



THE BOOK OF JUDGES

AMAZING GRACE

Leaders: choose some, but not all of the following questions. Email me with any questions. Jo.

Deborah and God's Amazing Grace: Judges 4 & 5

Deborah models what it means to stand firm in the truth of God's promise even when others in the culture are not. And while that's a big part of her story, these two chapters are about much more. It is important to understand the context, asking God through His Holy Spirit to teach us, and not impose on the passage what we might want to believe.

1. As you review the two chapters of Deborah's story, what stood out to you? Was there anything you found difficult to deal with or understand, or that inspired you in new ways?
2. Chapter 4 verse 1, says, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead." What was the evil they did? What were the consequences?

A Surprising Call

3. Who is Deborah and why is she unique?
4. What distinguishes Deborah from the other judges? What distinguishes her from the people of Israel?
5. Given the context of the time in which she lived, what is surprising about her calling as a judge? Because God selects her to be a judge, what might that reveal about His character?

A Tempting Fear

6. Who was Barak and what was his relationship to Deborah?
7. Re-read 4:6-14. Though God's commandment is clear, Barak hesitates to obey Him; in fact, he initially sets a condition to Deborah. What was it and how does Deborah respond to Barak? What implications might it have for us in encouraging others to obey God?
8. Read Hebrews 11: 32-34. What do these verses communicate about how God fulfills His promises to His people? What does it say about grace and second chances, specifically for Barak?

A Perfect Plan

9. Who is Jael and what is her relationship to Sisera and Barak? Why is Jael an unlikely opponent of Sisera?
10. After Sisera's death, God subdues the King of Jabin (see 4:23, 24), and frees the people of Israel. How do Deborah and Barak respond? What does that teach us about gratitude, corporate worship and the power of giving God glory for his delivering his people?
11. Rev. Tim Keller summed up the story (in his commentary, *Judges For You*) like this, "*This whole Judges cycle is framed around the actions of women: Deborah leads Israel under Sisera's oppression, seen most horribly in how he treats Israel's women; and Jael, another woman, is the means by which his reign of rape and terror is ended. After making the lives of many women hellish nightmares, it is two women who bring him down; there is a great irony that the man who used women as objects is killed by a womanly object.*" The legacy of such obedience was 40 years of peace (see 5:31). How does this reflect God's sovereignty, character and desire for his people to live holy obedient lives?
12. The story of Deborah reveals the extent to which God will go to rescue His people. But Jesus Christ fulfilled the Ultimate Rescue Plan by taking on the fears, imperfections and evil of all humanity on the cross, and conquering death when He rose from the grave three days later. If we have received such grace for our sins, what tangible ways can we extend grace to others? How can the love of Christ compel us and empower us to serve with integrity and faithfulness?

Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Pray that the community at Anglican Church of Noosa would daily consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that we do not grow weary or lose heart as we serve and love Noosa!

Deborah and God's Amazing Grace—by Jo Kadlecek

If you've seen an adventure movie or read a thriller novel lately, you could wonder if this story of Deborah—like all of Judges—first inspired it. You know the kind: full of unlikely heroes, terrifying enemies, fearful bystanders, and lots of violence, until finally the good guys—or girls—win. At least until the sequel comes out.

But given the news in our daily headlines, I'm struck not so much by its Hollywood appeal but by how relevant and hopeful Deborah's story is for us some 3,000 years after it even happened. She models what it means to stand firm in the Truth of God's Promise, even when everyone in the culture is doing otherwise. And while that's a big part of her story, these two chapters are about much more. Sure, there might be things here we want to fit our own agendas. But we need to understand the context, allowing God to teach us. It's important we don't impose on it what we want to believe.

When I started preparing for this sermon, I was curious what I'd find if I Googled sermons on Deborah. There were a few good resources, but mostly I came across titles like: "A Do-Right Woman", "She-roses of God", "Deborah, The Encourager of Biblical Manhood" and my personal favorite: "Dancing with Deborah: An Exodus from Patriarchy to the Liberation of Women".

People can have strong opinions about Deborah's story and the issues it raises. Does it support the view that women can lead? Does it reveal the consequences of fearful men? Maybe, but let's be clear: this is not so much a gender discussion as it is another story about how our Heavenly Father will do whatever it takes to win back his children who have once again looked to other 'gods' to fulfill them. And as God's heart breaks for his people, we see three themes here we also see throughout Judges—and across Scripture: 1. A Surprising Call, 2. A Tempting Fear; and 3. A Perfect Plan.

First, let's look at this surprising call. The first verses of chapter 4 tell us how the Israelites have again done what is evil in God's sight. They thought other idols were somehow better than the God of Israel. And the consequences of their wishy-washiness was cruel oppression for 20 years under King Jabin and his general Sisera. The oppression is worse than other times under other leaders; it is "cruel." And the end of chapter 5 tells us just how bad things got. The people were terrified and terrorized. So Israel—again—"cried to the Lord for help."

Enter Deborah, the fourth Judge, a prophet, a wife, a Mother of Israel, and the most godly of all the judges. In fact, her integrity and wisdom set her apart from all the other judges, who sadly, let ego and power distract them from their appointed roles. So when it comes to leadership traits, Deborah is unmatched among the judges—her priorities are right. She trusts the God of Israel, and inspires trust in her people. She doesn't lead by force, but instead listens daily to their cries and concerns as she sits under the Palm of Deborah holding Court. And as she does, her heart breaks over their oppression.

What, then, is surprising about her call to be a judge? Is it that she actually acts with integrity and serves her people with godly counsel while none of the other judges do? Is it that she's the only woman in the long line of judges? Or is it that she hears from God at all, as a woman in the midst of this male dominated culture and religion? Given the context of that time period, it's a bit of each; some would even say because she's a woman she's an unlikely candidate for leading God's people. So how did she get into the job? Had the men of Israel failed in their leadership abilities? Were they too afraid of Jabin or Sisera to do anything and so God had no choice but to select a woman? He can use anyone after all, right? Well. I'm pretty sure the Creator of the Universe, the God of the Bible, did not run out of options, saying, "Hmm. Looks like she's as good as we've got. Might as well go with her."

The text does not say anywhere why she was appointed: only that she was the one, "judging Israel at that time." Which is a great reminder to us that God is God and He's never let cultural norms or earthly opinions stop him before. He calls Deborah to be a judge, speaks to her, and places her in this position of amazing authority where all the people submit to her. And her uncompromising confidence in God paints a stark contrast to the people who "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" and who suffered for it.

So we have this "surprising" call in Deborah, the godly female Judge, who burns with indignation at how her people are being treated. God moves her to action, as he does with his servants, and she summons the warrior known as

Barak. It's Barak's presence that reveals a tempting fear, our second point. Deborah is angry that God's children are trapped in bondage, and certain that God wants to free them from Sisera's war machine. So she tells Barak, in v. 6: "Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you? 'Go, gather your men at Mt Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And 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?'"

It's a direct order. From God Almighty. Through a flawed but faithful Judge who happens to be a woman. And Barak's response is tricky. Notice he doesn't jump to and say, "Yes, Lord! Here am I!" No, fear tempts him. He hesitates. Look at v. 8: "Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go. If you do not I will not.'" He was a skilled warrior and he knew it looked grim. Sisera's army was huge, his was not. Sisera had 900 chariots of iron that were light years ahead of Israel's, and Barak literally had to rally the troops from six different tribes stretched across the land. Maybe his "I'll go if you go" response meant that he thought there was no way she'd say yes, so he'd be off the hook and wouldn't have to fight at all. Or maybe he saw Deborah as a lucky charm and if he did have to go to battle he wanted all the help he could get. Or maybe he recognized her prophetic confidence and simply wanted her support.

We don't know. The text doesn't tell us his motives, and we can't speculate. We can only see that he hesitated to obey. He was a military man, after all, and the odds were stacked against them. Deborah's response in v. 9 picks up on that fear and doubt: "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." The ultimate disgrace for a military officer or warrior would have been to be conquered by the lowest, least skilled opponent: a woman. Women did not fight. Even Deborah was not a warrior. And so Barak, because he initially gave in to fear, would compromise his reputation as a commander. Deborah even nudged him again in verse 14: "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?!" Barak's forces might have been no match for Sisera's but Sisera's were no match for God!

So Barak finally does go. He obeys and with enough faith in God's command that he would later be listed in Hebrews chapter 11, the Hall of Faith, for helping to conquer the Canaanites. So even his fear, like Deborah's faith, were part of God's Perfect Plan, our third point. And both set the stage for us now as we slow down to look at what happens next. The pacing is not accidental—if this were a movie we'd break from the grand battlefield shots, the pouring rain and floods that sweep away Sisera's army, and zoom in on Sisera's dirty wet face. He's knocked off his horse, and fleeing frantically on foot. Cut to a tent and the face of another woman, Jael, who is suddenly shown an opportunity. When he sees her, Sisera is relieved because he thinks she is offering him refuge; their kingdoms, after all, were at peace. Besides, he's exhausted from combat. So Jael gives him milk to drink, and he falls fast asleep. She stares at him for a second, then grabs a peg and a hammer, which were considered common household appliances because raising and taking down tents were women's work. Jael then fulfills God's prophecy through Deborah: she drives the peg through Sisera's temple. And just to be sure we get it, the writer tells us in v. 21: "So he died." What a humiliating death for a general—at the hand of a woman.

Focus back on Barak, who is still pursuing Sisera, when Jael suddenly greets him. As she invites Barak into her tent, he draws his sword thinking he's about to slay Sisera, when instead he finds a dead general, blood gushing from his head. Cut to Jabin the King of Canaan whom God is subduing v. 23 and the people of Israel are freed! Rescued. Through a godly Judge, a hesitant warrior and an unlikely opponent who didn't even use a sword! No wonder Deborah and Barak lead the people next in song! Though we didn't read the entire chapter, it's easy to see why Deborah invites the people to praise and worship the God of victory, giving him alone the credit. As she does, she recalls the specific details of God's strategy, names, places, events, so they'll see how personal and involved He is. She wants them to remember how his hand guided them, even Jael's deed, calling her most blessed of women. As Deborah pictures Sisera's mother looking for his victorious return in the final verses of chapter 5, we learn just how awful Sisera really was. Rev. Tim Keller summed it up like this, "This whole Judges cycle is framed around the actions of women: Deborah leads Israel under Sisera's oppression, seen most horribly in how he treats Israel's women; and Jael, another woman, is the means by which his reign of rape and terror is ended. After making the lives of many women hellish nightmares, it is two women who bring him down; there is a great irony that the man who used women as objects is killed by a womanly object."

And so the legacy of such obedience was forty more years of peace in the land! Oh, God is full of surprises, and so faithful in fulfilling his promises to and for us. Of course, his ways are not our ways. As a Father cares for his children, He is both able and willing to do far more than all we ask or imagine. Why, then, are we afraid to follow him? Why do we too often hesitate to speak up for others who are oppressed, or to obey his command to enter the difficult battles around us? Why do we look so easily to the idols of our age, the things we think will give us meaning and purpose, when the God of the Bible has proved time and again that he is far greater than our fears and so much lovelier than anything we think we want? Why especially, when we humans have been so good at doing “evil in the sight of the Lord” and at breaking his heart, does he keep pursuing us?

Because we—you and me—are his . . . children. Because He is our Creator. He formed us in his image, to be his family, to enjoy him forever. And just to make sure we would always know his Persistent Love, we saw the extent to which God would go to win us back. We watched in horror as Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, the One no one expected to be the Messiah, wrestle with his own fears in the Garden. Could he endure the burden of all our evil? Would he fulfill God’s perfect plan to take on the imperfections of all humans? Could he experience the violence that was about to fall on him, the physical pain and the utter alienation from God His Father without faltering? Yes. He did. On the Cross Jesus entered the most evil battlefield we could never imagine, to bring us back to His Father, to give us a new life of wisdom and courage, forgiveness and worship, a life far greater than any lifestyle our world offers. Even such an excruciating death could not keep him from fulfilling God’s promise that He would always be with us, that he would go before us as he did for Deborah and Barak. But how? When the hammer drove the nails into his wrists on the cross, and the darkness killed any sense of hope, how could this unlikely Savior, now dead, set us free?

Surprise! The Grave three days later was empty, and the Ultimate Rescue Plan was Perfected at last. The Faithfulness of God exploded into Resurrected Life. For you. For me. For all of us. Forever. And the Risen Jesus still invites us into his presence everyday, to acknowledge our fears and to admit we too often seek after other gods. And when we do, he does not hesitate to give us a grace so amazing everything changes.

But here’s the thing about grace: It’s always unexpected. It means we get what we don’t deserve. Instead of judgment, we receive kindness and forgiveness. Instead of death, we receive hope and eternal life. So what if, having received such grace from the Lord, we surprised Noosa, and the region and wherever we went, with a love and integrity so unexpected that people asked us why? Why do you care for me? Why do you do the right thing? Why are you so different??

Because the love of Christ compels us, we say. Because we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, what if we threw off everything that hindered and the sin that so easily entangles? Instead of giving into the fear and violence of our world, we model an assurance and hospitality so attractive that people want to know our secret! They see in us a perseverance of character, not hesitating to trust God, but fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Together, as a community, let’s daily consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men and so we do not grow weary or lose heart. Let’s serve with integrity. Let’s love faithfully. Let’s extend grace because we have received it.

So much so that when our neighbors & colleagues or families see our lives together, they see a Hope and a Strength more real and relevant than any headline or movie or any other thing in all the earth. And so they’ll ask, what is it?! And we say, God Almighty has freed us and He is with us.