

Beat By a Girl

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 4:1-24

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¹And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. ²And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-bagoyim. ³Then 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 twenty years.

⁴Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. ⁶She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesb-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun.' ⁷And I will draw out Sisera, 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?" ⁸Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." ⁹And 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 sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesb. ¹⁰And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesb. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.

¹¹Now 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 Zaananim, which is near Kedesb.

¹²When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-bagoyim to the river Kishon.

¹⁴And Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. ¹⁵And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. ¹⁶And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-bagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

¹⁷But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.

¹⁹And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. ²⁰And he said to her, "Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" ²¹But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. ²²And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

²³So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. ²⁴And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

This is the Word of the Lord.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Beat By a Girl

I played tennis my senior year in high school. Before that, I had played baseball in the spring and golf in the summer. I don't remember why I decided to switch to tennis. What was I thinking? I had never played tennis before in my life. I knew how to swing a baseball bat and a golf club. But a tennis racket!? So, as you can imagine, I wasn't very good. I regularly had to chase tennis balls I'd knocked over the fence. You won't be surprised to learn that I didn't make the varsity team. That in itself was shameful enough—a 6'2" and 185 pound senior playing JV tennis. But the shame only got worse as the season pressed on. I grew up in Garden City. My high school was a large, 6A school. But being in western Kansas, the JV teams played a lot of small schools out in the sticks. Many of those schools were too small to have both boys and girls tennis teams. So they combined their teams. Long story short, I had to play a number of girls. The shame was piling on for this 17-year-old boy who thought he was pretty cool. But matters became worse when I *lost* to a girl in Scott City. Then I lost to another girl in Ulysses. The town we called useless wasn't all that useless; it was useful enough to wound my pride. I stuck out the season, but gained the reputation of being good at being beat by girls.

So when I began studying Judges 4 and thinking about my title, I couldn't help but to title it, "Beat By a Girl." I felt a lot of solidarity with Barak, who was also outshined by two girls—Deborah and Jael. But not only is Barak shamed by two girls; Barak's also listed as a hero of the faith in Hebrews 11. Judges 4 was a redemption story for this Garden City boy who was beat by girls. Maybe there's hope for me, like Barak. Actually, that's where I want to begin this morning. Why is Barak listed in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faith when he was outshined by Deborah and Jael? We're told in Hebrews 11:34 that through faith, the judges were "made strong out of weakness." Barak was weak in a number of ways. But he was still a man of faith. And his faith made him strong in the midst of weakness. And that's how I want to structure my sermon this morning. I want to look at three things that made Barak weak in this story. Then I want to look at the one thing that made him strong in the midst of weakness.

OUT OF WEAKNESS

Let's start with Barak's weakness. There are three things I want to highlight:

1. Barak's circumstances
2. His hesitating faith
3. The consequences of his hesitating faith.

Cruel Oppression (1-3)

Let's start with his circumstances in verses 1-3. Israel was under cruel oppression. In verse 1, we're told that "the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died." And as a result of their rebellion, the LORD's retribution was unleashed against them. Take a look at verse 2. "The LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of the army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim." In verse 3, we're told that Sisera "had 900 chariots of iron." And Israel was "oppressed...cruelly for twenty years." So they "cried out to the LORD for help."

Jabin was in Hazor, a fortified city in Naphtali, 10 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was one of the most powerful cities in northern Canaan. It dominated the whole of northern Canaan. Sisera was in Harosheth-hagoyim, which was south and west of Hazor. And Sisera had 900 iron chariots. He

had a powerful and professional army. Israel was squeezed between two powerful places.² Barak had an army at his command as well, from Naphtali and Zebulun. But it was likely a rag tag group of volunteer fighters, a local militia if you will.³ They weren't professional warriors. They didn't have machines of war. Barak was no match for Jabin and Sisera. His circumstances made him weak.

A Hesitant Faith (4-9)

But that wasn't his biggest weakness. The two women in the story highlight a more important weakness, his faith. Deborah is the first woman in this story. And she exposes Barak as a man of hesitant faith. She's a woman of God's Word. She's a prophetess (v. 4). The people of Israel were coming to her for judgment (v. 5). Maybe she was governing Israel or maybe she was settling disputes.⁴ But at a minimum, Israel was coming to her to hear the Word of the LORD.⁵ The Bible never criticizes Deborah for assuming this role. But it does make you wonder where the men were in Israel. Where were the male spiritual leaders? But that's not the point of this story.

Deborah commissions Barak. Barak isn't Deborah's recruit. God chose Barak. Deborah is simply God's mouthpiece. In verses 6-7 she gives Barak a word from the LORD. "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel commanded you, 'Go, gather your men from Mt. Tabor, taking 10,000 men from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I [the LORD] will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I [the LORD] will give him into your hand?'" Although the odds are stacked against Barak, the LORD has made it clear what the plan is for Barak—he is commanded to go gather his troops at Mt. Tabor and the battle will happen at Kishon. The LORD also made clear what the outcome of the battle would be. The LORD would empower Barak. The LORD will give Sisera into his hands. The battle belongs to the LORD. The battle with Sisera is a non-issue. It doesn't matter how strong Sisera is, victory is certain. The real battle is one of belief. The battle's in Barak's heart. Will Barak take God at his Word and go? Will he obey? Obedience is a product of faith.⁶ Obedience proves faith. Does Barak have faith? Will he obey?

This battle of belief is presented two times in our narrative. And Barak loses the first battle of belief. Look at verse 8. Barak said to Deborah, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Barak puts conditions on obedience. He hesitates; he equivocates (he's non-committal); he hedges his bets. Deborah is strong in faith. She's a prophetess who has the Word of God ever with her. Barak wants a woman like that at his side. He doesn't want her to fight for him like Xena, the warrior princess, or Wonder Woman. He wants reassurance that comes with her presence. And if she's unwilling to provide her presence, he's unwilling to go and obey God.

Application

I love the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." Especially the line, "What more can he say than to you he has said?" We have a firm foundation, ye saints of the Lord, laid for you in his excellent Word. What more do we need?

I sometimes hear people say that we don't need more teaching in the church; we simply need more obedience to what we've already been taught. I think that's a false dichotomy in many ways. We

² Webb, Barry G. *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015.

³ Webb, *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*

⁴ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

⁵ Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.

⁶ Jackman, David. *Judges, Ruth*. Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1993.

always need more teaching. We live on every word that flows from the mouth of God. The Word does the work. But there *is* a sense in which we can't hide behind more teaching *at the expense of* obedience. When we have clear instruction from God's Word, we simply need to obey it with unequivocal faith. We need to prove our faith by faithfulness. That's what Barak needed to do. But he had weak faith in this moment. He hesitated. And so in verse 9, Deborah responds to his request by promising to go with him, but also announcing the consequences of his hesitant, conditional faith. He will not get credit for the victory that's been promised. In fact, Sisera will be given into the hand of a woman—and this will be to Barak's shame.

The Consequences of Hesitant Faith (17-24)

And that brings us to the consequences of Barak's hesitant faith, in verses 17-24. After the victory in verses 11-16, Sisera gets away. It's like the cartoons of my youth—after the battle, the bad guy gets away and so you have to watch another episode to see what will happen next. But the next episode is anything but what you'd expect. Sisera runs to the house of Heber, because there's an alliance with Heber and Jabin (v. 17). But Heber's wife Jael foils Sisera's plans and Barak's plans. She shames them both! Jael invites Sisera in to her tent to find safe haven (v. 18). But instead of providing safe haven, she drives a tent peg into his head while he's sleeping (v. 21)! This is a woman who knows how to improvise with the stuff she has laying around the house. She's a creative housewife!⁷ Maybe in our day, she would have used a food processor or a blender to kill Sisera. We're not told why she kills Sisera. Maybe she was hedging her bets; switching to the winning side after she heard about the victory at Kishon. But her motivation doesn't seem to be the point. Shaming Barak is the point.

The story's actually very similar to the story we read last week about Ehud.⁸ There's deception in both stories. Ehud deceives Eglon to get an audience with him. And Jael deceives Sisera to get an audience with him. There's great detail given about the killing in both stories. Ehud thrust his sword into Eglon's belly and the fat covered the hilt and the dung came out. Jael thrust the tent peg into Sisera's temple and it went into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. And both stories conclude with men who stand baffled by the murder in front of them. Eglon's attendants look on him to their shame. And now Barak looks on the body of Sisera to his shame. If Barak's a hero at all, he's a red-faced hero.⁹

Application

What's the lesson in all of this for us today? God will accomplish his purposes with or without us.¹⁰ Our faithlessness or hesitant faith or conditional faith won't keep God from accomplishing his saving work in the world. But it may keep us from fully participating in it.

I love to go to WSU basketball games. And one thing I love about the WSU arena is there's really not a bad seat in the house. But I never sit in really *good* seats. I usually get placed behind one of the goals, or behind some overweight, sweaty, loud, foul mouthed, zealous fan who hates all officials. Not a bad place to see the action. But it doesn't compare to those seats I've seen some of you in, behind the press table, right on the court, right next to the action, able to hear all of coach Marshall's play-angry strategies. If I could sit anywhere, I'd like to be there. When it comes to watching God win victory over sin and death and Satan, where do you want to be seated? Those who take God at

⁷ Keller

⁸ Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012; Block

⁹ Webb, *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*

¹⁰ Jackman

his Word and obey him through faith, have a front row seat. Those who are hesitant and put conditions on their obedience are sitting behind the obnoxious guy. I don't want to miss out, like Barak. What about you?

The Bible's View of Women

Now we've seen that this text is using women as foils to shame and highlight the weakness of Barak. But before we move on to see the strength of Barak, I think it's important that we take a minute to qualify what I'm saying. Does the Bible have a low view of women? Nothing could be further from the truth. Women are not lower than men in God's eyes. In fact, the Bible, more than any other religion, elevates women. Men and women are equal in God's eyes. They're both created in his image and used in amazing ways to further his purposes. Deborah is obviously an example of this. But at the same time the story of Deborah doesn't justify women as pastors or as heads of households. In fact, Deborah herself seems to know that it's not her role to fight. That role belongs to men. She was content to function within her God-given role (not to step out of it). She knew her role was to deliver God's Word as a prophetess. That's a high role, but it doesn't usurp the unique role given to men.

The point of this story is not to denigrate women. And that's not the point of my sermon either. The point here is to highlight Barak's weak faith and the consequences of that. Some have said that behind every successful man there's a powerful woman. But here, we see that behind a remarkable woman, we have a weak man.¹¹

WE'RE MADE STRONG

But Barak's weakness provides an opportunity for God's strength to shine all the brighter. And with that said, let's now turn to see how Barak was made strong through his weakness in verses 10-16.¹²

Like I said earlier, Barak is given two chances to prove his faith through obedience. Following his first chance, he failed. And through his failure we see a weak man. But following his second chance, we see that he didn't fail. He did prove his faith by faithfulness. In verse 10, we see that after Deborah agreed to go with him that he called out Zebulun and Naphtali and went to Mt. Tabor (v. 12), like he was commanded. And like God promised, Sisera met up with him at the river Kishon (v.13). Then in verse 14, Deborah again gives Barak a clear word from the LORD and a chance to obey. "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you." The same Word (essentially) and the same promise of victory. Only this time Barak proves his faith in God's Word by faithfulness to it. Barak went into battle, and in verse 15 we're told that "The LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword." We won't see until chapter 5 how the LORD secured this victory. For now, the point is that Barak obeyed God in faith and God defeated the enemies. We're told in summary in verses 23-24 that "on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. And the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan." The strong, unbeatable, armies and chariots of Jabin were beaten by God, in spite of the weakness of Barak. Barak eventually took God at his Word and God did what he promised; he secured the victory.

¹¹ Jackman

¹² Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007. Davis sees this section at the center of the whole passage (the middle of a chiasm). It's the most important part. That's one reason I've placed it at the end of this sermon.

God uses the weak to shame the strong.

This is what this passage teaches us. This is my sermon in a sentence. God's strength comes when we take him at his Word. God delights to use the weak to shame the strong. God delights to use what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. Sure, Barak was shamed when he failed to trust God. But ultimately the enemies of God were shamed when God used weak things and weak people like Barak to defeat Jabin.

Friends, there are lessons here about trusting God with unhesitating faith. That's where we've spent most of our time this morning. But even in Barak's weakness, we see that God is strong. When we are weak, he is strong. Paul says that we have this treasure (the gospel) in earthen vessels, in clay pots, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God. The gospel is weakness in the eyes of the world. But it is strong in the eyes of God. The gospel is foolishness in the eyes of the world. But it's the wisdom of God. God delights to save his people from their sins, and Satan, and death, through the cross. It makes no sense to the world that God would use the "defeat" of the cross to give victory. But through the death and resurrection of Christ, we have the victory. We simply need to take God at his Word. We need to believe this gospel and be saved. And we need to not be ashamed of this gospel, but take it to a lost and dying world, knowing that it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe. Don't hesitate. Don't equivocate. Go in the power of the Holy Spirit and share this good news.