

Followers of the Way

For we fight not against flesh and blood: Soldiers of Christ in an embattled world.

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Judges 4:1-24

This is the fifth in our sermon series entitled Clash of Kingdoms. So far, we've looked at (1) confronting false gods; (2) the strategies of evil; (3) God's faithfulness; and (4) children of the light and children of the dark. The title for today's talk is: For we fight not against flesh and blood – being soldiers of Christ in an embattled world.

If we're going to understand spiritual warfare, we need to pay careful attention to the experiences of Old Testament Israel. They did in the physical what we're called to do in the spiritual. The tactics they used and that their enemies used against them, the things they got right and got wrong, the way God dealt with them and led them – all these are examples we can learn from.

Physical warfare has many parallels with spiritual warfare. In a physical battle, the size of armies, the quality of their equipment, weather conditions and the effect of terrain all have a big impact. But the great imponderable is morale. Morale describes soldiers' mental and moral condition, their courage and endurance in facing hardship and the stresses of battle. It's a function of many things – ideology, bonds of comradeship, confidence in your leaders, and much more besides. At its heart, it's about being someone who, as Oliver Cromwell once put it, "knows what he's fighting for and loves what he knows." History gives many instances of battles won against seemingly impossible odds because one army's morale was superior. So, even in physical warfare, we know that what we can feel, touch and see doesn't tell the whole story.

It's just the same for spiritual warfare. We fight not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12), and the weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of the world (2 Corinthians 10:4). Appearances can be deceptive, and the great imponderable is also morale – or, as we might better put it in spiritual terms, faith. The passage we heard read from Judges 4 tells us how this plays out in the context of a particular point in Israel's history, and we'll be examining what we can learn from this in terms of being soldiers of Christ in our own embattled world. In the process, we'll also be referring to the Song of Deborah from Judges 5, which reads like a kind of battle report – a heavenly or spiritual commentary on the physical events narrated in Judges 4.

Start by taking stock of Israel's overall situation. After forty years of desert wandering, Joshua had led the Twelve Tribes into the Promised land of Canaan. By the time he died, Israel had taken a substantial part of the land given to them by God, but not all of it. In

Joshua's old age, the LORD reminded him, "there are still very large areas of land to be taken over." (Joshua 13:1). So, there was a job unfinished. And even what had been done hadn't always been done fully or properly. Because the Israelites had been tricked into making a treaty with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:14-21), this tribe were still living in Israelite territory, contrary to God's intentions. And there were others, too, within Israelite territory and outside, who'd make continual trouble for Israel in the time of the Judges and beyond.

There's a rhythm to the book of Judges: Israel turns away from God, suffers oppression at the hands of her enemies, cries out to the LORD, who raises a deliverer to free His people – and then the whole cycle soon starts all over again. The phrase, "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (Judges 2:11, 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1) appears seven times, and the book ends with the sad commentary, "In those days ... everyone did as he saw fit." (Judges 21:25). It was a lawless period, when worship of the one true God was often forgotten or ignored, an age with no agreed moral framework – a time with many similarities to our own.

(By the way, the episode we're looking at today isn't an isolated event and it doesn't belong only in a single time and place. It's part of the ongoing Clash of Kingdoms that's continued for millenniums and is still being fought out now, so it shouldn't surprise us that the events Judges 4 and 5 tell us about have past, present and future dimensions. As to the past, there was another king of Hazor called Jabin, who lived about a century before Barak and Deborah. He, too, headed a powerful Canaanite alliance against Israel, but was defeated by Joshua when "the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel" (Joshua 11:8). As to the future, the river Kishon features in yet another great victory God won for His people hundreds of years after Deborah and Barak had died. The river Kishon flows north-west from Galilee to empty into the Mediterranean close to Mount Carmel, and after confronting the prophets of Baal on that mountain, "Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered them there." (1 Kings 18:40). When Deborah sang, "The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon" (Judges 5:21), she could just as easily have been referencing what Elijah did to the prophets of Baal as what Barak did to the army of Sisera. We're part of an ancient fight, and what we're looking at today is just one aspect of a long-running war.)

When we pick up the story, Israel was in a bad way, because "once again [they'd done] evil in the sight of the LORD." (Judges 4:1). Their moral and spiritual degradation was reflected in the nation's physical condition, with "the LORD [selling] them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who ruled in Hazor" (Judges 4:2) – they were back in a state of slavery, despite all God had done to win their freedom and bring them into His rest in the Promised Land. Hazor was a large and wealthy city on the borders of Israel, about ten miles to the north of the Sea of Galilee. It lay at the junction of major trade routes, and had access to some of the latest technology. We see that in the name of the place where Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, lived – Harosheth Haggoyim (*workmanship of the Gentiles*): see Judges 4:3. The people of Hazor were good at making stuff, and they had all sorts of whizzy kit Israel didn't. By contrast, Israel was in economic and social decline, and her

lack of weaponry was so acute that the Song of Deborah says, "Village life in Israel ceased ... and not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel." (Judges 5:7-8).

All earthly power and advantage lay with Israel's oppressors. Jabin had "nine hundred iron chariots" (Judges 4:3), whereas Israel had none. Chariots were the main offensive weapon of armies of that age, not unlike a modern armoured division. Pitting an army with no chariots at all against one that had nine hundred didn't make for very good odds. And for a long time, it seemed there was nothing Israel could do, with the result that Jabin "cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, [until] they cried to the LORD for help." (Judges 4:3). When at last they did this, God heard and answered. And what a difference God makes! At every stage in the warfare that unfolds afterwards, we see the hand of God at work, albeit that He operated through human agency. God's still looking for people to be His agents.

Through the prophetess Deborah, the LORD commanded Barak to "take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor." (Judges 4:6). God explained that he would "lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon river and give him into your hands." (Judges 5:6-7). All well and good. But approach this situation with the wrong frame of mind – looking at the enemy's strengths, your weaknesses and lacking confidence in your commander-in-chief (God) – and the order Barak received might have seemed like a suicide mission. Mount Tabor is an extraordinary feature. It rears up out of a flat landscape and sits all on its own, with no other high ground nearby. It's roughly ten miles west of the Sea of Galilee, at the eastern end of the Jezreel valley – a place where you could well get cut off and become easy prey for an enemy army.

But politically, strategically and tactically, telling Barak to go there was a typical piece of divine genius. It was within easy reach of Hazor, so Jabin and Sisera would have been able to get their own troops into position quickly. And God made sure the Canaanites soon got wind of what was going on, through relatives of Heber the Kenite who'd "pitched his tent" (Judges 4:11) at Kedesh – the very place where Deborah had gone to join Barak and from where he'd "summoned Zebulun and Naphtali" (Judges 4:10, see also 4:6, 4:9) – the Kenites being a clan which had "friendly relations [with] Jabin" (Judges 4:17). In other words, there were spies telling Jabin and Sisera what Barak was up to, but God used these very spies against Israel's enemies.

And God turned what seemed to be the Canaanites' strengths against them in other ways, too. When they heard where Barak was headed, Jabin and Sisera must have sensed a chance to snuff out any remaining political and military resistance in Israel, and thought Barak was walking into a trap. Chariots are unsuited to hilly terrain, so fighting on Mount Tabor itself wasn't their plan. But since the flat land that surrounds this mountain on all sides is perfect chariot country, they could besiege the Israelites there, and either starve them into submission or force them to come down onto the plain and fight on their opponents' terms. Or so they believed.

So, there was a substantial pull factor luring Jabin and Sisera to give battle. But there was a push factor, too, because in truth they had no choice but to respond to Barak's move.

Mount Tabor commands the main north-south trade route that runs down the Jezreel Valley – the so-called Via Maris or Way of the Sea – putting the Israelites in a position to disrupt Hazor’s trade if left to occupy it uncontested. A city whose wealth was founded on commerce couldn’t let that challenge to its prosperity pass. So, whichever way you come at it, God ensured that Sisera would be lured into a fight, just as He’d said.

Details of the battle are scant, but the Bible makes it very clear that the contest was first and foremost a spiritual one. Deborah told Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” (Judges 4:14). And, for good measure, Scripture emphasises that “the LORD ... routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword” (Judges 4:15), that “God subdued Jabin” (Judges 4:23) and it was the LORD who “[handed] Sisera over to a woman.” (Judges 4:9). God mocked His enemies and made a spectacle of them: “Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot” (Judges 4:15) – the vaunted source of his supposed military superiority shown to be useless. He died an ignominious and grisly death at the hands of a woman (Judges 4:18-22), which would have been seen in those days as utterly humiliating. And the proud and ruthless Jabin – a man guilty of cruel oppression (Judges 4:3) – was first subdued (Judges 4:23) and then destroyed (Judges 4:24).

The Song of Deborah repeatedly underlines the spiritual dimension that paralleled the battle fought on earth. There’s a symmetry between how it talks of “the righteous acts of the LORD” (Judges 5:10) and “the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel” (Judges 5:10) – first God moving in the spiritual, then the corresponding manifestation in the physical through God’s people. The spiritual dimension affects the physical realm, and vice versa: “Kings came, they fought, the kings of Canaan fought” (Judges 5:19), while at the same time, “From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.” (Judges 5:20). This is a battle in which the whole of Creation took part, just as (right up to the present) “the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19).

By mocking the pretensions of Jabin and Sisera, God showed up the false gods they worshipped and the spiritual powers that stood behind them. Jabin means, *He discerns*, (linked to the verb for *to discern, understand or have insight*) – but if he’d truly had the gift of discernment, he wouldn’t have let God lure him into giving battle. No false god can give true discernment. The Bible says it’s through the Holy Spirit that God imparts the gifts of wisdom and understanding (on which genuine discernment depends), since “The Spirit of the LORD ... [is] the Spirit of wisdom and understanding” (Isaiah 11:2). Likewise, Sisera, whose name in Hittite means *meditation*, derived no benefit from any of his pagan contemplations and mindfulness techniques, since the Bible says it’s on the law of the LORD that the blessed man “meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). Far from bringing godly wisdom, insight and understanding, pagan meditation is designed to open us up to the influence of false gods and evil spirit powers. If you’ve ever been involved in such things, repent now and make sure you get delivered of any evil that’s been able to come into your life as a result.

God’s desire is to bring us into the fullness of all He’s prepared for us and to release us into being all He’s designed us to be. By His grace and power, Barak won a great victory

over Israel's enemies, yet missed out on something more that God desired for him. When Barak replied to Deborah, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go" (Judges 4:8), at root this showed a lack of trust in God. Barak wanted to use Deborah as a crutch and to shelter under her anointing, rather than step out from her shadow into the anointing God had given him. He wanted the prophetess to hold his hand instead of taking the position of full authority and leadership God required. Unsurprisingly, Deborah responded, "Because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours" (Judges 4:9). Through Deborah, God twice gave Barak the order, "Go!" (Judges 4:6, 4:14). For all we know, there might have been a third "Go!" God wanted to speak to him concerning the "pursuit of Sisera" (Judges 4:22), but Barak put himself in a place where he never received it. Instead, it fell to Jael to kill the enemy commander (Judges 4:21), and to gain the honour of being called "most blessed of tent-dwelling women" (Judges 5:24). Note another symmetry, by the way: whereas God twice spoke "Go!" to Barak, Jael twice spoke the corresponding instruction, "Come" – once to Sisera (Judges 4:18), and once to Barak (Judges 4:22). Since Barak wouldn't go as God wished, he was told to come and see what had been done by a woman – something that ought by rights to have been done by him. If God's speaking His "Go!" to us today, we shouldn't hold back.

Now, undoubtedly, Barak was a mighty man of God. He features in the great roll-call of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11:32 as a man "whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." (Hebrews 11:34). His name means *lightning* – linked to the verb for *cast forth* or *shine* (like light, lightning or glittering weapons). In the Bible, names signify reputation, character, honour, fame, glory and authority. In many ways, Barak lived up to his name. He struck the enemy like lightning as he "went down from Mount Tabor followed by ten thousand men" (Judges 4:14), and his weapons were glittering as God routed Sisera's army "by the sword" (Judges 4:15). And yet he could have been even more. It's a lesson for us as we contemplate what God may be asking us to step into at this time, and how He might want to draw us into yet greater manifestation of the gifts He's given us and the authority He's set in us. Deborah sang, "My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people" (Judges 5:9), so let's not fail to act with the royal authority God's bestowed on us, and let's make sure we're always His willing volunteers.

The Song of Deborah has a blessing and a curse. The curse is for those who hang back from the fight: "'Curse Meroz', said the angel of the LORD. 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the LORD, to help the LORD against the mighty.'" (Judges 5:23). The blessing comes when we do the opposite: after God's victory through Barak "the land had peace forty years" (Judges 5:31) – double the time of Israel's oppression. We're soldiers of Christ in an embattled world and we fight not against flesh and blood, but fight we must. Let's burnish our armour and take our stand today. Amen.