

Judges 4

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[0 : 0 0] Caricatures are a dangerous thing. We all need to be on our guard against unthinkingly buying into a caricature that seldom will portray the one being caricatured in a positive light.

We should always try and be charitable in our judgments to err on the side of caution and to give others the benefit of the doubt. Now, this is not a call to blind tolerance or an anemic blandness with regard to others, but simply a call to be Christian in the judgments that we make concerning others.

And this advice holds for those round about us, our family, our work, our church, for those in the public arena who we often think are fair game, and also to men and women we are introduced to in the pages of the Bible.

When we hear something critical or negative of another, it's always good to just pause and ask the question, well, is that true?

Or even if what is said is true, might there be a reason or mitigating circumstances that we are not aware of? And I want you to bear this in mind as we spend some time thinking about Barak.

[1 : 3 1] What do you think of Barak? What kind of image do you have of him? Now, just to clarify, as we clarified already with the children, we're not talking about Barak Obama, but Barak, son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, who we meet here in chapter 4 of the book of Judges.

Indeed, perhaps some of us, if we're being honest, would say, well, we know very little about him at all, and perhaps not enough even to have formed an impression concerning him.

Indeed, a question that could be asked is, why focus on Barak at all? In a chapter, in a passage, where it is Deborah who rather takes center stage.

Deborah, a prophetess, a judge, a mother in Israel, she certainly merits careful attention and praise. And so, the question might be posed, perhaps unfairly, if my focus on Barak is evidenced of an undisguised misogyny.

Well, I trust that that's not the explanation, but rather that it's driven by a desire to focus on one who is a somewhat less well-known character, who, I would argue, has been unfairly caricatured, and yet who, as we've discovered, perhaps surprisingly, perhaps intriguingly, is to be found in faith's hall of fame, in Hebrews chapter 11, by faith, Barak conquered kingdoms.

[3 : 1 1] All of these commended for their faith, Barak included. Now, I'll divide what I have to say concerning Barak under three headings.

First of all, to just consider briefly the times of Barak, the times in which he lived, that grant to us the backdrop, the context, in which we discover what it is that he did.

So, first of all, we'll think a little bit about the times of Barak, but then move on to what is the substance of what we want to think about, and that is the faith of Barak.

How can we describe, or how is his faith presented to us in the account? But then that will lead us on to a final matter for us to consider that we have entitled in the following way, the one greater than Barak.

So, the times of Barak, the faith of Barak, and the one greater than Barak. What then can we say concerning the times of Barak?

[4 : 19] Well, we're given a brief outline of the times in which he lived there at the beginning of chapter 4. Indeed, if we take our reading from chapter 3 and verse 30, and then jump to the beginning of chapter 4, we're given a brief outline of the times.

In verse 30 of chapter 3, that day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for 80 years, following the victory of Ehud. But then we read in chapter 4, after Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

So, the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. And then we read how he oppressed them for 20 years, and they cried to the Lord for help.

There we have that, what is becoming now a familiar description of the times that followed God's deliverance on this occasion by the hand of Ehud.

There is peace, there is prosperity, but then the people do evil again, they rebel against God, God judges them, He sells them into the hands of this enemy king.

[5 : 34] And then as they suffer under the yoke of this king, so they eventually cry out to God for help. It's a similar pattern. But though the pattern is indeed repeated, the circumstances on each occasion are far from identical.

The challenge that is posed to Israel on this occasion, to Israel as a nation, by King Jabin and his general Sisera, is a challenge and a threat far greater and more dangerous than we have seen thus far in the book of Judges.

Now, to understand why that is so, we maybe need to just take a brief step back and grasp an important aspect of how the book presents to us the different episodes that it does.

What we need to understand is that the circumstances that are portrayed for us in the book of Judges, chapter by chapter, often give the impression that the whole nation of Israel was affected, that all of God's people were involved, but largely this is not the case.

On many occasions, the oppression suffered and consequently the relief required was much more localized. And we have hints that allow us to come to that conclusion in the text.

[6 : 57] So it's not all the people that find themselves under a given oppressor, but perhaps the people of God in a particular locality or region or a particular tribe or group of tribes.

The question then arises is, why is it then that the manner in which these episodes are portrayed does appear to suggest that all of the people are affected?

I think what we have here is an important insight into God's purpose for a united people marked by solidarity and mutual support.

So if one locality or region or tribe of God's people is oppressed, there is a real sense in which all are oppressed, even if not all are enduring the physical or political oppression that is being described.

And this principle is one that we have echoes of in the New Testament in teaching concerning the church, how the church is one, and when one part of the church suffers, well, we all suffer.

[8 : 04] When one part rejoices, well, we all ought to rejoice. Well, a similar principle applies here in the episodes described for us in the book of Judges. Well, I mention this as background as we move in to consider the situation as described here in chapter 4 and to go on to explain why it is, as I've suggested, particularly threatening and more so than previous difficulties that have been described.

And I think as regards the times of Barak and particularly what we have described here, there are three details for us to note. The first thing for us to note is that as on other occasions, as we've just suggested, not all Israel is affected.

Now, where that is made very clear isn't so much in chapter 4, but curiously, in chapter 5, where we have a poetic account of the very same episode.

So, chapter 4 is a descriptive, prose account of what happened, historical details and what have you. And then in chapter 5, you have this song that describes the same episode, but in poetic terms.

And within that song, which we'll be thinking about a little bit more this evening, there is explicit reference to those tribes that did not participate in the battle.

[9 : 27] And it's made very clear that they were not being oppressed at all. They were living their lives quite happily. This particularly relates to tribes to the south. They weren't affected by the oppression, and indeed, they did not even participate in securing relief for their brothers who were affected towards the north of Israel.

So, not all Israel is affected. That's the first thing we could note in terms of a detail. But the other detail that's important to note is that unlike on previous occasions, the two previous occasions that we have recorded in the book, the enemy that is being faced is Canaan itself, or the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the land, those living within the boundaries of the promised land, rather than intruders from without.

When we met with Othniel, we discovered that those who were oppressing the Israelites were those who had come from the north. They weren't those within the promised land, those who had come and crossed the border to oppress God's people.

Or then, with Ehud, it was the Moabites. Again, they weren't within the boundaries of Canaan. Rather, they crossed the Jordan and oppressed the people. Now, it's somewhat different and in many ways more challenging because it's the very people within the promised land, the Canaanites themselves, under King Jabin, who are oppressing the Israelites.

But the third detail, and this really brings us to the nub of the issue in terms of the seriousness of the threat posed, is the location of their dominance and how this carried a very real threat of permanently dividing or even dismembering Israel.

[11 : 17] As we are told in the text, Hazor was the location of King Jabin's base. Now, Hazor is to the north of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, Sisera, his general, who is much more prominent in the account, he is also identified as having a base for his operations. And the name that is given is Harasheth Hagayim.

Some are more difficult to locate that geographically with precision, but it would seem to have been to the west of the Sea of Galilee, almost towards the Mediterranean coast.

So, if you can try and visualize a map of Canaan, you have the Sea of Galilee. Above it, you have King Jabin at Hazor, and then towards the Mediterranean, you have Sisera and his military might.

And there is a sense in which they almost serve to divide the nation in two. And as a result, the very real danger existed of the northern tribes being altogether isolated from the southern tribes.

[12 : 21] They simply wouldn't have been able to make their way through that part of the nation that was dominated by King Jabin and his general Sisera.

And so, this oppression and this military dominance, unchallenged, would have had potentially fatal consequences for the very integrity of the nation.

Well, just to illustrate with one example what would not have been possible in the times of Barak. Remember how Joshua set up an altar at Shechem and how he had said, this is the place where the people of God will see the altar and will remember God's deliverance.

Well, in the times of Barak, the northern tribes wouldn't have been able to make their way to Shechem. It would have been impossible for them, certainly in any great numbers, to mobilize themselves and make their way through all the military might of Jabin and Sisera.

So, just one example of how this was threatening the very integrity of the nation. We could say more, but the principal point that I want to highlight is that the times of Barak were times not only of painful oppression for many of God's people, but times when the very permanence of Israel as a nation was under significant threat.

[13 : 39] And for such a time, God raised up Barak. And He continues to call and raise up men and women to use the language of the book of Esther for such a time as this.

And that, of course, remains true to our own day and generation. The times of Barak. Moving on to the faith of Barak, which is what we're principally concerned with.

Barak's faith, or lack of faith, depending on your perspective, is usually measured in light of what he says in verse 8 of the account, or certainly what he says recorded in verse 8.

And we'll hone in on the significance of what he says there to Deborah in a moment. We'll come there. But we have much more material to work with in presenting a portrait of Barak's faith than what we find there in verse 8, though that is in some ways central.

Our starting point, really, if we're even debating whether he was or was not a man of faith, well, our starting point has to be Hebrews chapter 11, the passage that we read, where we have an explicit commendation of Barak's faith.

[14 : 54] And so, on the basis of that passage alone, we can declare without question that Barak was a man of faith, indeed a man of exemplary faith. The whole purpose of the account to present those whose faith we ought to admire and follow.

Our concern, then, is to explore the nature and character of that faith, that he was a man of faith is without question. But what kind of faith was the faith of Barak?

To order what I have to say, I want to describe Barak's faith in the following ways. First of all, a faith that responds, then a faith that depends, a faith that obeys, a faith that triumphs, and then finally, a faith that celebrates.

Some of these we'll deal with very fleetingly and others we'll detain ourselves a little bit longer. First of all, then, a faith that responds. Notice in verse 6, as the episode begins to take shape, we've been given this description of the oppression that the Israelites were suffering.

We've been introduced to Deborah. And then in verse 6, we read, She, that is Deborah, sent for Barak, son of Abinoam, from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, the Lord, the God of Israel, commands you.

[16 : 17] And then the command is there described for us. Now, that sentence that Deborah sent for Barak and said is a sentence that, though accurate, fails to capture what was involved for Barak to hear God's command through Deborah.

For Barak to make his way to Deborah in the south of the country, Barak was based in the north, where the tribes of Naphtali and Sebulun were based.

So, even for him to make his way to where Deborah was to receive this command involved an arduous and potentially a dangerous journey of some 60 miles.

So, the very fact that Barak is standing dutifully before Deborah to hear God's command is evidence of a faith that responds. The call had reached Barak.

Deborah has a message for you and Barak responds. He comes to hear God's message through God's prophetess. That response of Barak involved two necessary elements.

- [17 : 27] It involved, first of all, a recognition of God's appointed authority, Deborah. Now, that in itself may have been quite difficult for Barak to swallow, that the one he had to recognize as owning and representing God's authority was this woman, Deborah.

A highly unusual circumstance, but his response required him to recognize her authority. But not only to recognize her authority, but to submit to God's appointed authority in the person of Deborah.

This is a faith that responds. What about you? Is your faith a faith that responds to God's call? Do you recognize and submit to God's authority as it finds expression in his word, the Bible, and in those he has placed to exercise authority in his church?

It would have been very different had Barak refused to respond to God's call. So the faith of Barak is a faith that responds.

But it is also, and this brings us in many ways to the heart of the matter, it is a faith that depends. What do we make of what Barak says there in verse 8?

- [18 : 48] In chapter 4 and verse 8 we read, Barak said to her, he said to Deborah, if you go with me, I will go. But if you don't go with me, I won't go.

Now the most common interpretation is less than generous to Barak. These words of Barak are deemed to reveal his cowardice or at least his hesitancy.

They're deemed to reveal, to expose a failure to trust in God. Rather, Barak here would appear to be placing his trust and dependence in Deborah rather than in God.

If you go with me, then I'll go, but if you don't go with me, then don't count on me. And so often that is the conclusion that is arrived at.

But I wonder, is that fair? I would suggest that what lies behind the words of Barak are the same sentiments and the same faith that we find in Moses.

- [19 : 52] And the episode in particular that I'm thinking about, we can find in Exodus chapter 33 from verse 12. In Exodus 33 and from verse 12.

We'll just read these verses and what I'm suggesting is that what we have here is in many ways a parallel dialogue in some of its characteristics to the one that we have recorded for us in Judges.

We read there in verse 12 of Exodus 33, Moses said to the Lord, you have been telling me to lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, I know you by name and you have found favor with me.

If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people. The Lord replied, my presence will go with you and I will give you rest.

Now listen especially to what Moses says. Then Moses said to him, if your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?

- [20 : 59] What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? And the Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.

Then Moses said, now show me your glory. And the Lord said, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy in whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

In some ways they're very different occasions or episodes but at heart they're very similar. What Moses is saying to God is you're sending me but I won't go unless you go with me.

You're sending me to perform this great task but I can't do it alone. I need your presence with me. If your presence goes with me then I will go. And how does God respond?

God says, yes, I will go with you. You have asked for my presence to be with you. Well, you shall have my presence with you. And what I'm suggesting is that that is not so very different to what we have in Barak and in the words of Barak.

[22 : 06] Barak is not demanding the help of a woman or a man for that matter. In this case it happens to be a woman. But what Barak is demanding, what Barak is pleading for is the presence and help of God represented by a woman, by Deborah.

Remember that Deborah was both a prophetess and a leader. She represented both God's authority and God's will or direction. And Barak boldly and wisely demands both.

And I think for this he is to be commended. What Barak is saying is I can't do this alone. I need the presence of God with me and you represent God's presence. And so if you will not go with me then I will not go.

Now of course the problem with all of that which may may or may not seem credible is what follows in verse 9. Because what do we read in verse 9? Well how does Deborah respond to Barak's words?

Well we read that Deborah responds as follows. Very well Deborah said. I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this the honor will not be yours. For the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.

[23 : 16] Rather intriguingly. Not to Deborah as it happens but to another woman who we meet later in the account. The point is that that verse certainly suggests that Barak is being reprimanded.

It doesn't even suggest it. It declares it. That he is being reprimanded by Deborah. So how does that stand with what we have suggested lies behind Barak's words?

Well I think here it would be helpful to notice the footnote that we have for that verse at the bottom of the page in our Bible there. In the Bible that we're using the manner in which the words in Hebrew are translated are but because of the way you are going about this the honor will not be yours.

But notice the footnote there at the bottom of the page. The footnote says but on the expedition you are undertaking the honor will not be yours. What the translators have done in our version is to introduce a slant to the words.

Now translators often have to do that to make sense of the words that they're translating but on this occasion I think a more literal if perhaps more wooden translation is much more helpful.

[24 : 29] Really all Deborah is saying or certainly all that appears she is saying is making a statement of fact. She's saying this is what is going to happen. Notice how she agrees readily to go with Barak.

There's no argument there's no quibbling there's no reproof for him requesting. She agrees readily I will go and then she simply makes a statement of fact. In this undertaking you will not receive the glory another a woman will receive the glory and indeed in a measure that is precisely what happened.

What Deborah is doing is not reprimanding Barak but informing him. Barak knows he can do nothing in his own strength. His 10,000 men are no match for the 900 iron chariots of Sisera and all his many soldiers but if God represented by God's appointed prophetess and judge will accompany him then he will go.

What about you? Is your faith a faith that depends on and trusts in God? A faith that depends but then also a faith that obeys.

This is very important but we'll deal with it very fleetingly. In verse 6 and in verse B we have this command of God through Deborah to Barak go take your 10,000 men with you and lead the way to Mount Tabor.

[25 : 55] And then in verse 10 we pick up what flows from that and we read so Deborah went with Barak end of verse 9 to Kadesh where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali 10,000 men followed him and Deborah also went with him.

The command is clear lead the way with the men of your tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali and go and go to the encounter of the enemy.

And what is it that Barak does? Well he does precisely what he had been commanded to do. The command is clear and Barak obeys. Enough said. A faith devoid of obedience to God's commands is no faith at all.

So a faith that responds a faith that depends a faith that obeys but also a faith that triumphs or a faith that overcomes. The account of course relates how the enemy were overcome.

In verse 14 we read then Deborah said to Barak go this is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands has not the Lord gone on ahead of you? So Barak went down Mount Tabor followed by ten thousand men at Barak's advance the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword.

[27 : 16] Notice there the manner of this faithful overcoming that was secured by Barak. Words that we've already touched on with the children. At Barak's advance the Lord routed Sisera and in these few words you have this so important spiritual principle that applies for us today also.

At Barak's advance the Lord routed Sisera. The Lord did not require Barak's advance in order to rout Sisera. Far from it as we've already been thinking with the children the miraculous flooding of the valley the overflowing of the Kishon river.

This was God's work and it would have secured the victory without the need for Barak's involvement. But God chose that the victory would be secured in this way at Barak's advance the Lord routed Sisera.

And so it is today. We may lament that in our day the Sisera's of this world the enemies of God are not being defeated they're not being routed but perhaps we should ask if we are the ones failing to advance at Barak's advance the Lord routed Sisera.

A faith that triumphs but then finally a faith that celebrates and here really I'm thinking of the whole of chapter five that we've not read the song of Deborah. Again perhaps a little unfair that it is so entitled because the chapter begins on that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam.

[28 : 56] sang this a song. What is the song of Deborah and Barak? What does the song do? What does Barak do as he sings the song?

Well he celebrates the power and grace and enabling hand of God that granted deliverance to his people. A faith that fails to sing and celebrate God's grace and power is a very pitiful faith indeed.

What about you? What about us? Is your faith, is our faith a faith that celebrates and sings, that celebrates our God and sings his praises as we admire all that he has done and is doing for us?

The faith of Barak. Then finally and more briefly the one greater than Barak. Now those of you who have been around for the last few weeks will be aware, I hope, how I've repeatedly stressed that the judges or deliverers presented to us in the book of Judges serve to point us to Jesus, to the ultimate deliverer and perfect king.

This is really the key for us to fully understand the purpose of the book for us as God's people. And the judges point to Jesus in two complementary ways.

- [30 : 21] Their limitations point to the need for one not subject to such limitations, while their faith and their strengths point to the one perfectly characterized by such faith and strength.

In the case of Barak, he also points to Jesus in these two parallel ways, but in the charitable spirit that I am commending, let's focus on his faith and how Barak's faith dimly mirrors and so points to the faith of the one greater than Barak.

What did we say concerning Barak's faith? We said that it was a faith that responds to God's call, and what can we say of the ultimate deliverer, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?

What of Jesus? Well, was not his coming into our sin-sick world in faithful response to the call of his Father? Is his not a faith that responds to the Father's call?

We said of Barak that his faith was a faith that depends on and trusts in God, and to whom did Jesus always turn in faithful dependence as he answered the call laid upon him to come into this world as the Savior?

- [31 : 39] Barak's faith was a faith that obeys. What are we told of Jesus? He humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Barak was willing to die while Jesus handed himself over to death in our place to defeat God's enemies and to secure deliverance for his people.

Barak's faith was a faith that overcame, that triumphed. What can we say of Jesus and his saving work at Calvary? What does Paul say as he writes to the believers in Colossae?

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he, Jesus, made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. The victory of Jesus had all the appearances of abject defeat, so unlike the victory of Barak over Sisera.

But the victory of Jesus was, despite appearances to the contrary, the definitive victory over the enemies of God for the deliverance of God's people, you and me, a faith that triumphs.

- [32 : 52] Barak's faith was a faith that celebrates and sings. It's the faith of Jesus, a faith that celebrates and sings. What is brought to my own mind is the words that we read in the book of the prophet Zephaniah, chapter 3 and verse 17, where we have this beautiful picture painted for us of a day coming when not only will God's people sing in exultant praise, but a day when the Lord will sing with and over us.

The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing, a faith that celebrates and sings.

One greater than Barak. What are we to do? How are you to respond to this story, this true story, this incident so long ago in the history of Israel, of this man Barak called by God?

How must you respond? Well, in the first place, I would encourage you and urge you to be like Barak. Examine your own faith.

And examine whether it is like Barak, a faith that responds to God's call, a faith that depends on God, a faith that obeys God, a faith that triumphs, a faith that overcomes and celebrates and sings.

- [34 : 19] Be like Barak. That is a legitimate challenge to lay before you this morning. But what I would urge you much more urgently to do and much more critically is to believe believe and trust in the one greater than Barak.

Believe and trust in God's appointed Savior for sinners across time and across continents. The only and sufficient Savior of sinners, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Believe in Him. Put your trust in Him. That is the greatest call that is made to you through this account of Barak.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are the God of history, that you are the God who orders the circumstances not only of individuals but of nations and of peoples.

And we thank you that you order these things for the good of your own. We thank you that this is true as we read of the occasions described for us in ancient times, in the times of the judges.

[35 : 29] But we thank you that it is no less true today. The God to whom we approach, the God who is our God, the God that we pray to even now is the God who sits in throne governing the affairs of the nations.

We thank you that you govern those affairs with one principle, purpose in mind, the good and the deliverance of your own people. We pray that you would help us to be like Barak, help us to examine ourselves and the faith that we have, but help us above all to look to Jesus, to look to him as the one in whom we can put our trust, the one who is your great deliverer and the one who can be our deliverer and savior.

Help us to believe and trust in him. And we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.