

Logan Smith
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Judges 4:1 - 5:31

A Story and a Song: God's Glory in Salvation and Judgment

I'm a terrible singer; nevertheless, I love to sing. In particular, I love to sing Christian songs and hymns, especially at church, with you guys. I like different styles of worship music, I like both old and new - but what makes a worship song good is not the style of music, but the *words*. And when you look at the words of older hymns and compare them with contemporary praise music, you see quite a bit of difference. No, I'm not talking about how language has changed, or how the style of music is different. I'm talking about how *the things that we sing about and praise God for* are very different in most contemporary worship songs than in older hymns. I was reading an article recently that was noting this difference; it was written by a professor of worship music at a seminary, and he documented, from extensive research, how the songs and hymns of past generations of Christians almost always included lines about *heaven* and the hope we have in death because of the gospel, while heaven is absent from most contemporary worship music today.¹ Many contemporary songs no longer sing about uncomfortable topics, like death and heaven, suffering and trials in the Christian life, spiritual warfare and the reality of Satan, or perhaps most of all, the topic of GOD's judgment and wrath. And yet, if we look at most of the hymns sung by centuries of generations of Christians and churches, they sung about just those very things, all the time!

So why was there such a big shift? There are no doubt many reasons why, but I think one reason is because, in our modern day and age, we don't like to talk about or sing about things that make us uncomfortable. We like to sing songs that make us feel good and focus on happy topics. We don't like to think about uncomfortable topics - like the topics of death, suffering and sorrow, sin and temptation, Satan, even God's wrath and judgment. And yet, when we sing the hymns of old, they remind us that it is precisely in these uncomfortable places that we find the glory and grace of God in incredible, profound ways. It's in the uncomfortable places that GOD's glory shines all the more brightly, and where we are invited to come and encounter God. But when we encounter God in these places, He's often not what we expect. He works in ways that are very different from our ways - strange ways, surprising ways. And yet when we do, we

¹ Matthew Westerholm, "The Church Should Sing for Heaven's Sake: When and Why We Stopped Singing About Heaven and Why We Should Start Again."

realize that God is far greater, far more gracious, far more *glorious*, than we thought before. That God is working out all things for our good even in - *especially in* - the unlikely, uncomfortable places, the difficult and daunting circumstances of our lives. It's precisely there, in those moments that we feel the weakest and most helpless where we encounter God's glorious strength and the power of the gospel of Christ Jesus.

And that's exactly what I think we see in our text this morning, Judges chapters 4 and 5. What we see in these two chapters is a picture of God's glorious work of salvation for His people through unlikely and surprising means, when the circumstances seem hopeless, even using the weak things of this world to do so - and it all results in His glory. It shows us this with a story (in chapter 4) and a song (in chapter 5). The story shows us how God delivers His sinful people Israel, once again, from their enemies; and yet He uses very unlikely means and people to accomplish his task, ending with deception, treachery, and a gruesome killing. But then, in chapter 5, we're given a song that praises God for His deliverance, making it clear that the events of this story are indeed used by God to bring about salvation for His people, precisely through the judgment and destruction of their enemies. It's a story that takes us to the uncomfortable places, reminding us of our sin, weaknesses, and neediness. But it also reminds us that God can use us and can work in our circumstances no matter how messy they look, no matter how weak or unlikely we may be. And as He does so, He displays His glory, leading us to worship and praise Him for His works of our salvation in our lives today, just like we see in the days of old.

So the first thing we see in our text is:

I. Barak Doubts: We Must Rely on God, Not Ourselves or Anything Else (4:1-10)

Our story begins where we left off last week, where we saw two stories that had the same pattern: Israel sinned, God brought judgment through their enemies, Israel cried out to God, and God saved them. But sadly, what we see here is, the pattern repeats itself for a third time. After Ehud, the judge, died, "the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (4:1). And so, God punished Israel again, allowing their enemies, the Canaanites, to oppress them as a sign of God's judgment. They are in need of being saved once more.

And so, the pattern continues, as they cry out to the Lord for help. But right where we expect to see God raising up the next deliverer to come and defeat Israel's enemies, instead we see, not a warrior, but a woman: Deborah, the prophetess. We're told that she was "judging" Israel at that time, that she would sit under a tree and the people of Israel "came up to her for

judgment,” to settle disputes and give guidance. And yet, we’re not told that God raised her up as a deliverer. In fact, we see that *someone else* is actually supposed to be the deliverer: a man named Barak, a military leader. Only there’s just one problem: Barak doubts God and hesitates.

We see this in v.6. Deborah summons Barak and says, “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. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and troops, and I will give him into your hand’?” We should read this as a rebuke; she’s asking Barak, “Didn’t God command you to gather your troops and go to war to save Israel? Well, then, why haven’t you done it? What are you waiting for?” But Barak, this military leader who’s been called up to be the deliverer, doesn’t give the brave, honorable response we expect him to give. “Barak said to her,” in verse 8, “‘If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.’” Barak hesitates. He says he will not obey God on the Lord’s terms, but will only obey God on *his own terms* - if Deborah comes with him. Now why does he respond this way? What’s going on? What’s going on is that Barak is scared to obey because he doubts that God will deliver on his promises. Barak knows that the Canaanite army is a far superior military force, and that the Israelite army isn’t strong enough to beat them. Look back at v.3 for a second: we’re told that Sisera, this commander who oppressed Israel, has “900 chariots of iron.” Now, we might think, at first, that this means Barak’s army of 10,000 will easily have them outnumbered! But that’s not the case at all. As I noted a few weeks ago, the Canaanites had iron weapons and chariots, but Israel didn’t, meaning the Canaanites were more technologically advanced, they had a far superior military. When we read “chariots of iron,” that would be the equivalent of tanks for us in modern day warfare. Only, Israel didn’t have tanks! Ten thousand infantry men going up against 900 tanks don’t stand a chance. Furthermore, we’re told later that Sisera has a whole army of men *in addition to* these chariots as well. Clearly, Israel is outnumbered, Sisera’s army is far superior, and Barak knows it. And it wasn’t just Barak who doubted God and hesitated to obey out of fear and a lack of faith. In 5:15-18, Deborah mentions that there were many tribes of Israel who *didn’t* go to war to fight off their enemies, but instead stayed home. We read in 5:23, “Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD, curse its inhabitants thoroughly, because they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the might.” Barak looks at his odds, and he thinks, “There’s no way we can win this battle!” But that’s because he’s only looking at it from a *human perspective*;

but he should instead be looking at it from a perspective of faith; after all, God already told him that He would deliver Sisera's army into Barak's hand! But instead of trusting God, he puts his confidence in worldly things, even wanting Deborah to come along like some kind of good luck charm. Barak is trusting in the human perspective rather than God. Barak hesitates, fears, and disobeys because He *doesn't trust God*.

Have you ever found yourself in Barak's shoes before? Have you ever known what the right thing to do was, known what God was commanding you to do, but then made excuses for why you couldn't obey? Maybe you thought, "I can't do that! I can't obey the Lord in this way! It's too costly! It's too dangerous! I'm too weak! I'm not strong enough! I'm not smart, or gifted, or competent enough! I'm not good or godly enough to do what the Bible says I should do." When we start to think that way, to say that we're just too weak or just not good enough to obey God, we might think we're being humble - but in actuality, we're just making excuses, trying to justify our disobedience. What it really reveals is that we are *putting our confidence in ourselves rather than God*. When we learn from the Bible that God commands us to do something - whether we learn that something we're doing is a sin and we need to repent from it, or that we're expected to love others sacrificially, or forgive our enemies, or share the gospel with others, or be part of a church, or even just to trust God in seasons of sorrowing and sorrow - when we know what tells us to do, but then just make excuses for why we just can't obey and trust God yet, what it reveals is a *lack of faith in our hearts*; it shows that we are looking to our *own strength* rather than the strength of the Lord. God calls us to *rely on Him*, to obey in His strength, not ours. The answer isn't, "Believe in yourself more! Just have more self-confidence!" No, that just leads us to more failure and fear, because we will inevitably reach the point where we just can't do it on our own. No, the answer is: *stop believing in yourself, and start believing in God*.

And that's exactly what the rest of the story shows us. Which leads us to the next part of the story:

II. God Delivers: God Works Through Unlikely Means (4:11-24)

Despite Barak's lack of faith and hesitation to obey, God graciously uses him anyways. As the story continues, we see that God can indeed deliver His people, even when outnumbered, even using a man who's scared and weak, and even using the weak and unlikely things of this world. - and He does it not only as an act of grace to His people, but to bring glory to His name. We get a taste of this in Deborah's response, in v.9: "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.” Now, we might expect at first for the “woman” here to be Deborah; but God has something even more unlikely in store.

Finally, though reluctantly, Barak agrees to go up to battle, with Deborah going with him, and he gathers his army. But then, in v.11, the scene cuts abruptly away, to tell us about the family of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Moses’s father-in-law, a non-Jew, who separated from his kinsman and moved his family up north, close to where King Jabin and the Canaanites live. Now, at first, we may think, “What has this got to do with anything?” But it’s actually a very clever bit of foreshadowing. If this were a movie we were watching, it would go like this: we see the main characters, Barak and Deborah, having this tense, dramatic moment, and then finally, they make a decision, they start amassing their troops for battle, but then scene suddenly shifts away from the troops to the quiet countryside, where we’re introduced to another set of characters - a small family - that seems to be having their own, inconsequential plot going on, but because we know how stories and movies work, it’s clear that this is a bit of foreshadowing, that somehow, the story of this small family is going to intersect with the story of Barak and Deborah. And in our movie, just before the camera pans away, perhaps we see the silhouette of Heber’s wife, Jael - but then, the scene changes again, leaving us in suspense.

And now the story picks up speed. In verses 12-16, the armies clash and go to war. And miraculously, Israel, though outnumbered and outmatched, wins! But it’s clear that this is the *Lord’s victory*. As v.15 says, “And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword.” Deborah’s song in chapter 5 makes this point even more explicit: this victory is from the Lord. The song reflects on the story, but makes sure that we see the point: that this is a story of *God’s glorious salvation*. The song begins in 5:2-5, praising the Lord for marching out and giving Israel this victory, but it does so by recognizing that the Lord did so through using *means*. The rest of the song recognizes all of the different means God used to bring about the victory, using Deborah, Barak, and the army of Israel. And then, we get a few more details about how God does this from the song in chapter 5:20-21: “From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might!” With poetic language, this tells us that God, in the heavens where the stars are, fought against Sisera, sending a sudden rainstorm to flood the Kishon river and “swept them away.” Remember that

Sisera's mighty military depended on these hundreds of iron chariots? Well chariot wheels don't do well in the mud or in the flood! God miraculously delivers the enemy army into Barak's hand, overflowing the river and upending the enemy chariots. God fights for His people, just as he promised!

But the story doesn't end there. In v.17-21, Sisera escapes on foot, with Barak chasing after him. And Sisera comes to that little cluster of tents we saw out in the countryside earlier - he comes to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who has a peace treaty with Sisera. S Jael invites him into her tent, agrees to help him, even gives him milk when he asks for water, and covers him with a rug. But then, when he falls asleep, she grabs a mallet and a tent peg, and literally nails him into the ground, killing him. And the story ends, in verses 22-24, with Barak finishing the job, defeating King Jabin and destroying their enemies, until the Lord gives them peace. The Lord delivered Israel from their enemies, and delivered Sisera into the hands of a woman, Jael, just like He promised.

And this picture of God's deliverance has a very encouraging application for us today: it shows us that *God can use us as instruments in His hand, no matter how messy, broken, weak, or unlikely we may be*. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 1, God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to shame the strong. Just like God used fearful Barak, and just like He used the surprising circumstances of Jael, God can use us. It's not about how strong or competent or powerful or gifted or godly or faithful we may or may not be; it's all about the Lord using us in a way that reveals not our glory, but *God's glory!* God loves to use the weak and foolish things of this world to shame the strong and the wise. God loves to use weak and broken vessels - like you and me! - to show His glory. And that should encourage us! When we are weak, then we are strong; when we are aware that we can't save ourselves, but trust that *God can* - that is where strength comes from! Our strength doesn't come from ourselves - it comes from God, because it's the *strength of the Lord* that we need! God isn't going to abandon us in our moments of weakness and failure - in fact, He brings us into tough moments precisely so that *God will get the glory*, not us! So that means the only thing required of us is to acknowledge our weakness, our brokenness, and to have *faith* in the Lord - and then let Him work in and through us. No matter how weak and frail you may be, no matter how broken or messy you may think you are, no matter how impossible your circumstances may seem, if you're a Christian, then God is using all of these things, every detail of your life and circumstances, even the unlikely details that seem insignificant and weak,

to work out His great plan of redemption and salvation in your life. God promises, in Rom. 8:28, that He will work together all things for our *good*; this doesn't mean what *we think* is good, but what is *truly good and best for His people*. If you're a Christian, God promises to work in all of our circumstances to bring about our *spiritual good and salvation*. So lift your eyes to the Lord, draw near to Him in those uncomfortable moments. The Lord will be with you - *especially* in your moments of weakness. God loves to do this for us. And as He does so, it results in His *glory*. Which brings us to our final point:

III. Deborah's Song: Praise the Lord for Bringing Salvation through Judgment (5:1-31)

After the battle, Deborah and Barak break out into song, in chapter 5. As we've already seen, this song unabashedly attributes this victory to the Lord, praising His glory for saving and delivering His people, Israel, from their enemies. This song is a praise song, a song of worship! And yet, the way they praise God here takes us by surprise; it's not exactly a "feel-good" worship song; it praises God saving His people *through the judgment and destruction of their enemies*. Listen to vv.24-27: "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked for water and she gave him milk; she brought him curds in a noble's bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell - dead." As we hear this song of praise, my guess is that none of us think, "Man, I wish we could sing that on Sunday mornings at church!" I mean, the way the story ended, we have to admit, is a bit uncomfortable, isn't it? It ends with Jael deceiving Sisera and driving a nail through his head! So the story's ending is already a bit uncomfortable enough; but now are they really *praising God for it*? Sure enough, that's exactly what they do. The song continues, in vv.28-30, in a way that is probably even more uncomfortable for us: "Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice: 'Why is the chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?'" In other words, we see a picture of the mother of Sisera, the man that Jael killed, worrying about her son's safety, worried that he hasn't come home yet. Now, at first, we might find this jarring, even alarming that this praise song to God is gloating about the sorrow of this woman. But as it continues, we see clearly that we should not feel any sorrow on their behalf. VV.29-30 say, "Her wisest princesses answer, indeed, she answers herself, 'Have they not found and divided the spoil? - A womb or two for every man; spoil of dyed materials for Sisera, spoil of dyed material

embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?” Sisera’s mother is worried about her son’s safety, but then comforts herself saying, “Oh, I’m sure he’s fine; he’s probably just out raping women and pillaging the countryside, bringing home nice nice things for us that he’s stolen from those he’s killed.” What we’re supposed to see here is that Sisera, and his mother, and all these Canaanite enemies, are *wicked, evil people*. We’re not supposed to feel sorry for them; we’re supposed to see that they received judgment from God! And Deborah rejoices in their downfall because she recognizes that as God judges and destroys these enemies, He is delivering and saving His people, Israel, from their oppression.

We see this clearly in the last verse of the passage: ““So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.’ And the land had rest for forty years” (v.31). This conclusion makes clear that this song is praising God for delivering His people from the wickedness, injustice, and oppression of their enemies. It’s praising God for bringing salvation to His people through the judgment and destruction of His enemies. The Bible makes clear over and over again that there is no true salvation without judgment. There is no true peace while the enemies continue to oppress. And this is just as true for us today. But here’s the key thing for us to recognize: as Paul says, in Eph. 6:12, our battle is not again “flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Our greatest enemies that we need to be delivered from are sin, Satan, and death. Ever since Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin against God, the world has broken, all humanity enslaved to sin, our world filled with evil, sorrow, pain, injustice, and lies. Satan reigns in the world, sin reigns in humanity, and death comes to us all. And yet, even at the beginning, God promised, in Gen. 3:15, that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, defeating our ancient foe - just like Jael here crushes the head of Sisera! And all of this points forward to when Jesus Christ, the promised savior, came - and on the cross, he crushed the head of the serpent! IN His death, Christ conquered over Satan! Christ conquered our enemies! In fact, Christ conquered our *greatest enemy* - ourselves, our own sin, our own guilt and shame. You see, the amazing thing is, when Christ went to the cross to conquer over His enemies, that list *included us!* And yet he died for us, even while we were His enemies, shedding His blood in our place to deliver us from our sin and the wrath of God we deserve; to deliver us from the tyranny of Satan; even to deliver us from all the consequences of sin in this broken world, even death! Yes, sin, Satan, and death still

ravage our broken world; yet the good news of the gospel is that Christ has dealt the mortal blow, and that one day, when He returns, He will put all of His enemies under His feet - even death! Satan will no longer lie, deceive, attack, tempt, or accuse us. Sin will be no more. Even *sinners* will be no more - all evildoers will be dealt with, once and for all: we will either be cast into Hell; or, if we repent and trust in Christ alone, we will be forgiven and raised to live sinless lives in paradise with God forever! We will be delivered from sin and all its consequences! We will no longer be plagued by suffering, sorrow, injustice, or the evil actions of other people. We will have genuine salvation when - and only when - all of our enemies will be crushed under the feet of King Jesus. And that is surely coming, because Christ has already won the victory!

Therefore, we have every reason to *rejoice and praise the glory of our great God for accomplishing such a great salvation*. As we rightly recognize just how great the judgment of God is, and just how wonderful a salvation He has wrought for us, it moves us *worship and glorify God*. This is why we sing worship songs that don't just make us feel good, but remind us of how God's goodness and glory is revealed even in the uncomfortable truths of scripture, even in the uncomfortable places of life, like suffering, the reality of our sin, spiritual battle with the devil, the judgment we all deserve, and even in the face of death. For example, "It is Well with My Soul" teaches us to praise God in life no matter our circumstances, even in sorrow in suffering, even when Satan opposes and accuses us, even when facing the reality of our own sin and the coming Judgment against it, by remembering the glorious hope of the gospel, which leads us to worship and praise Christ our Lord! Or Amazing Grace, which ends by looking to our inevitable death, but reminding us that, because of the incredible grace of the gospel, death is not the end, but we will be raised to live with the Lord in Heaven forever! Or, as we just sung earlier, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," deals with the uncomfortable realities that the Christian life is full of opposition and spiritual enemies; it reminds us that "this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us;" if even calls us to "let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also," to be willing to give up the good things of this life, even life itself. These are uncomfortable topics, aren't they? So why do we sing about them? Because it reminds us that *Christ* has conquered victoriously over our enemies, that He is our mighty fortress, precisely because He has crushed the power of sin, Satan, and death, so that if we're trusting in Christ, our enemies will not undo us, that death will not have the final word, but that Christ has defeated our enemies on the Cross in order to bring about a glorious salvation!

Brothers and sisters, no matter how impossible or daunting your circumstances may seem this morning, let us trust that God is at work and will surely use them to bring about our salvation: our true salvation, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Yes, it may seem unlikely when the wicked prosper, when evil seems to prevail, when Satan and Sin and Death rage on around us. But don't give up hope; don't give in to fear and doubt; lift your eyes to Christ and trust in His strength, not our own. Yes, we are weak; but He is strong, and He loves to use the weak things of this world, even you and me, to accomplish His purposes! So no matter how unlikely it may seem from your perspective, don't put your confidence in yourself or worldly things - put your confidence in the Lord, and trust that He will deliver, that He *will* be glorified! So let us trust the Lord and praise His glory - not just in our songs, not just on Sunday Morning, but in all that we do, everyday of the week. Praise the Lord, for Christ has conquered our greatest enemies: Sin, Satan, and Death!

But this salvation is only for you *if we repent from our sin as God's enemies and put our faith in Jesus Christ alone*. If you're not a Christian this morning, then God's judgment of His enemies isn't good news for you - it's bad news; because of your sin, you are God's enemy, just like all of us are apart from Christ, and you face judgment. But the good news is: you don't have to be God's enemy! You can be saved! Simply repent and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, that though you deserve judgment, Christ died in your place and was raised again, crushing your sin and guilt, Satan, and even the death you deserve, so that you can be forgiven and raised to eternal life. Don't trust in yourself, trust in Christ. If you have any questions about that, I'd love to speak with you. Let us pray.