

SERMON TITLE: A Frustrating Dependence

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SCRIPTURE: Judges 4

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The days of the judges were not happy and hopeful. They were dark and despairing. Israel was called to be a holy people – faithful to their God and showing the nations his power and love. Sadly, rather than bless the nations, Israel became like the nations. They bowed to idols and embraced pagan lifestyles. In short, they compromised. As the last line in Judges puts it: “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Thus, these stories serve as both a warning and an invitation to us. They warn us against conforming to cultural narratives and they invite us to hope in the face of despair. They ask us, “What does it mean to have an uncompromising faith in a faithful God?”

SERMON SUMMARY

Faith in Scripture is talked about in different ways. It includes relational trust and personal connection with God. It can sometimes have a sense of allegiance or *faithfulness*. It includes believing, which we often associate with truths or ideas. But the Bible also portrays faith as dependence, and this is especially true in Judges. In Judges, we are given story after story of what *not* to do. God’s people continually did what was right in their own eyes. So, part of the message of Judges is that we should *not* rely on and depend on ourselves. Because we’re so quick to try to fix our problems on our own without God, this mandates what can only be termed “a frustrating dependence.”

SERMON SCREENSHOTS & KEY POINTS

Judges 4 continues the downward-spiraling cycle that began in chapter 3. It’s about a prophetess named Deborah who is portrayed as an unlikely judge-figure. She calls for Barak and reminds him that God said he would hand the enemy into his hands, but Barak is scared and pictured as a cowardly judge-figure. Because of his fear, Deborah tells him that a woman will take his honor. Eventually, Barak musters the courage to go to war, but Sisera (the enemy commander) sneaks away and into the tent of a woman named Jael. Jael seemingly gets the victory that Barak thought was his by killing Sisera. Surprisingly, the writer of Judges summarizes the story by saying, “So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel” (4:23).

In this story, there’s some mixed messages and competing pictures. First, on a broad level, violence in Scripture can still be hard to comprehend, even if it’s against terrorist-like (ie. Jabin and Sisera). Also, the story gives us a coward who should be a hero and a hero who disappears! Out of nowhere, halfway through the story, Deborah is gone. Furthermore, the defeat of the enemy is from another enemy. What does that mean? The following is also confusing. Deborah says, “Barak, didn’t God tell you that he would give them into your hands?” Because he’s scared, Deborah says, “Barak, because you’re not confident in God, he’s going to give your enemy into a woman’s hands” (which we expect to be Deborah). But then in 4:14, Deborah says, “Barak, get up! This is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands.” So, will it be in Barak’s hands or a woman’s hands? Is Deborah the judge who leaves? Or is Barak the judge who fears? Does Jael win? Or does Israel? The point is, we as readers are supposed to be frustrated. We’re supposed to throw our hands in the air at this story. Meaning...

Sometimes God’s grace to us is to prevent us from relying on ourselves or others to make sense out of life.

Deborah was an awesome, godly woman, yet she had a coward of a man who was scared to do what God told him to do. When Barak actually musters up the strength to step out and obey God, another enemy finishes the job. A direct implication is that God wants to get us to a place where we run out of options for making life work on our own. This is his preventing grace, and it calls for a frustrating dependence upon him. So, what’s the positive part of this dependence? Why is faith often so frustrating *and* what should we do about it? Well, along with the intentionally competing pictures in Judges 4, there is one consistent melody:

- 4:6 “Has not God commanded you?” ...
- 4:7 “God said, ‘I will give them into your hand.’”
- 4:14 “The Lord has done it. Does he not go before you?”
- 4:15 “And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots.”

4:23 "On that day, God subdued Jabin before the people of Israel."

Yes, the writer of Judges wants us to feel the intensity of our sinfulness, brokenness, and need. But more than this, he wants to give us a picture of a God who brings unsuspecting victory to undeserving people. As Daniel Block writes, "The entire account is deliberately crafted to highlight the salvation provided by God. He is the chief operator, pulling the strings, raising generals, deploying armies, dictating strategy, and effecting victory. In the end, both narrative and song celebrate the saving work of Yahweh." Thus,

Even if we don't experience it like we want to in the present, we can depend on God for future victory because of his track record of faithfulness in the past.

Like the book of Judges, we need this truth when our lives are on spin-cycle. This is why Deborah declared to Barak, "Does not the Lord go before you?" Meaning, is he good to his word or not? And yes, God gives the victory, but we don't get to tell God what the victory has to look like. In deep dependence, we get to fall back into his arms, knowing that he is good and wise even if the pieces are confusing to us. His track record proves that he's worthy to be trusted. So, for us, this means that we must resist quick-fixes, easy answers, cultural narratives, and a tidy faith that is no faith at all. Rather, we have to learn to take a deep breath, trace his faithfulness in the past, confess our sins, pray for patience, beg for wisdom and know that relying on him will not be in vain. He will bring victory to his people in his way and time. He wants to prevent us from relying on ourselves *so that* he can bring us into a place of total reliance on him. This is a frustrating dependence, believing that the Lord goes before us but that we don't know exactly what's ahead.

There's no better example of this than our Lord Jesus himself. Some may think, "God the Father never prevented him from getting his own way, that's just odd." However, speaking out of the intensity of the moment, the night he was arrested on his way to the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet, not my will but yours be done." And not only did Jesus himself need to know it, "Does not the Lord go before you?" But for our sakes and because of his death and resurrection he *became* the Lord that goes before us, paving the way to life and blazing the trail ahead of us. He is the True Judge who takes our deserved judgment into himself at the tree. He crushes the head of the enemy by the nails that were driven into his hands and feet. He's the only one who can deliver us from life spiraling downward and out of control. If Judges screams to us that we need a deliverer who, after they die, we don't run back into sin. Then Jesus is the deliverer-king who isn't held down by death. Therefore, the cycle is broken because the increase of his government of peace will know no end, and in him we get to stay in shalom. Jesus' resurrection is the decisive and ultimate victory that we need. It proves that all the things that weigh us down now don't get to speak the final word. At the empty tomb, we can reread Judges 4:23 as, "So, on that day God subdued sin and death before his people and brought them eternal victory."

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are the ways that you normally think about faith in God?
2. When is dependence on God hardest for you?
3. What was your favorite part of the passage or message?
4. Who is someone you know who lives humbly in "frustrating dependence" on God?
5. What is so strange about the eventual victory in Judges 4, especially about how God gets the credit for it?
6. Name a time when you have felt God steering you away from self-reliance.
7. Name a time when you have experienced God's gracious victory in a surprising way.
8. How is Jesus the perfect example of someone who lived with this kind of dependence on his Father?

GUIDED PRAYER

As the Psalmist prays, "Some trust in chariots and horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." Pray that we would trust in Jesus our Lord who goes before us. Pray that we would sense his presence with us and going ahead of us. Pray that the Holy Spirit would show you the depth of your neediness, that he would make it clear all the many ways that we have to rely on him for life and deliverance.

[i] The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *Judges-Ruth*, by Dan Block; *Judges for You*, by Timothy Keller; *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, by Dale Ralph Davis; *Deserting the King: The Book of Judges*, by David Beldham and Craig Bartholomew; *Finding God in the Margins: The Book of Ruth*, by Carolyn Custiss James; and *Judges and Ruth: Teach the Text Commentary*, by Mark Strauss. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.