the book of Judges, we read again that the people did...

They sinned. The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Eid died. So the cycle of idolatry again continues.

The Israelites sinned, they violate the covenant they have made with God and they feel the consequences. And in this case, it says that the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan.

[7 : 15] So God allowed the king of Canaan to rule over the Israelites. And so far, whenever we have read about the beginning of a new cycle of idolatry, the falling away of God's people, we have read in the next sentence or so, we usually read, and the Lord raised up a new deliverer, but not in this chapter.

We don't read this sentence in this chapter. Instead we are introduced to a woman called Deborah. By the way, we only read chapter four, but I will make references to chapter five because they are both giving an account of the same story in very different ways.

Chapter four is prose, chapter five is poetry, but it gives us details that are important to understand what happened. So I will walk us through the text and point out some things and then I'll try to say what we can learn from the text and how we can apply it to our own lives.

So who is Deborah? The text tells us that Deborah was a prophetess, so a female prophet, and she was the wife of some guy called Lapidoth, who is really not significant at all in this story.

So maybe we should say Lapidoth was the husband of Deborah, because at least we know who Deborah is. We also see that Deborah was judging Israel at that time, and it's not exactly clear what that means.

[8 : 40] She wasn't an official judge from what we can see, because usually an official judge would have said at the city gates, that's where they did their business. But Deborah is not at the city gates.

Deborah actually sits under a palm tree, which is called Deborah's tree, which is also unusual, because in that area in Israel, you don't really get palm trees.

But probably there was this one palm tree where she sat and where people would go up to her and she would judge their cases and she would give them advice. She probably wasn't a professional judge then, but she was known as a prophetess, as one who received the word of God and who gave people the word of God.

And in this story, we kind of see what that means. The people of Israel come to her and they complain, because they're being oppressed, they're being ruled cruelly.

And so she summons Barak and she orders him to lead his army, the army of the Israelites, into war. So Deborah in this case is a bit like a mother, right?

[9 : 50] The children of Israel, they come and complain to her, and what do mothers do? They sort things out, right? So Deborah says to Barak, go and lead the people, because God has told you that you will win against the king of Canaan.

And in this little verse that is describing Deborah, we get a hint where the chapter is going. The reason why Deborah is not in the city being a judge probably is because she's a woman.

But we see that God uses her. She is determined to use her gifts for the good in whatever capacity she can. And we will see that God uses her even in the war.

So often a question arises, the question comes up, why did God choose a woman in this chapter, in this case? And what a lot of commentators think is happening here is that there was a problem with man in Israel.

So what's the problem? The problem is the man are not taking up their responsibilities. We will see that later on as well. The chapter is showing that idolatry, the idolatrous cycle has made man irresponsible people.

[11 : 06] And not completely, not every man is as bad as it gets. I mean, Barak is still doing good stuff, but I think the chapter is hinting at that. So instead we get a woman who is giving people the word of God, not in a public space like prophets because they wouldn't have been acceptable probably, but she is doing whatever she can using the gifts that God has given her.

And God is using her for the people of Israel. And she not only receives God's word, she applies it, she does things, she obeys it.

So she summons Barak and she asks him, has not the Lord, the God of Israel commanded you, go gather your man at Mount Habor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naftali and the people of Zebulun.

And Barak doesn't say, you are the prophetess and I know you are giving me a message from God so therefore I will go and do it. No, he says, Deborah, I'll go if you go.

No, that's the kind of man we have here. He's scared. He says, Deborah, I will go, but you have to go with me. Why is he saying that?

[12 : 21] Doesn't he have 10,000 men with him? I mean, that's quite a lot of people. That's what I thought when I read the story. But the problem is that as so often the instructions that God is giving him, they make no sense from a military point of view.

If you Google Mount Habor, that's where they're supposed to go up with all the people. If you Google that, you will find a mountain that is like this, like a bowl that you turn upside down.

It's like a child was trying to draw a mountain. That's what you get. I went down a rabbit hole when I was preparing the sermon of a Hebrew scholar saying that actually, Tabor means belly button.

And I'm not sure what exactly he wanted to say. Maybe it's a negative of a belly button. That's what it looks like. I'm not sure. Anyways, in verse three we read that Cicera had 900 iron chariots.

And you have to imagine iron chariot is basically like a tank in that time. Fast technology, really strong. You have an advantage on the battlefield.

[13 : 28] And if Barrack and the Israelites go up Mount Tabor, Mount Belly Button, as it were, then they could just surround them with their iron chariots.

And what happens then? The Israelites have no way of escaping, right? So when the chariots come up, they have to fight to life and death.

And the Israelites, they were oppressed for 20 years. They don't have the weapons. They don't have the food. They are not fed well. So they really don't have a good chance.

So we can kind of see why Barrack is scared to go up Mount Tabor. In Judges chapter one, verse 19, we're giving a little hint at how powerful iron chariots were in that time.

It says that Judah couldn't drive out the inhabitants of the plain land because they had chariots of iron. So it really makes a difference. So strategically, from a military point of view, it doesn't look great.

[14 : 30] But from a spiritual perspective, God had promised them victory. So Deborah responds to Barrack. And she says, okay, sure, I'll go with you.

But because you asked me that, Cicera, you asked me that, Cicera will fall into the hand of a woman. In other words, Barrack will not get any glory, no honor for killing Cicera.

But instead, a woman will get the glory. And at this point of the story, everyone thinks, well, we know who this woman could be, right? It's probably going to be Deborah who killed Cicera then, since she is so strong, she is so strong and she's the judge and prophetess.

Maybe she's the one who delivers them. But that's actually not what's going to happen. We are being introduced to another character, J.O.

So what's the point of this? What is the point I'm trying to make? Why is it such a bad thing that a woman gets the glory instead of a man? See the passage is trying to make a point that idolatry has made man weak.

[15 : 37] And it's trying to do that by saying the women are the active parties because the man are not taking up the responsibility given by God.

We live in a time where feminism, where equality are really big topics. But it's really important to not portray our worldview on this passage because we would miss the point.

Because what this is actually trying to say is that it's not saying that women can't have responsibility or power.

It's just trying to make the point that there should have been other people taking up responsibility. In biblical times that would have been clear. A hundred years ago that would have been clear.

Is this saying that women can't serve God? Is this saying that women can't take up responsibility or anything like that? No it's not. You see God used Deborah and God used J.O. in his sovereignty.

[16 : 41] Now we as a church and as a denomination, as a free church, we hold to a complementarian view of man and women, which means they're equal, but they have distinctive roles given by God.

And we believe that the New Testament is giving us instructions as to how some offices and roles in the church and in public worship are reserved for man.

Now we can't go into all the details of that. If you have questions then please ask Cory about that. And he's happy to talk you through that.

But let me say this, dear women of this church, of this congregation, or if you're visiting today, you are very much and how do I say this? You're so appreciated in this church because without you the church would struggle quite a lot.

And this story is making a case for women. It's making a case for women who love God, who walk with God, who love to read the Bible, who love to serve, to do exactly that, to be used by God, to be used in his ministry, to pour themselves into the ministry of God and let him use you.

[17 : 50] So with respect to the New Testament instructions. Now having said all this, this story is also showing that man has a responsibility, that we need to take God seriously, that we need to take his word seriously.

In this very instance, Deborah gets that. Baruch doesn't get that so much. That's why Deborah commands Baruch, not once but twice.

Because she gets that it's God who will bring deliverance from the enemies. It's not their strategies, it's not their effectiveness, their weapons, their technology, but it is actually God.

That's why she says to Baruch, does not the Lord go out before you? And then the story continues and kind of you prepare for a long account of the battle and what happens.

But it's just in a couple of sentences that the Bible tells us that Baruch and the man, they go down the mountain and they defeat the enemy. They kill every single person.

[19 : 03] And only one person manages to flee, which is Cicera. And you're kind of left wondering, how did that happen? And that's a good point to turn to chapter five because in chapter five we get a song in which Deborah sings about everything that happened.

So chapter five includes more details. Chapter five says, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped. Yes, the clouds dropped water.

And that explains how the Israelites won, right? Because remember, they had chariots of iron with them. So you remember Mount Tabor, the round kind of hill and they surround the hill with their chariots of iron.

Now it starts raining really heavily and you want to go up there with your chariots of iron. What happens? The horses light, the chariots, they fall over.

The people are in chaos. Nobody knows where they're supposed to go, what's happening. You can really, you can almost feel the confusion and the chaos that is there.

[20 : 19] Maybe tanks would have been better after all because they could have maybe made the way up, but not the chariots of iron. We can only imagine what it was like, you know, all the enemies trying to get up there and suddenly it starts raining and thundering and storming and they can't make it.

So all that Barak and the Israelites had to do was run down and sweep away the enemy, kill them. There's a really cool detail, well I think it's a really cool detail in this text and that's Barak's name.

The name Barak means lightning bolt. Now God is making this thunder storm and Barak, aka the lightning bolt, is running through it down the hill, striking the enemy.

If Psalm 20 had been written at that time, the words would have been really fitting. Psalm 20 says, some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. See, God does not care about human strength. He doesn't care about advanced technology.

[21 : 35] In His sovereignty, He can do whatever He likes. Judges 5 verse 20 even says that the stars were fighting for Israel. In other words, God's providence goes as far as making the stars align in the right way.

When the Lord is on your side, you have nothing to fear. Yet it's easier said than done, right? We are not in the times of judges. We are New Testament believers.

We know what happens with Jesus and the cross, and we know about our identity. We know that God is on our side. We know that in Jesus we have the victory. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We know that we are loved. We know that we are chosen and redeemed. But sometimes even a small comment of someone can make all that crumble.

Do you really believe that? This passage encourages you to believe in the promises of the living God and to obey them, to do what He asks you to do.

[22 : 46] Though we may seem weak sometimes, as a church, we have the living God on our side. Let's see how the story ends, King Cicera runs away without his chariot of iron, and he ends up in Jail's tent.

And Jail is not an Israelite. She is the wife of Heber the Kenite. And Heber the Kenite had peace with Jabin the king of Hazor.

And Jabin is Cicera's boss. No, it's a lot of names and quite confusing, I know. Anyways, Cicera thinks that Jail is his friend.

So he feels kind of safe, right? And Jail says, come into my tent, you've got nothing to fear about. I'll take care of you. I'll hide you. So Jail is a bit like a double agent in that instance.

She's a bit like a female James Bond almost. She comforts him, and she gives him milk and puts a rug over him. And as he sleeps, exhausted, she takes a tent pack and drives it through his head, which is quite a wild story.

[23 : 58] And we wouldn't expect that in the Bible sometimes, you know. But the Bible, as we said, is pretty raw. It doesn't sugarcoat things.

It's a remarkable story. We get two really strong women who do the will of God, and together they deliver Israel from their oppressors.

And sometimes people say, but Jail, was she really that good? I mean, she kind of acted in a pretty horrible way, right?

What do I mean? The thing is that she betrayed her husband because she's breaking the peace her husband had with Jabin.

He's lying and actively deceiving Cicera that he doesn't have to be afraid. And then she murders him by hammering a peg through probably, so commentators say, through his mouth and throw it into the ground, which is pretty horrible.

[24 : 57] And if you believe the traditional Jewish interpretation and actually the interpretation that a lot of scholars have as well, she might have even used her femininity to sexually seduce Cicera here.

So if she was here among us, we would probably say that wasn't a very good way to bring these things about, right?

Now the Bible says something different. The Bible in the next chapter says this, most blessed of women be Jail, the wife of Hebrew, the key knight of 10 dwelling women, most blessed.

That's quite different to our reaction maybe. It says further in verse 25, he asked water and she gave him milk. She brought him curds in a nobles bowl.

She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workman's mallet. She struck Cicera, she crushed his head. She shattered and pierced his temple.

[26 : 03] She crushed his head. And the Bible commends her for that. And again, we have to stress that this is a different time and a different place in the Bible in the history of God, which means the history of God saving his people.

And it's also worth mentioning that Jail wasn't an Israelite, right? Because maybe she didn't even know about all the laws. But what she did know, and this is the important part, what she did know was that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, is the living God.

And she made sure she was on the right side of things. God's enemies will be punished according to their sins is what judges then says in Judges 5.31.

It says, so may all your enemies perish, O Lord. But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might. Jail made sure that she's a friend of God.

And chapter 5 verse 30, it also hints to the fact that Cicera was the kind of person who would take Israelite girls as part of his treasure and that he and the soldiers would take them as slaves.

[27 : 20] He wasn't a good man. He was cruel. He was harsh. He took whatever he wanted, not just their foods, not just their treasures, but also their daughters. So he was oppressing the people of Israel.

Now, I think that there is something more going on in this passage, that there is something symbolic about Jail killing the oppressor of Israel.

Because in the very beginning of the Bible, there was already an oppressor of the people of God. In the garden, in Genesis 1 to 3, we read about that, in the garden, the serpent tempts Adam and Eve, and he causes them to fall into sin.

And as a consequence, God curses the serpent and he prophesies to someone the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent's head. And throughout the Bible, we get accounts of that again and again.

One of the more famous ones is David and Goliath, David crushing the big Goliath. And here in this story, we get a woman who symbolizes also the seed of the woman as prophesized in Genesis 3.15.

[28 : 29] And this woman, Jail, she crushes the head of the one who symbolizes the enemy, who symbolizes the serpent.

So what we get in here is, in the realness and in the brutality and the messiness, which reflects the times of the judges, we get a picture of the gospel.

The seemingly strong oppressor is executed by a person that nobody would have expected, which means that in the story of judges, we have a pattern of strange people and strange places and strange solutions.

And overall, in this cycle, we see that again and again. So let me give you a list of things that I think this story is trying to teach us. So firstly, I think that this cycle shows, first and foremost, that God's sovereign will and providence is there, is active.

He delivers his people. He has a plan and he will use whoever he needs to use to achieve his purposes. So in this story, we have a team effort through which the enemy is brought down.

[29 : 43] And it's all orchestrated from above. Through God's word, through his bringing about of the storm and even changing the nature, and through him leading Cicera into Jail's tent, who then deceives and kills him.

Secondly, in the books of Hebrews in chapter 11, we have something that we sometimes refer to as the Hall of Faith, where the author of Hebrews is talking about examples in the Old Testament who were examples of faith.

And Barrick's name is actually mentioned in the Hall of Faith. So what God asked of Barrick wasn't easy. And yes, he did doubt and he was weak.

But God showed his strength through his weakness. So Barrick is an example of faith and he is an example of what it means to trust in God's word.

In the Bible, God uses unusual people with unusual methods. In a time in which everyone did, as was right in their own eyes, he used Jail, who was from a different people, to kill Cicera.

[30 : 53] And what we can learn from Jail is not to go and do likewise, please don't. But what we can learn from her is that we should find ourselves on the right side.

We should be on the side of God, of the living God. We should be friends with Him. And we should do everything we can to fight the enemy. We ought to fight the idols in our hearts that keep us oppressed and that keep us slaves of sin.

Fourthly, we don't fight with weapons like the people of God in the book of Judges. One writer says this, the New Testament equivalent of the conquest of Canaan is the conquest of the whole earth by and for Christ.

And the way we do that is by fighting with weapons that God has given us in the New Testament. We are warriors of love. In Ephesians 6, Paul has given us the whole armor of God that we sang about in our first song this evening, where Paul says, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The fight has changed. It's not against flesh and blood anymore. And let me encourage you to read Ephesians 6, maybe throughout the week, and be encouraged by that.

[32 : 27] Let me just mention the different pieces of the armor that Paul is giving us there. He's talking about the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes of readiness given by the gospel of peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

One thing has stayed the same as in the Old Testament, and that is that the word of God tells us that our enemy has already been defeated. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, the curse of sin has been broken.

Salvation is offered freely to anyone who believes in Him. If you think that you're just a strange person in an unusual place and you have nothing to offer to God, then this story is telling the opposite and leaves us without any excuses.

Deborah, Barak, and Giles show us that God uses those who are willing to serve. He uses those who seem to be weak in faith, and He uses those who seem to be outsiders, so we really don't get an excuse here.

Let us pray. Holy Father, we thank You for the story of Deborah and Barak and Giles and the story of Judges. And we do ask You that You would help us to understand the story better, that You would help us to fight as warriors of love, as warriors of Your kingdom, and to use the weapons and the armor that You have given us.

[34 : 05] Father, we give thanks for Your Word, and we ask that You would encourage us in that and help us to apply all these truths to our hearts. And we give thanks for Your Son, Jesus Christ, who went to the cross and who achieved everything that we couldn't have achieved out of our own strength.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.