

What do you think about this maxim... (I'm not sure who first said it... but please consider whether you think it is true or not...)

“We often crucify ourselves between two thieves: regret for yesterday and fear of tomorrow.”

Is it not true that opportunities are often missed... because of our being reluctant... or overly cautious...? ... Have we not failed to act in many situations... or failed to grasp an opportunity... because we do not have enough faith... or confidence to step forth...? We hold back... we hesitate... we shrink back from challenges and opportunities... **and even those** that we know God wants us to take.

Think of what is often lost... because we hesitated... or were untrusting.

* The chance to be reconciled to someone we have had a falling-out with
* to grow in our love for God
* to be delivered from some oppression... bondage... or painful situation
* to gain victory over some addiction or enslavement
* to escape from an ongoing problem... difficulty... or suffering
* to experience the joy of seeing a loved one come to trust Christ in their life....

On and on the lost opportunities and challenges could be listed. But God does not call us to be reluctant, fainthearted, fearful, and unbelieving. The call of God is to be courageous, to be women and men of courage.

This is the subject of our great passage of Scripture today. It is the story of a courageous woman and a reluctant military commander. ... Deborah was the woman of great courage... and Barak was the military commander with a fearful... reluctant spirit. ... This is the well-known story of Deborah and Barak.

The story of Deborah and Barak come to us in the Book of Judges in two different forms. One is historical narrative... and the other is poetry. Judges chapter four explains the event by using regular historical prose... and then chapter five fills in some needed details... which we are naturally curious about from reading chapter four... The poem relates some vivid details and insight... with artistic expression.

So to get you ready for the poetic half of our passage... (because I know that not everyone here is a fan of poetry) ... I have a little prelude... an overture... a summary of today's passage (if you will) to ease you into it.

This morning I will tell the tale about a female who was frail yet she would assail a male who had the initiative of a snail. And about another female who made a trail to a sleeping male, and struck him with a deadly nail and saved Israel. Now both were female and both travailed and both were hailed and that will end our tale.

It is ironic that I am up here preaching about not being reluctant... and some of you may be thinking... "*Pastor, you should have been more reluctant with your attempt at poetry...*" ... OK... for the duration of my time with you this morning... I will leave the poetry to the author of Scripture. So let's get started. First... we begin with the historical narrative.

Judges 4:1-3

This is a familiar pattern to us. By now we're used to the cycle of sin in Judges- people are given some degree of relief from their problems... and then they ignore the Lord and do evil. ... The consequences of their evil descend upon them... and they're taken over by a foreign power that is hurtful to them.

Ehud... the judge who delivered Israel from Moab... who we studied in the previous chapter... was a good influence for 80 years. He influenced Israel to walk a holy life. ... But Israel's righteousness was not due to their convictions... so when the circumstances of Ehud's influence changed... sin took over.

Jabin was living in Hazor... and his army commander... Sisera... lived in a different town... a Philistine city. We are given the name of his home-town... because it helps us understand some of the back-ground to this story. ... Sisera was from Harosheth-hagoyim.

"Harosheth" means smiths... or "metal worker"... and "goyim"... you will recognize as the word Jews often use for Gentiles. Together, the two words mean "smiths of the Gentiles." These were Gentile iron-smiths... who had the secret of making iron tools... and weapons. ... The Philistines had a monopoly on the making of iron... and they simply would not share the technology with the Israelites.

If any Jew wanted an iron plowshare... they were permitted to come to Sisera's town - Harosheth-hagoyim... and have one made... or sharpened. But the Gentile Iron Smiths would not allow an Israelite to possess any kind of iron weapon. Thus the Philistines were able to oppress the Israelites by not being able to protect themselves with any sort of useful arsenal. because they could prevent them from gathering an arsenal of weapons.

The Israelites were severely oppressed by Sisera's iron chariots... and his well-equipped army. ... Chariots were the tanks of the ancient world. Made of iron or wood, they were pulled by one or two horses and were the most

feared and powerful weapons of the day. They would be driven into a group of soldiers to cut and mutilate them very quickly. Some chariots even had razor-sharp knives extending from the wheels designed to maim those helpless foot soldiers who were unlucky enough to be in their path. ... The Canaanite army had 900 iron chariots. ... Israel was not powerful enough to defeat such an invincible army. ... Therefore, Jabin and Sisera had no trouble oppressing God's people.

Now I want to break into the second half of our study-passage for today... the poetry side... because it shows us... through the emotive language that poetry is... just how downcast and hopeless the people of Israel were. They hid themselves... They would not travel main highways but instead... if they HAD to travel... they took the treacherous and crooked paths in the hills.

Judges 5:6-7a

The last phrase that I read... "*The villagers ceased in Israel...*" speaks volumes of what conditions were like. ... In other words... farmers would not farm their fields... they ceased! ... No one bought or sold at the market... They ceased! ... Israel's commerce... the vitality of every village... came to a standstill. Everyone laid low and hid. The joy of Israel was completely gone!

Israel is without hope. Their circumstances looked impossible for turning-around. ... The king who oppressed them... knew what he was doing... and he had an army that knew how to be an army... and a well-trained leader who possessed an overwhelming arsenal of weapons.

But what is it... that takes an *impossible* situation... and changes it... so that there is freedom... and life... and joy... again? ANSWER: "*Israel cried out to the Lord.*" That's the key.

There is a spiritual principle here which we can apply to our lives:

Overwhelming circumstances are never the truest reality of any situation you or I face. ... The people of God were overwhelmed... but then they cried to God... and God said... "*I'll deliver you.*"

What is it in your life that is overwhelming you? ... What is it that is bearing down...? ... What is it that doesn't seem to go away... that severely oppresses your Christian lifestyle...? ... When Israel cried to God he made possible the *impossible*. ... And he does this in the strangest ways.

In this situation with the Israelites... God really does do a strange thing... from an ancient culture's point of view. This is completely unthinkable! Unheard of! God uses a *woman* to deliver His people. ... If we step away from our present culture for just a moment... we would probably have to say... "*How embarrassing this must have been to the men of Israel...*" For that period of world civilization... it was definitely very odd!

Judges 4:4-10

God had raised up a courageous woman named Deborah to be the judge in the land. This was an act of grace... but it was also an act of humiliation for the Jews... because they lived in a male-dominated society that wanted only mature male leadership. ... Look how God berates Israel many years later... for this same condition... through His prophet Isaiah...

Isaiah 3:12 (ESV)

My people—infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your guides mislead you and they have swallowed up the course of your paths.

For God to give His people a woman judge... was to humiliate them... and treat them like little children... which is exactly what they were when it came to spiritual things.

As soon as God's people cried... God answered! ... The last place Israel goes to look for help... is where God goes to choose a deliverer. ... God uses the weak things... to confound the mighty... because He gets the glory for the victory. ... A weaker vessel is used by God to turn the nation around. He uses a godly woman named Deborah. ... This is the only time in Israel's Biblical history that a woman was chosen by the Lord to lead the nation. The leadership of the men was very weak at this time.

Shiloh was the spiritual center of Israel at that time. ... That is where the ark was... where the tabernacle was... and where all the priestly activity was... But there was no leadership there... so the people bypassed Shiloh... and travelled far to the North... They went all the way to Bethel... in the hill country of Ephraim... to meet with Deborah... and to seek wisdom from her.

This is an amazing fact! ... There was no man anywhere in Israel they could appeal to. The priests were decadent... We see this from other accounts... later on... in the book of Judges. This period of the Judges is the same time period of the story in 1 Samuel... where we meet those two corrupt sons of Eli.

There was no wisdom in Shiloh... so the people travelled a great distance... to Deborah... who had already established herself in their eyes as a woman of the Word of God. ... She was a prophetess.

As we read in verse 6... Deborah has a word from the Lord. ... She summons Barak... and relays to him a command to gather troops from two of Israel's tribes... and take them to the top of a mountain. ... She says that if Barak leads his troops up the mountain... the Lord will lead Sisera... the Canaanite commander... to the valley below and defeat him.

Um... what kind of strategy is this? ... Go to the top of a mountain... and let your better-equipped enemy surround you and cut off your supply lines... O.K...?!

Trust the Lord... Barak! ... But I'm Barak... I might wonder whether Deborah is hearing things right.

When God wants to glorify Himself through His people, He always has a perfect plan for us to follow. God chose the leader of His army, the place for the battle, and the plan for His army to follow. God also guaranteed the victory. It was like the "good old days" of Joshua again!

Upon hearing the plans, Barak is very hesitant and doubtful. He is out-manned, out-gunned, out-positioned, and outnumbered. The enemy has nine hundred chariots and they have no spears or shields. To attack an enemy that had chariots on a flat plain was suicide if you were on foot. Knives protruded from the wheels of the chariots which would mow the foot soldiers down. The odds seemed hopeless and death looked certain. It looked like a no-win situation.

Judges 4:8

Was Barak's response an evidence of unbelief... or a mark of humility? ... He didn't accuse God of making a mistake. ... All he did was ask Deborah to go with him to the battle. ... Was that because she was a prophetess and he might need a word from the Lord? ... She would be a great help in enlisting these 10,000 volunteers for the army!

Because Deborah announced a negative consequence to his request... the Lord does not seem to be rewarding Barak for exemplary behavior. Barak put more confidence in Deborah... then in the Divine. ... The fact that the command was from God... and that it promised victory... was not enough for Barak. ... His firm refusal was definitely a lack of faith in God. Standing alone... he did not have the faith to face the enemy. ... His faith and confidence in God were just too weak. ... He needed to draw strength from the strong faith and encouragement of Deborah. ... Consequently... he refused to mobilize the armed forces unless Deborah accompanied him. Barak's request shows that... at heart... he trusted human strength... more than God's promise.

Deborah... sounding as if she expected such a response from Barak... consents. ... But she also informs him that his disobedience comes with a price. ... The Lord... would not give Sisera directly into his hands. Barak would not have that glory. Deborah informs him that the Lord will deliver Israel from their miserable enemy... but Sisera would be given into the hands of a woman.

Who could that woman be but Deborah? ... Barak is taking with him ten thousand men and one woman. ... At this point in the narrative... Deborah is the only possibility. ... The honor... we presume... will be hers. ... While we're wondering how Deborah will receive this honor... the narrator introduces us to another character.

Judges 4:11

Say what?!!! Why is this verse giving us this information right now...? What does Heber the Kenite... and the location of his tent have to do with Deborah and Barak... and their pressing business with Jabin and Sisera?

Nothing, apparently... except that Heber has pitched his tent near Kedesh... the destination of Deborah and Barak. This new character... Heber... has moved away from his kinsmen... who lived far to the South of him now... And these were all distant relatives of the Jews (related through Moses' father-in-law... Jethrow) and they were friendly allies of the Jews. ... The narrator (a master-story-teller) tantalizes us with verse 11, then moves on.

Judges 4:12-13

Deborah... who claims to be hearing from God... lays out a battle-plan that sounds more like a suicide mission... than a practical strategy of any sort! *“We are going to climb up Mt. Tabor and let the enemy completely surround us... so that we are trapped here... and completely hemmed in. If we decide to go down to where they are waiting for us... they can mow us down with their chariots...”* ... And Barak's waffling leadership wouldn't

seem to inspire much confidence... either! ... About all Deborah and Barak have going for them... is the word of God... assuming that Deborah is hearing it right.

Perhaps you and I are an awful lot like Barak. We believe in a “qualified obedience.” ... We’re willing to obey the Lord — to a point. We’ll obey him as long as certain conditions are met. ... *“God... If I can’t know all the particulars about this call You have for me... then I would at least ask You to provide me with an expert to come with me... who can help me discern what to do and when to do it. ... I mean... Common’ God... especially if You’re calling me to some outlandish undertaking... that has all the earmarks of a suicide mission... Let me take someone along who is REALLY connected to You... who can call the shots!”*

What if God told us to do something similar to what He told Barak to do? ... If you are a follower of Jesus Christ... then I am going to bluntly say... He already has! ...

Luke 9:23 (ESV)

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Galatians 2:20-21 (ESV)

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Have you completely laid down your life... in order to follow Christ entirely...? Is there a relationship that He has been asking you to mend with a friend or a family member...? ... Is there a spiritual gift that you have

been hiding...? Is there a ministry that He wants you to connect with...? Do you have a neighbor or a co-worker that trusts you... but you are leaving on the path to a Christless eternity...? Are there resources that He has given to you... that you have been treating as your own...?

Judges 4:14-16

As soon as the Canaanite army reached the valley of the river... Deborah issued a strong call of action to Barak... challenging him to go. ... For this was the day that the Lord had given the enemy into the hands of Israel. Deborah... once again... assured the troops of the Lord's presence and power. ... The Lord Himself would give them the victory... for He had marched on ahead of the Israelite army.

Barak did just as Deborah commanded... he launched the attack. ... In fact... he himself led the charge down the mountainside of Mt. Tabor with his 10,000 troops following behind. ... Then it happened. The Lord miraculously intervened. ... He took a specific action. ... And what the Lord did completely confounded the Canaanites. ... They were all routed... fleeing for their lives from the pursuing Israelites... because of the action that God took.

What did the Lord do...? How did God make possible the impossible...? Shouldn't we be told...? Wouldn't it make this story more believable if we knew...? ... Will the narrator tell us...? ... Yes... the narrator does tell us. But... cleverly... he saves it for the emotive language of poetry. ... We will have to wait until the poem of the next chapter to find out.

For now... this is what we should know... Barak had to advance against a superior enemy... trusting in nothing but the Lord... and apart from the Lord... his chances for victory were zero... ziltch... nada... nothing!

God sometimes leads you and I to impossible places... where we don't have what it takes to be effective... where God has to come through... where the chances of success are nil... apart from Him. ... He moves all the players into place... at just the right time... even those who are opposed to His plans. ... He even baits the spiritual forces that are arrayed against us. Wherever He calls us to go... He goes ahead of us.

What... then... do we do? ... We obey! ... We advance! ... We go to where He is - ahead of us. ... We descend the mountain... so to speak. ... Then what? ... Then we watch the Lord do His miraculous work. ... We watch Him win astounding victories... in ways that only He can get the glory! ... What a rush! ... The victories of God... if we're present for them... expand our faith and encourage us to trust Him for future endeavors.

Judges 4:17

Remember Heber the Kenite? Out of the blue, the narrator introduced us to him in verse 11. When the narrator continued with the story, we forgot all about Heber. Now we meet him again—sort of. We don't actually meet him; we meet his wife, Jael. An exhausted Sisera, fleeing from Barak, also meets Jael. Jabin, Sisera's king, and Heber were allies, so Sisera has every reason to expect that Heber would shelter him. Too bad for him that Jael, not Heber, went out to meet him. Where's Heber? We don't know. This chapter of the story belongs to his wife.

Judges 4:18-20

That was probably the worst thing Sisera could have said. ... If Sisera had not said this to Jael... Jael would not have known that Sisera and his men had been defeated. When Sisera said this... he let on that he was being pursued... that he had run from battle. ... This must have given Jael... whose husband (we were told in verse 11) was an ally to Jabin and Sisera... the courage to join the winning side... and get into their good graces. Jabin and Sisera have been defeated. Now was her opportunity to ensure that her household remained in good stead with those in power.

Judges 4:21-24

There is *one clear lesson* for us in this point. ... God will deliver us... completely deliver us... from our enemies. ... But there are two prerequisites... two things that we must do before we can be delivered. ... We must repent and call upon the Lord.

This experience of Israel teaches us this. They were not delivered until they had repented... and called upon the Lord. ... So it is with us. Once we turn away from our sin and evil... God delivers us. ... But note this fact: it is God and God alone who can deliver us...

- from life's trials and temptations • from oppressions and sufferings
- from pain and hurt • from emptiness and loneliness • from unbelief and fear • from guilt and doubt

No matter what the problem or difficulty is... God has the power to give us victory over any enemy that seeks to oppress and destroy us.

It will never be the result of superior organization... better fighters... or better strategy. ... What we see happen over and over in Judges... and in the modern world... is that the people of God repent... and act courageously in following God's instruction... then He intervenes.

Now... lets observe how the people of God celebrated God's intervention... and learn what exactly it was that God did... to route Sisera and his 900 iron chariots.

First praise is given because certain leaders of certain tribes in Israel responded to God's call... and led.

Judges 5:1-3

Next we are given the first clue... as to how God routed the enemy...

Judges 5:4-5

But before God took action... everything looked hopeless for Israel. Then the leaders of Israel began to lead... under God's direction.

Judges 5:6-15a

Not everything in this poem is praiseworthy. ... You see some of the Israelites acted despicably... and the poem shines the spotlight in their eyes... for a while.

Judges 5:15b-18

O.K... now we get to... THE REST OF THE STORY... We now see the specific action that God took.

Judges 5:19-22

Sisera was charging up the valley. ... It was the dry season. Great weather for a battle! He was no fool... you would never take your chariots out in the rainy season! ... So... while he is charging up this wadi and ten thousand Israelis are charging off the slopes of Mount Tabor toward him... a storm suddenly bursts over Tabor... probably somewhere up in the mountains of Gilboa. ... This caused a tremendous wave of water... a magnanimous... earth shaking wall of water crashing along and sweeping them down the previously peaceful Kishon River. ... Their chariots become bogged down and there is no time to turn and try to flee.

As you read this poetic account, you can almost see the chariots jostling, the beating of the horses' hooves, the panic of the horses as men try to drive them out of the mud... but they are cut to pieces.

Keep in mind that the Canaanites worshipped the false god Baal who was thought to be the *god of storms*. The sudden appearance of the storm and its torrential downpour therefore contributed to the confusion and panic of the enemy soldiers. Their god Baal who controlled the storms was thought to be striking out against them. The Lord God was proving Himself stronger than their god Baal. Consequently, this would have added to their utter confusion and panic.

Barak did not know this would happen. ...Deborah did not know precisely what God was going to do... but she had faith. When Sisera and his men start coming at them... she said... "Charge! Go out to meet them! God will fight for you." And God did. ... And God will do... for you and I...

Judges 5:23-31

Wherever God calls you and I to go... He goes ahead of us. Why hesitate...?

