

If you remember the last time I preached in July, I was talking about a man called Ehud. His story's in the book of Judges, and by 'judge' we're not to think of a man in a black gown and a moth-eaten old wig. The term '**judge**' refers to leaders of God's people, used by **God** to deliver them.

And there are twelve such judges talked about in the book of Judges. Ehud was the second, and tonight I want to talk about the **fourth** judge. Ehud, you'll remember, was an **unexpected** deliverer because he was left-handed. Tonight we're reading about a judge, a leader and deliverer of God's people who was unexpected as well, because she was a **woman**. Deborah. And we find her story in Judges chapter 4, with a **song** about the events following it in – you've guessed it – chapter 5.

So let's read together from Judges – the 6th book in the Bible – chapter 4.

If you're like me (and Wendy probably hopes that none of you **are!**), but if you **are** like me, when you go away on holiday you want to make sure that you've got everything ready to leave in good time. And if you're going abroad, the most **important** thing you're going to need is your passport. So you put it somewhere **safe**, where you know you're not going to forget to take it. But you do it in advance of the day and so when the day comes, you've forgotten where you've **put** it! You search everywhere, and then you remember you put it in the **suitcase**, so as not to forget it, but the suitcase is now packed, standing by the door, ready to go.

So out come all the things you've packed – clothes for sunny weather, bathing cozzy – important; sun hat, sun cream, insect repellent – important; toothbrush, soap, antiperspirant – important; hair dryer – not so important for **me** any more. Then you get down to the most important thing, the passport. **Found** it.

This evening's story is a bit like that: it's like unpacking a suitcase of very important things, but we need to find the **most** important thing. And the most important thing in **everything** we read in the Bible, is what we learn about God. That's our aim, that's why this story's been preserved for 3000 years.

I want us to ask ourselves tonight, 'where is God in this story?'

So, you'll remember that after God rescued his people from Egypt with Moses as leader, they've moved into the land that God promised their ancestors, and this is recorded in the **previous** book, the book of Joshua, who led them in. So they're in the 'Promised Land', it's about 1100BC, and the action takes place just south-west of the Sea of Galilee.

But they have two problems: They've **obeyed** God in moving **in**, but they've **disobeyed** God in failing to drive out the **inhabitants** of the land – the Canaanites, as God commanded them to do in Deuteronomy chapter 7. God **knew** that if the Canaanites remained, the Israelites would be turned away from following **him** to serve other gods. And that's **exactly** what happened.

So this is the situation at the beginning of chapter 4. God's people need **rescuing**, and **they need rescuing in two ways** – physically and spiritually.

They need rescuing, delivering, saving **from a physical enemy**. And we read of this in verses 1-3. [Read].

The Canaanites were the longest established inhabitants of the Promised Land. Although God promised this land to **Abraham** and his descendants, it wasn't because they were a **deserving** people, it wasn't because they were any **better** than others, it was because they were the people he'd **rescued**, but **also** because the Canaanites were destined for destruction. Listen to what Moses says in Deuteronomy 9:5, *'It's not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations,'*

God **will** drive them out, but Israel has allowed them to **stay** at the moment. So God allows them to be controlled by Canaanite king Jabin and his military general Sisera. During the period of the judges, they're the only enemy to come from **within**. They're a formidable and powerful enemy, and the 900 iron chariots were the equivalent of **tanks** in those days.

Chapter 3:4, tells us that the Canaanites remained *'to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands which [God] had given their forefathers through Moses.'* It was a test that the Israelites left **20 years** to do something about. They were cruelly oppressed by Jabin for 20 years, before they finally cried out to God for **help**, we read in verse 3.

Why wait so **long**? If God was their God, and if he was all-powerful, you would've thought the **first** thing they would do is cry out to God for help. They'd clearly forgotten the peace their land had enjoyed for 80 years under Ehud and his successor Shamgar.

It reminds me of the words of that old song; 'What peace we often forfeit, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry **everything** to God in prayer.' If you need rescuing in some way – come to God **first**, don't wait, don't delay. Israel waited 20 years.

Verse 1 of chapter 4 tells us **why** they waited – '*After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.*' They were far from God, they'd gone their **own** way, they'd followed **other** gods, they'd done what brought **them** pleasure. They weren't close to God because they'd **disobeyed** him. Where was **God**? He raised up an oppressor to teach his people to obey him. They needed to be rescued from this **physical** enemy.

But they needed to be rescued **from a spiritual enemy**. '*once again they did evil*', verse 1 says. And **unfortunately** we read these same words over and over again throughout the book of Judges. Israel kept **on** sinning. God **rescued** them from physical enemies, but Israel **failed** to realise that they needed **more** than that, they needed rescuing, delivering, saving from their **sin**, the evil **inside**. They kept on sinning. The God-fearing leader Ehud has died, and Israel shows its true colours once more, they did **evil**, they chased after other gods.

What about **us**? What about **us** on a Monday? We're fine on **Sunday** because we're surrounded by Christians and we can **say** the right things, and we can **do** the right things. But what about mid-week? Does our life **show** that we've been born again? That we're new creations? That we want more than **anything** to live a life pleasing to God and hating evil?

John says in his first letter, '*No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's **seed** remains in him; he cannot go **on** sinning, because he has been born of **God**.*' 1 John 3:9.

Unfortunately, until the devil is finally destroyed in the end times, there will **always** be attacks, both physical and spiritual. We aren't yet sinless and we still have mortal bodies. So Israel needed, and **we** need **too**, physical and spiritual rescue, deliverance, salvation....

Until Israel gets **this** right, finds salvation in God and in God **alone**, they won't know peace in the land. Until **we** get this right, find salvation in God and in God alone, **we** will not know peace with God. **Spiritual** rescue is the more important - How often have we seen people ask God for practical help and rescue, but as soon as they **receive** it, they walk away from God and fail to experience **spiritual** rescue.

Where's **God**? He is the only rescuer, the only deliverer, the only Saviour. Israel can't save themselves: we can't save **ourselves**. **God** has to be involved.

Let's look, then, at the action of our story, by thinking about the three main characters, remembering that we're asking 'Where is God?'

Who's the main character? Which of the three is the most important character in the story? Deborah? Barak? Or Jael?

Well, in this book of **Judges**, it's **Deborah who is the judge** – she's the leader of the Israelites at this time. Verse 5 tells us that '*She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.*' She was an unexpected leader because she was a woman, but she was obviously a very **wise** woman, very **mature**, well-**respected**, very upright and a public figure. She is determined and powerful, but chapter 5:4 calls her '*a mother in Israel*' with all the connotations **that** brings with it.

There are, of course, **other** women mentioned in the Old Testament, but I can't think of another – I may be wrong – but I can't think of another who's presented in such a **leadership** role as Deborah is.

People come to her for advice and leadership because she is in **tune** with God. She's a prophetess, a **godly** woman, who seems to know the mind of God, and people recognise this. No-one sees it as **strange** when she summons Barak – commander of the army – to give him the Lord's commands to go into battle. **She's** the one in verses 6 and 7 who gives the orders.

So surely **she** must be the most important character, the judge Deborah.

But wait a minute. She **does** give the orders to Barak, but whose orders **are** they?

Second half of verse 6 – *‘The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: Go ...’* God says *‘I will lure Sisera ... to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’* And verse 14: *‘Go! This is the day the **Lord** has given Sisera into your hands.’* The orders are the **Lord’s**. Deborah is the mouthpiece of God. She points to God.

Where’s God? **He’s** the one who gives the orders – **God** tells Barak when and where to go, **God** will lure Sisera to the place where he’ll be defeated, **God** will give him into Barak’s hands. **Deborah’s** role is all about pointing to **God’s** involvement. God is in this campaign.

And **Deborah** isn’t the one who’s remembered in the New Testament for the events of Judges 4 & 5: In Hebrews 11:32 we read, *‘And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised,’*

Barak is the one remembered in Hebrews for his **example of faith**. So perhaps **he’s** the most important character.

But as we read our account, he comes across at first sight as quite a **weak** character: verse 8, *‘Barak said to [Deborah] “If you go **with** me I will go; but if you **don’t** go with me, I **won’t** go.”’* A warrior, a military leader, saying that if this mother in Israel doesn’t go, he won’t go **either**? Is this **strength**?

We have to remember Deborah’s standing here: she was the civil leader in Israel, but more **importantly** than that, she was God’s mouthpiece to Israel. And so what Barak is **asking** for, in effect, is for **God** to go with them. **That’s** the strength of Barak. He wants the presence of God with his army as they do battle. And this reminds us of Moses when he spoke to God in Exodus 33, he said *‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.’*

Barak wants to know the presence of God. He recognises that he’s **inadequate** without God with him, and his confidence **only** comes through the power and grace of God. I’m sure that David expresses Barak’s feelings when he writes in Psalm 20, *‘Some trust in chariots and some in horses,’* – the Canaanites **certainly** did – *‘but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.’* And in Psalm 21, *‘O Lord, the king rejoices in **your** strength. How great is his joy in the victories you give.’* David and Barak knew the joy of victory won in **God’s** strength. And **we** need to know this too.

Where does **your** confidence lie? Are you relying upon your **own** strength? If you're doing anything for God, anything at **all**, God wants you to rely upon **him** to provide everything you need. Don't trust in your own mortal **inadequate** strength, trust in God's powerful, **supernatural** strength.

If we do things in our own strength, we're promoting **ourselves**, we're taking all the glory for **ourselves**, where we should be giving **God** the glory. God wants to use people who'll give him the glory. **That's** what Barak teaches us here and in chapter 5:16-17 we see people who are in contrast with him because they're too busy to come to the battle; they're too busy tending their sheep, or fixing their fishing nets, or mending their boats.

Perhaps Barak – his name in Hebrew means 'Lightening' – perhaps **he's** the most important character here, the great commander of Israel's army that defeated the enemy Jabin on the battlefield. Samuel, speaking to the people of Israel later on says, *'Then the Lord sent Gideon, Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies on every side, so that you lived securely.'* 1 Samuel 12:11. So Barak was renowned as a great **commander**. Great victory was **his**.

But **was** it? Look again at Judges 4:15: *'At Barak's advance, the **Lord** routed Sisera and all his army ...'* The **Lord** routed Sisera and his army. Deborah prophesied in verse 14 that the Lord would give Sisera into Barak's hands. *'Has not the Lord gone before you?'* She says. The **Lord** routed the enemy.

But God did this by doing more than just giving **strength** to Barak and his army. Chapter 5:21 gives us a clue **how** God routed the enemy: *'The river Kishon swept them away.'*

The historian Josephus tells us **more**, he wrote **this**: "So the battle began; and when they were come to a close fight, there came down from heaven a great **storm**, with a vast quantity of rain and hail, and the wind blew the rain in the face of the Canaanites, and so darkened their **eyes**, that their arrows and slings were of no advantage to them, nor would the coldness of the air permit the soldiers to make use of their **swords**; ... the Israelites ... took such courage, upon the apprehension that **God** was assisting them, that they fell upon the very midst of their enemies, and slew a great number of them; so that some of them fell by the **Israelites**, some fell by their own **horses** which were put into disorder, and not a few were killed by their own chariots." Antiquities. 5.5.1-4

Barak's victory? Where's **God**? Not only is he giving his people strength, he's behind the great storm that caused the river to **flood**, which caused the enemy's chariots to get stuck in the **mud**. He's behind the wind and the hail which caused such **confusion** that the enemy didn't know what they were **doing**.

The **Lord** routed the enemy. The victory was **God's**. Where's **God**? Right in the middle of the battle – he's fighting – **he** gains the victory. God fights for his people. As **Christians** we'll have battles to face, we have enemies in the **devil**; the world **around** us with all its temptation; our old sinful **nature** that still thinks it's in charge; and death; but these are **God's** battles because we are his people and **God** has the victory.

So, if Deborah and Barak aren't the main characters, that only leaves **Jael, the doer of the deadly deed**, the one who dispatches the enemy general. Deborah says in verse 9, *'Very well, ... I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.'* That woman, as we now know, was not Deborah, but **Jael**. The act of deliverance, the death blow, was achieved at the hands of Jael. So **she** must be the most important one, because her role was to destroy the enemy general and so deliver God's people.

We may not **like** reading this account. We may be a little **uneasy** that God's people were rescued by such a **gruesome** act. As well as this, she used **deception** on a weary and sleeping guest. We have to remember that these things are recorded here as historical **events**. This method is not meant to be a **recommendation** of how we are to deal with our enemies. King David was an adulterer and a murderer, but we're not supposed to follow his **example**. What happened is historical **fact**, recorded but not recommended. We could discuss this further, but not at the moment.

Anyway, as we read in verses 18 – 22, Jael invited Sisera into her tent, gave him a blanket to relax in and a drink to quench his thirst. As he lay there asleep, exhausted by a busy day on the battlefield, she then struck the final blow with a tent peg. Women were in charge of putting up tents then, so she would have known what she was doing. This blow would lead to the deliverance of God's people from this enemy which had controlled them for 20 years. **She** must be the main character.

But wait a moment. Look at verse 11, it doesn't seem to fit into the flow of the **story** line. *'Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh.'* Then look down to verse 17. *'Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and Heber the Kenite.'*

The **Kenites** were distant **relations** of the Israelites, descended from Jethro, who was Moses' father-in-law, who we read about in the book of Exodus. But **Heber** was friendly with Jabin the Canaanite king, so Sisera would have been expecting the **welcome** from an ally. Unfortunately for **him**, Heber was **out** when he arrived, and only Jael was at home and she clearly didn't **share** her husband's feelings.

?Co-incidence that the family moved campsite, just down the road from the battlefield? Co-incidence that Heber wasn't there? Co-incidence that Jael didn't share her husband's friendly feelings towards Jabin and Sisera? Co-incidence that she could handle a hammer and tent peg? Just co-**incidence**? Really? I don't **think** so.

Where's God? God's the one putting Jael in the right **place** to deliver his people, at the exact **time** that Sisera would come seeking for help, with the right **allegiance** to God's people, with the opportunity, strength and **ability** to strike the blow to deliver his people.

Who's the most important character in deliverance? Deborah? Barak? Or Jael? **None** of them is most important – we see here that God's orchestrating the story all the way through – **his** involvement is the most important aspect of the story. We see God's hand at work **throughout** – **he's** the one working out salvation. He uses Deborah – a godly woman who knows and understands God's mind; he uses Barak – a man of faith and obedience, keen to fight for God knowing God's presence with him, giving God the glory; God makes sure that even a faithless man, Heber, moves his tent so that his wife can destroy the enemy of God's people; he uses **nature** in the storm. He brings all these things **together** to deliver his people when they call out to him in verse 3. *'God works all things **together** for the good of those who **love** him.'*

We started off by saying that the Israelites needed rescuing. We see overwhelmingly that the one who **achieves** that rescue for his people is **God**. *'The Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army...'* verse 15. 8

Verse 23, *'On that day God subdued Jabin the Canaanite king before the Israelites ... until they destroyed him.'*

We need rescuing. **Physical** rescue from troubles and difficulties is easy to recognise. But we must recognise that the most important and **vital** rescue we need is **spiritual**. Most of all we need rescuing from the power of sin. The **Israelites** failed to recognise this. They went on **repeating** their mistakes, they turned away from God over and over again. We **mustn't** make the same mistake.

God is our rescuer. God is our deliverer. God is our Saviour.

No human can save us permanently. At the end of Deborah's song in chapter 5, we read that the land had physical peace for forty years. But God's deliverance, his way of salvation from **sin** is **forever**. Jesus came to give eternal life, **forever**, peace with God **forever**. This is the deliverance we all need – spiritual deliverance – deliverance from sin through Jesus.

Do we know the mind of God, like Deborah? Do we have the faith of Barak, enjoying the presence of God? Are we like Jael, available to be an instrument to bring glory to God? Have we experienced his salvation? Do we know that we're at peace with our God? Have we known his hand at work in our lives?