

**DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 4: "A STORY OF IRONY"**  
**JUDGES 4:1-24**

**Personal Introduction**

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

**Sermon Series Introduction**

We're currently in Part 4 of our sermon series called "Downward Spiral," where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: "A Story of Irony."

So let's get right into it.

**Sermon Introduction**

We all want to know things. We want to be certain of things.

But why is that?

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa gives a compelling explanation. He says that the central drive of our modern age is "to make the world engineerable, predictable, available, accessible, disposable ... in all its aspects." In other words, we want to make the world more controllable.

And so, science and technology are booming industries of knowledge and research to know more, so that we can control more.

But this is not just the tendency of modernity; this is the tendency of every fallen human heart.

We want to know so that we can control.

But Rosa makes another observation to show us the paradox of all this; he says, "it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive. A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world."

Just think about your most meaningful and satisfying experiences. They probably were not planned but unexpected.

You receive back an exam that you thought you did horribly on, only to find out that you were one of the top-scorers.

Your team was winning the championship game, but then they lost their lead, but in the last moments, someone on your team make a game-winning shot. And you're just flooded with joy as you jump up and down and shout with all your teammates.

You went into college thinking you were going to study one thing, but you came out with a degree for something completely different, and what you're doing now for work is again completely different than what you studied—but you couldn't imagine yourself doing anything else but what you're doing now.

We didn't know that any of these moments would happen; none of them were expected. And yet, that's part of what made them so meaningful and satisfying for us.

Again, Rosa observes that when we try to know and control and master everything, it doesn't lead to a more fulfilling life but a more frustrating one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020), quoted in Bobby Jamieson, *Everything is Never Enough* (New York: Waterbrook, 2025), 8-10. He writes that our driving urge is to try to make the

When was the last time you felt frustrated when something in your life was not going according to your expectations?

For many of us, it probably wasn't too long ago—maybe even earlier today.

But when we're able to accept that we *can't* know and control everything, then we can begin to see all the *unexpected* moments of life *not* as frustrating roadblocks to our own expectations but as part of what makes life most meaningful and as opportunities to bring glory to the only sovereign Lord who *does* know and who *is* in control of all things.

<pause>

So as we turn to the book of Judges today, we'll see a story of *irony*, where what you *expect* to happen *doesn't* happen and what you *don't* expect to happen *happens*.

It's a story of unexpected twists and turns. It's a story that leads you to anticipate one thing, and then surprise, another thing happens instead.

But in the end, it's a story of true life, one that is most meaningful and satisfying as it points us back to the Lord who leads and delivers his people through it all.

### Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 4:1-24.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon.

If you need access to a Bible, just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

Remember, "judges" here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were not kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

We're in the main body of the book, which tells the narratives of 12 judges (6 major judges and 6 minor judges).

- Major judges have longer narratives and start with the statement "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" or "And the people of Israel **again** did what was evil in the sight of the LORD."
- Minor judges are much shorter—just a few sentences—and they don't start with that statement.

Last time we were in Judges, we looked at the first two major judges (Othniel and Ehud) and the first minor judge (Shamgar), and today we'll look at *another* major judge.

The account of this judge covers *two* chapters—chapter 4 is the story and chapter 5 is the song. But we'll only look at the story today, and then we'll cover the song next week.

So that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

### Scripture Reading

Let's read Judges 4:1-24.

<sup>1</sup> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. <sup>2</sup> And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The

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world "a series of objects that we have to know, attain, conquer, master, or exploit. And precisely because of this, 'life' ... always seems to elude us. This in turn leads to anxiety, frustration, anger, and even despair."

commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. <sup>3</sup> Then 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.

<sup>4</sup> Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. <sup>5</sup> She 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. <sup>6</sup> She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-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.’ <sup>7</sup> 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?” <sup>8</sup> Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” <sup>9</sup> And she said, “I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. <sup>10</sup> And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.

<sup>11</sup> Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.

<sup>12</sup> When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, <sup>13</sup> Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. <sup>14</sup> And 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. <sup>15</sup> And 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. <sup>16</sup> And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

<sup>17</sup> But 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. <sup>18</sup> And 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. <sup>19</sup> And 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. <sup>20</sup> And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” <sup>21</sup> But 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. <sup>22</sup> And 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.

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

This is God’s Word.

### Overview

We’ll look at this passage in three parts.

- I. A story of irony
- II. A distinction portrayed
- III. A point emphasized

We’ll first walk through the entire story, pointing out some of the irony—or some of the unexpected twists and turns—and then, in our final two points, we’ll circle back and look at the story again to see what we can learn from it.

## I. A story of irony

Look at verses 1-3.

[<sup>1</sup> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. <sup>2</sup> And 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-hagoyim. <sup>3</sup> Then 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.]

Right away, we realize that we're at the start of *another* downward spiral that we've come to expect in this book.

By way of reminder, the general pattern of the downward spiral all throughout the book is that...

- Israel rebels against the Lord by turning to idolatry,
- the Lord hands them over to their enemies as an act of discipline,
- the people cry out to God for mercy,
- the Lord responds by raising up a judge (or a military leader) to deliver his people from their enemies and give them rest,
- the judge eventually dies,
- the people return to their wickedness, but it's even worse than before,
- and then repeat, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the pagan Canaanites than the people of God.

So here, in the first three verses, it's exactly as we'd expect.

- In verse 1, "the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD."
- In verse 2, "the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan."
- In verse 3, "the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help."

And the very next thing we're expecting is that the Lord will raise up a judge to deliver his people.

So as the reader, the natural next question is: Who is the next judge?

Look at verses 4-5.

[<sup>4</sup> Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. <sup>5</sup> She 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.]

And here's the first twist. When we're expecting to be introduced to the next judge—the next military leader to deliver God's people from their oppressor—we're introduced to Deborah the prophetess.

There were no women mentioned in the previous accounts of Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar, so it's a bit surprising to now be introduced to Deborah the prophetess who was "*judging* Israel at that time" and whom the people of Israel came to see "for *judgment*."

But interestingly, for the first and only time among the major judges, there's no language of the LORD "raising up" a judge or the "Spirit of the Lord" coming upon a judge.<sup>2</sup>

So there's no explicit affirmation that the LORD has raised up Deborah as the judge, so we're left wondering: Is Deborah the judge (or the military leader) that the LORD has raised up to deliver his people, or should we expect someone else?

Look at verses 6-7.

[<sup>6</sup> She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor,

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<sup>2</sup> See Othniel (3:9), Ehud (3:15), Gideon (6:14), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (13:25; 14:6).

taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. <sup>7</sup> 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'?"

Here, Deborah, as a prophetess of the LORD, sends and summons a *new* character—Barak—and calls *him* to be the military leader to deliver the people of Israel, and *assures* him that the LORD will give him the victory.

So Deborah is presented as the messenger from God and Barak is now presented as the judge that the LORD has raised up to deliver his people.

So for the original Israelite reader, expectations of the judge being a male military leader is now restored.

But then look at verse 8.

[<sup>8</sup> Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go."]

For the *first* time among the judges, Barak is *reluctant* to lead. Even though the LORD has *assured* him of victory, Barak gives an ultimatum for obedience. He will *only* obey if a certain condition is met.

Perhaps like Barak, we can also be *reluctant* to do what God has already told us to do. And we ask for more and more signs of assurance, even though his Word is already very clear.

Here, Barak says to Deborah the prophetess, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

Now, we need to understand that this was not asking Deborah to come with him as emotional or moral support. This was superstitiously believing that if he had the LORD's prophetess with him, that would somehow give him greater assurance of victory.<sup>3</sup>

In reality, God's *word* assuring him of victory should have been all the assurance Barak needed to obey.

And from Deborah's *negative* response, we know that what Barak was asking for—his ultimatum for obedience—was *not* a good thing.

Look at verse 9.

[<sup>9</sup> And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.]

Deborah agrees to go with Barak, but as a consequence for his ultimatum or conditional obedience, the LORD makes clear that the glory (humanly speaking) of killing the enemy commander Sisera will not be his, but "the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman."

So as the reader, given that Deborah is the only woman presented so far in the narrative and she has agreed to be present with Barak in the battle, we are led to expect that *Deborah* is the "woman" who will receive the glory.

<pause>

Now, at this point, some of us who are familiar with this narrative may be a bit confused because we may have previously understood *Deborah* to be the judge—and not Barak.

<sup>3</sup> It was like the Israelites later wrongly thinking in 1 Samuel 4 that if they carried the ark of the covenant, which represented the presence of God, into battle, then they would certainly win—and in that case, they actually lost.

So I'll pause the narrative to give a brief explanation for understanding *Barak*—and not *Deborah*—as the judge that the LORD raised up here. I'll give *three* reasons.

First, if we understand that this is a story of irony—of unexpected twists and turns—it makes sense that the author would lead us to think that Deborah was the judge and then reveal that Barak is actually the judge.

Second, if we understand that the book of Judges has an overall downward spiral—not just for the people of Israel but even for its judges—then Deborah doesn't fit this downward spiral pattern.

If we look at the six major judges throughout the book,

- *Othniel* is the golden boy,
- *Ehud* starts to get iffy with his use of deception,
- *Barak* is giving the LORD ultimatums for his obedience,
- *Gideon* will be the first judge to start killing fellow Israelites and functionally leads his people into idolatry,
- *Jephthah* makes a rash vow and sacrifices his daughter,
- and *Samson* looks almost completely pagan.

In that downward spiral of major judges, Barak makes a lot of sense—he fits—but what is Deborah, who is presented as pretty much “flawless”<sup>4</sup> in this narrative, doing in the middle of this downward spiral of judges? She doesn't fit the pattern of what the author is showing us throughout the book.

Rather, she serves as a *contrast* to the initially weak leadership of Barak; she's there to highlight the downward spiral of judges taking place with Barak.

Third, other Scripture passages affirm that *Barak*—not Deborah—was the judge here.

1 Samuel 12:11: “And the LORD sent Jerubbaal [or Gideon] and **Barak** and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety.

Hebrews 11:32-34: “And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, **Barak**, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

In both these instances, Barak is in the middle of other clear judges, which seems to be an unmistakable affirmation that *Barak*—not Deborah—was the judge in this account.

More can be said, but I think those three reasons are sufficient for now.<sup>5</sup>

<pause>

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1990), 241.

<sup>5</sup> This fits the understanding that judge-deliverers were “military leaders spontaneously raised up by God to deliver the people from an oppressor” (Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *Prophet, Priest, and King* [Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2016], 116, Kindle). Daniel I. Block (*Judges, Ruth: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999], 193-194) poses 12 questions that doubt the author understood Deborah as one of the judge-deliverers of Israel: “1. Why is she not introduced as one whom Yahweh has raised up? 2. Why is there no reference to her inspiration and empowerment by Yahweh's Spirit (*ruah yhw*)? 3. Why does she need Barak to accomplish the deliverance? 4. Why is the word *yasa*, ‘to save,’ never applied to her? 5. Why does she say, ‘The LORD will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman’ instead of ‘into my hands’? 6. Why does the author observe that ‘she went up with Barak’ (4:10) but avoid placing her at the head of the troops? 7. Why does Deborah announce to Barak, ‘This day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands’ rather than ‘my hands’ (4:14)? 8. Why is she absent from the description of the actual battle (4:15-17), and why does she never meet Jabin or Sisera? 9. Why did the poet prefer the title ‘mother in Israel’ over ‘savior of Israel’ (5:7)? 10. Why does the poet avoid the root *qum*, ‘to rise,’ let alone referring to Yahweh as the causative subject, when he speaks of Deborah's rise? 11. What is this woman doing in what everyone acknowledges traditionally as a man's world—leading soldiers into battle? 12. Perhaps most intriguing, why does the narrator portray her character so different qualitatively from most of the other deliverers?” In addition, Judges 4-5 has many similarities with Exodus 14-15—story, then song; both Pharaoh and Jabin have chariots; both deliverances happen through bodies of water; both have a prophetess—Miriam and Deborah—who are prominent in the song. If Deborah mirrors Miriam as a prophetess, then just as Miriam was not the leader or judge-deliverer (but Moses was), Deborah is not the leader or judge-deliverer here (but Barak is).

But if Barak is the judge, then how do we understand verses 4-5 where it says that Deborah “was *judging* Israel at that time” and “the people of Israel came up to her for *judgment*”?

[<sup>3</sup> Then 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.

<sup>4</sup> Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. <sup>5</sup> She 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. <sup>6</sup> She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-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. <sup>7</sup> 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’?”]

Remember, immediately before this, in verse 3, “the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help.”

So in verses 4-5, the people of Israel are not coming to Deborah to resolve their legal disputes, but they are coming to her because she’s a prophetess and they are waiting to hear what the LORD’s judgment is regarding their cries to him for help.<sup>6</sup>

And then, verses 6-7 describe the judgment that the *LORD* gives through his prophetess Deborah in *response* to his people’s cries: he will raise up *Barak* as a judge for his people.

So Deborah, as a prophetess of the LORD, “judges” Israel (so to speak) by giving the *LORD*’s judgment in *response* to their cries to him for help; she is *not* the judge-deliverer that the LORD raises up but the *prophetess* he sends to *call* his judge-deliverer—Barak.

<pause>

If you flip back to chapter 1 and look at the first two verses, you’ll see something very similar happening.

[Judges 1:1-2: After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel **inquired** of the LORD, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?” The LORD said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.”]

The people of Israel *inquired* of the LORD about who should go up and lead them in battle against the Canaanites, and the LORD responded that the tribe of Judah should go.

Here, the people go to Deborah the prophetess inquiring of how he will respond to their cries for help, and the LORD responds that Barak will lead his people in battle against the Canaanites.

<pause>

So that’s a brief explanation for understanding *Barak*—and not *Deborah*—as the judge that the LORD raised up here.

Now, going back to the narrative.

[<sup>10</sup> And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.

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<sup>6</sup> The act of judging in these verses is typically understood in a judicial capacity—holding court and settling disputes among citizens. But nowhere else in the book does the term require a judicial interpretation and such an insertion of Deborah settling legal disputes when the issue of the narrative is national crisis seems misplaced. Instead, “the people of Israel” in verse 5 can be understood collectively as the entire nation (as in verse 3 and in the rest of the book) rather than individually as people coming to Deborah to settle their private disputes; and verse 5 can be understood as an exposition of the people of Israel crying out to the LORD for help in verse 3.

<sup>11</sup> Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.]

In verse 10, Barak obeys the word of the LORD by gathering 10,000 men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali as they prepare for battle.

And then look at verse 11.

The narrative seems to pause to give us what seems to be random information. We're introduced to a new character, Heber the Kenite.

We were introduced to the Kenites earlier in chapter 1, where they settled with the tribe of Judah (1:16), so they were allies with the Israelites. But Heber has separated himself from them, and he's out here in a tent, very close to where the battle is going to take place.

So as the reader, we're led to ask more questions.

- Being so close to the coming battle, how would Heber the Kenite be involved?
- Being a Kenite, a descendant of Moses' father-in-law, would Heber be loyal to the Israelites?
- Or, having separated from the Kenites, would Heber side with the Canaanites?

The author doesn't answer any of those questions, but he just resumes the narrative after this brief interruption.

[<sup>12</sup> When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, <sup>13</sup> Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. <sup>14</sup> And 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. <sup>15</sup> And 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. <sup>16</sup> And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.]

In verses 12-13, the enemy commander Sisera hears that Barak and his troops have prepared for battle, so he, likewise, gathers his 900 chariots of iron and his troops to prepare for battle as well.

And then, in verses 14-16, the battle takes place.

Deborah gives prophetic assurance of the Israelites' victory,<sup>7</sup> and Barak charges forward with his troops.

And unexpectedly, in verse 15, Sisera abandons his chariot and flees away on foot.

And in verse 16, Barak and his army completely destroy the entire army of Sisera.

And just like that, the battle is over.

But as the reader, you're still left with a bunch of unanswered questions.

- What will happen to Sisera?
- How will the LORD sell Sisera into the hand of a woman?
- What role will Heber the Kenite play now that the battle is over?
- What will happen to Jabin?

And so, the story continues.

[<sup>17</sup> But 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. <sup>18</sup> And Jael came

<sup>7</sup> From this point, Deborah disappears from the narrative. We don't hear from her again until the next chapter when she and Barak sing of the Lord's deliverance.



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. <sup>19</sup> And 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. <sup>20</sup> And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” <sup>21</sup> But 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. <sup>22</sup> And 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.]

Look at verse 17.

We find out that Heber the Kenite has aligned himself with Jabin and the Canaanites, and so Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, to find refuge.

Look at verses 18-20.

In my house, when I'm playing hide and seek with my boys, I'll be the counter and the boys will hide. And the boys will hide in a room where Tina is and tell her, "Don't tell daddy that we're here."

Essentially, that's a bit of the picture that we get of Sisera. The commander of this mighty Canaanite army is reduced to looking like a scared child playing hide and seek, telling his motherly figure, Jael, "Don't tell anyone that I'm hiding here." And Jael also basically treats him like a child by giving him milk and tucking him to sleep.

And then, look at verse 21.

It's another twist!

Like Rahab, Jael, unlike her husband, reveals herself to be aligned with the Israelites—not the Canaanites.

And like Ehud, everything starts to move in slow motion as she goes for the kill: she “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.”<sup>8</sup>

<pause>

Now, look at verse 22.

At some point, Barak realizes that Sisera was not with his army, so he turns back in pursuit of him. But he's too late.

In fulfillment of the Lord's words to him, Barak does not receive the glory (humanly speaking) for killing Sisera, for he's already dead at the hand of a woman.<sup>9</sup>

But surprise! The woman is not Deborah like we expected, but it's unexpectedly Jael—the wife of one of Jabin's allies.

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

<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 3:15, the Lord promised that there would be one who comes from a woman who will *crush* the head of the serpent—of *Satan* himself. And here, as Jael crushes the head of *Sisera*—whose name even sounds like the hissing a serpent—it's simply a preview of that later day when Jesus would come to crush the head of Satan at the cross.

<sup>9</sup> In some sense, Barak looks a little like the servants of Eglon from the previous judge account with Ehud. He walks in too late only to find the man already dead on the floor (3:25). But this was particularly to Sisera's shame—to be killed at the hand of a woman (cf. 9:53-54).

And then, in verses 23-23, it's just the falling action and resolution—"the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed [him]."

<pause>

And so, in a nutshell, *that's* Judges 4—a story of irony, a story of unexpected twists and turns.

So what can we learn from this narrative? We can learn many things, but one thing to call our attention to is...

## II. A distinction portrayed

As we look at the passage again, the first lesson that we can see through Barak and Deborah is that ...

The Lord calls men and women to distinct roles. <repeat>

This passage is not necessarily *about* this, but it certainly *portrays* this distinction.

Barak, in his initial reluctance to lead, was *not* taking up his responsibility to lead *specifically* as God's appointed judge-deliverer and more *generally* as a *man*.

And Deborah, in contrast, shines in this passage as a godly example of a *woman*—as she *submitted* to her own God-given role as prophetess and used her role *not* to usurp Barak's God-given role as judge-deliverer, but to *strengthen* him to be able to faithfully live up to his calling.

When she saw his hesitancy and weakness, she could have gotten impatient and easily pushed him out of the way—and he may have even welcomed that. But instead, she somewhat rebukes him, basically saying, "God is calling *you* to lead."

And that seems to snap Barak to his senses, and we see a different version of Barak in the rest of the narrative.

<pause>

This reminds me of a story that Kathy Keller, the wife of the late pastor, Tim Keller, tells in their book, *The Meaning of Marriage*. She writes this:

In the late 1980s, our family was comfortably situated in a very livable suburb of Philadelphia where Tim held a fulltime position as a professor. Then he got an offer to move to New York City to plant a new church. He was excited by the idea, but I was appalled. Raising our three wild boys in Manhattan was unthinkable! Not only that, but almost no one who knew anything about Manhattan thought that the project would be successful. I also knew that this would not be something that Tim would be able to do as a nine-to-five job. It would absorb the whole family and nearly all of our time.

It was clear to me that Tim wanted to take the call, but I had serious doubts that it was the right choice. I expressed my strong doubts to Tim, who responded, "Well, if you don't want to go, then we won't go." However, I replied, "Oh, no, you don't! You aren't putting this decision on me. That's abdication. If you think this is the right thing to do, then exercise your leadership and make the choice. It's your job to break this logjam. It's my job to wrestle with God until I can joyfully support your call."

Tim made the decision to come to New York City and plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The whole family, my sons included, consider it one of the most truly "manly" things he ever did, because he was quite scared, but he felt a call from God. At that point, Tim and I were both submitting to roles that we were not perfectly comfortable with, but it is clear that God worked in us and through us when we accepted our gender roles as a gift from the designer of our hearts.

<pause>

When we look at Barak 2.0 (so to speak)—the Barak *after* Deborah nudges him in his role of leadership—he looks like a whole different man.

He was facing a mighty army with 900 chariots of iron that had been cruelly oppressing them for 20 years. Remember, these were like the tanks of the ancient near east, and all he had were foot soldiers. It took firm *faith* in God's word to be able to lead in what looked like an impossible situation.

And not only that, but he also still decided to lead even after he had been told that he would not get the glory (humanly speaking) of killing Sisera.

This kind of glory would have been like receiving the glory of making a game-winning shot in a basketball game.

<pause>

From 1991 to 1993, the Chicago Bulls basketball team won three consecutive NBA titles. And the person who led them to victory was Michael Jordan. But if Michael Jordan was like Batman, Scottie Pippen was like his Robin.

But in 1994, after Michael Jordan retired the first time, it was Scottie Pippen's moment to shine. He was going to be the new Batman.

And in the last moments of a crucial playoff game, the Bulls call a timeout, and the coach draws up one last play. Whoever he gives the ball to needs to make the game-winning shot, but instead of giving the ball to Scottie Pippen, the coach decides to give the ball to Toni Kukoc.

And Scottie Pippen is just devastated. He gets so upset that he refuses to even go out on the court. He just sits down on the bench.

He wanted the glory of the game-winning shot, and as soon as he knew that he wouldn't get it, he doesn't even want to play.<sup>10</sup>

<pause>

So to Barak's credit, even after hearing that he won't get the glory of taking the game-winning shot, he still goes out in faith and leads the people of Israel to fight the mightier Canaanite army.

Now, if you were told that you wouldn't get the glory (humanly speaking), would you just sit down and refuse to play, or would you step out in faith like Barak and still lead?

All throughout Scripture, we see that some of God's greatest leaders are those who knew from the onset that they would not receive any earthly glory in their own lifetimes.

Isaiah was told from the beginning that nobody would respond to his preaching (Isa. 6:9-10).

Jeremiah was told from the beginning that his people would fight against him (Jer. 1:19).

And of course, Jesus looked like a failure in his death with all his disciples scattering and being hung in humiliation on a cross.

Barak knew that he wouldn't get the earthly glory in that day of battle, but he still led the people with great faith. And that's why Barak is in the "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11. Barak 2.0 was a godly man of God because he was a man of faith who did not live for his own glory but for the glory of God.

Part of being a godly man is that you can set aside your aspirations for your *own* glory and submit them to your *greater* aspirations for *God's* glory.

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<sup>10</sup> David Felker, "The Stars Fought from Heaven," May 24, 2020, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-stars-fought-from-heaven>.

<pause>

So Barak 1.0 was *not* a godly example of a man. He was *reluctant* to take up his responsibility to lead, and gave an ultimatum for obedience—which we should never do with God.

Deborah, throughout the passage, was a godly example of a woman. She used her gifts not to usurp Barak's leadership but to strengthen and support him to lead.

And because of that, Barak 2.0 became a godly example of a man—as he trusted God's Word, rallied others together, and led them courageously even though he knew the glory would not be his.

<pause>

We live in a world that is increasingly blurring the lines between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. Of course, there is much overlap as fellow human beings, but there are fundamental differences embedded into God's good creation that makes men and women not interchangeable. They are distinct biologically and in their God-given roles.

Imagine a church where brothers were discipling other brothers, and sisters were discipling other sisters, not only as Christians in *general* but as Christian *men* and Christian *women*—as Titus 2 instructs us to do.

Imagine a church where the brothers have a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide, and protect women in appropriate ways, and where the sisters have a freeing disposition to affirm, receive, and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in appropriate ways.<sup>11</sup>

Imagine a church where the brothers model and help other men exhibit true *strength* like the perfect man, Jesus; and the sisters model and help other women exhibit true *beauty* like Christ's holy bride, the church.

Children, I'd encourage you to ask your parents sometime this week what it means to be a *man* vs. what it means to be a *woman*.

And this is not just for parents to explain to their children, but it's important for all of us to understand *who* God made us to be *as men* and *as women*. So I'd encourage you to write down these chapters I'm about to mention and discuss them with each other and your children sometime later today or this week.

- Genesis 1-2 for God's good design of distinct roles between men and women in creation,
- Genesis 3 for how the Fall has distorted these gender roles,
- Ephesians 5 for how Jesus' relationship with his church ought to inform our understanding of biblical manhood and womanhood,
- And Titus 2 to show us how we ought to disciple one another towards being those kinds of men and women.

Of course, there are many more passages that we could turn to, but I think those are great places to start.

I know a lot more could be said about this topic that we can't cover here, so two great introductory books I'd recommend are *What's the Difference?* by John Piper and *Men and Women in the Church* by Kevin DeYoung.

**[JKT only:** I'd also encourage you to stick around after Sunday Celebration today as we have our Parenting Class on Raising Boys. And next month, we'll have our Parenting Class on Raising Girls. Whether you're a parent or not, these will be helpful classes to better understand what God's Word teaches about what it means to be men and women.**]**

<pause>

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<sup>11</sup> John Piper, *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 22.

So a distinction portrayed—the Lord calls men and women to distinct roles. And finally...

### III. A point emphasized

It is the Lord himself who leads and delivers his people. <repeat>

If the passage only *portrayed* the previous distinction, I can say confidently that the passage is *about* this point.

How do I know that? Because the structure of Judges 4 is actually a *chiasm*.

A chiasm is a literary structure where things are presented in a certain sequence and then repeated in reverse order—and what's in the middle is the most important.

Think of a symmetrical cheeseburger. You have bun, lettuce, cheese, patty, cheese, lettuce, bun—where the patty (the meat in the middle) is the most important part of the cheeseburger.

[A: The people of Israel are oppressed by Jabin king of Canaan (4:1-3).

B: The woman Deborah is highlighted (4:4-9).

C: Barak and Sisera each “called out” their armies (4:10-13).

**D: The LORD leads his people into battle (4:14a).**

C': Barak and Sisera each “go down” (4:14b-16).

B': The woman Jael is highlighted (4:17-22).

A': Jabin king of Canaan is subdued (4:23-24).]

So here, in Judges 4, you could say that it's a bit of a cheeseburger (so to speak).

- The two buns are in verses 1-3 and verses 23-24, where the people are first *oppressed* by Jabin king of Canaan, but then at the end, they have *subdued* Jabin king of Canaan.
- The two lettuces are in verses 4-9 and verses 17-22, where two women—Deborah and Jael—are highlighted.
- The two cheeses are in verses 10-13 and the latter part of verse 14 to verse 16, where Barak and Sisera each “called out” their armies, and where Barak and Sisera each “go down” [from Mount Tabor or from his chariot].
- And the meat patty is in the beginning of verse 14, where the LORD leads his people into battle.<sup>12</sup>

[<sup>14</sup> And 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.]

So the most important part in the entire passage is what Deborah says to Barak at the beginning of 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?”

By the way, that's a rhetorical question. The answer is assumed. It could also be translated, “Indeed, the LORD goes out before you.”

The whole point of this verse and the entire story is that the LORD *leads* (or goes out before) his people and the LORD *delivers* his people from their enemies (or has given their enemies into their hands).

And then, look at verse 15.

[<sup>15</sup> And 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.]

<sup>12</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation: Expositions of the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 70-71.

It says that “the *LORD* routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword.”

The word for “routed” means “to throw into confusion or panic,” and it’s the same word used in Exodus 14:24, when the LORD “threw the Egyptians forces into a panic” as he delivered his people through the Red Sea and destroyed Pharaoh’s chariots and armies in the sea.

If we look carefully at verse 15, it seems like the LORD is the *only* One fighting the battle. The LORD is the only subject here. He’s the One who routes and defeats Sisera’s army by the edge of the sword.

And he does all this “*before* Barak,” as if Barak is only a *bystander*—simply a *witness* of the LORD doing all this.

Barak may have rallied the troops together and agreed to lead, but he’s really following the LORD’s lead.

[<sup>16</sup> And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.]

And in verse 16, it’s an almost comical picture of Barak and his *foot* soldiers pursuing the fleeing *chariots* and completely destroying Sisera’s army.

Chariots of iron were essentially like tanks in the ancient near east. They were a huge military advantage. Earlier, in chapter 1, we saw that the tribe of Judah could *not* conquer the inhabitants of the plain “*because* they had chariots of iron” (1:19).

And here, we see men on *foot* chasing after and destroying *tanks* (so to speak).

If you’ve ever seen that famous picture of a man standing in front of tanks at Tiananmen Square—just search “Tank Man” and you’ll find it—just imagine that man chasing down and destroying those tanks.

It’s almost unthinkable. And yet, that’s what was going on here—it’s not what anyone would have expected.<sup>13</sup>

But how could this be? How could men on *foot* chase and conquer 900 *chariots* of iron?

Simple—because it is the Lord himself who leads and delivers his people.

When the *Lord* is at the head of his people, then even the gates of hell cannot prevail against them (Matt. 16:18).

<pause>

And if we look at verses 23-24, the last two verses, we see one final twist in this narrative that tells us the point of it all.

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

All the characters that we *thought* might be the hero are nowhere to be found. Deborah, Barak, Heber, and Jael have all disappeared.

And who’s left? Who’s the real hero? Who is ultimately credited for delivering the people?

Look at verse 23: “So on that day, *God* subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel.”

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<sup>13</sup> Just like the LORD made the mighty Eglon and the Moabites look like fools in the previous narrative, here, the LORD makes the mighty Sisera and the Canaanites with their 900 chariots of iron, who had been cruelly oppressing the people of Israel for 20 years, look like absolutely nothing.

Amidst all the unexpected twists and turns of Judges 4, if there was any doubt about who this narrative is *really* about, it all gets clarified at the end. And the song in Judges 5 that we'll look at will make it even more clear.

The main point, the main lesson, the main purpose of this narrative is to show us that it is the Lord himself who leads and delivers his people.

So will you trust him? Will you trust *his* Word more than your own thoughts, desires, and feelings?

## Conclusion

As we close, remember what the *whole* book of Judges is about.

It will say over and over again in its concluding chapters: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1), so we're meant to see how God's people lead themselves into ruin *without* God's appointed king.

The point of the *whole* book is that God's people need God's appointed king from the tribe of Judah in order to experience God's blessings.

And so, here, we get a glimpse of *who* that appointed king will be.

Ultimately, the king that God's people need is not just King David from the tribe of Judah, but they need God *himself* to be their King to lead them into battle and deliver them from all their enemies.

And so, about a thousand years later, God himself came to be born as the person of Jesus Christ, from the tribe of Judah, as *the* Son of David, to be the God-man King that God's people truly needed.

God himself needed to lead and deliver his people, so he did it himself.

And he did it in the most ironic or unexpected of ways.

Not through a great military victory but through a humiliating death on a cross.

<pause>

If you're not a believer in Jesus Christ, this is the good news that you need to hear.

Even though all of us have sinned against God and rightfully deserve to be crushed like Sisera, God came as the person of Jesus Christ to be crushed in our place and to do what we could never do.

The cross is where he delivered his people from their greatest enemies of sin, death, and Satan. It's where he bore our sin, died our death, and crushed the head of Satan (Gen. 3:15).

And so, if you repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your King and Savior, then he delivers you in the most unexpected of ways.

Through his death, you can join in his resurrection life.  
Through his humiliation, you can join in his heavenly exaltation.  
Through his suffering, you can join in his eternal glory.

Like Barak, even though we *participate* in his victory, we're merely *bystanders* and *witnesses* of the deliverance that he *alone* accomplished without any of our help.

We don't deserve his deliverance. We could never earn his salvation.

But by God's grace, salvation for sinners at cross is the greatest story of irony, the most unexpected of twists, accomplished by the greatest King we could ever have—God himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

