

Faithfulness From the Unexpected

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[0 : 00] Hey Church, good morning. It's 1030 now so I'm going to go ahead and get us started. I appreciate you all joining me, although from a distance and virtually it would be super helpful if you are on Facebook and you're able to comment. If you could just make a comment so that we know that you're with us and so it gives us a small sense of community even as we're separated and it also helps me to not feel like I'm just completely alone in my family room talking into a cell phone.

We're picking back up with our series in the book of Judges. Before we do that though, a couple announcements I want to remind you guys of. First of all, next Sunday, November 5th, is our celebration Sunday for our Grit and Grace Generosity Initiative. So next Sunday we're going to announce the number of commitments and we're also having lunch after worship so I just want you all to save the date for that. We're going to have, I believe, Rudy's barbecue. I hope I'm not speaking out of turn on that, but it will be good and be a time for us to celebrate together. There's also going to be fun activities for children. So please mark November 5th on your calendar. Speaking of grit and grace, the timing of us having a snow day is unfortunate because I know some of you are hoping to turn in your commitment cards today.

If you can just get those to us to the church office before November 5th, that will help us to add your number to our final number. With that, let's go ahead and get started. We are picking back up in our series in the book of Judges. Remember, we took five weeks off for our Grit and Grace Generosity Initiative, and we're picking back up in Judges chapter 4. You'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about a need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. You'll remember that it's about our need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. And we're also reminded of the power of spirit-enabled leadership. I'll add to that that the book of Judges is also about God's mercy. It's about his mercy to hard-hearted people. We're picking up in the middle of a story, so we sliced it in half. The beginning of the story was the story of Barak and Sisera.

Right in the beginning of Judges chapter 4, you'll remember that Deborah gave a word to Barak, telling him, hey, you need to go fight Sisera. But Sisera hesitated, and he placed conditions on his obedience. So we saw the importance of courageous obedience, and we also saw the danger of placing those conditions on our obedience. We're going to see the other side of the coin this week as we look at the character of Jael. She's going to be not a negative example like Barak. She's actually going to be only positive. She's going to be an example of that courageous and faithful obedience.

[2 : 54] And so our question this morning is very simple, and it's this. Why does God use unexpected people? Why does God use unexpected people? And hopefully, if you're familiar with the story, you know that Jael is very unexpected. We are picking up in Judges chapter 4. We're starting at verse 17, and I invite you to turn with me there. You can turn in your phone or your Bible. I would say your worship guide, but unfortunately, I think I'm the only one who has one of these. But it will be good to have your Bible or your phone, because I am at the beginning going to refer back to the beginning of chapter 4. With that, remember that this is God's Word. God tells us that the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever. And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 4, starting at verse 17.

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 Hatsor and the house of Heber the Kenite. 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. Verse 19. 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. 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. 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. Verse 22. 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 into her tent, and there lay Sisera dead with the tent peg in his temple. So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. 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. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you this morning that we are able to connect with each other virtually, even as we are separated physically.

We do ask for the safety of our city and those in it, those on the roads, that you would protect them. And we ask that you would help us this morning as we dive into your word, that you would speak clearly to us, that you would remove the distractions that come with being virtual rather than in person, that you would still use your word in a powerful way in our lives, you'd speak clearly to us of your grace, and that we would respond with obedience and faith and love. And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we come into the story of JL, we are picking up in the middle, actually, of a larger story. And so it's important for us to remember what's happened before. If you have your Bible open, you can see earlier in the chapter, what we saw, I guess it was six weeks ago now. So verse six of chapter four, Deborah delivers this message to Barak, and she tells Barak, hey, it's your job to go and defeat Sisera. Remember, Sisera is working for Jabin king of Canaan. We see that in verse two. And then she doesn't just tell him what God's will is for him. She also gives him a great promise. Verse seven, she says, look, victory is yours. God is going to give you great success. So it's not just that you have this great task in front of you. You have everything that you need. You've been given a promise of God's support.

You know that you're going to be victorious over Sisera. And so that's why it's so shocking in verse eight when Barak says, okay, I will go, but only under this one condition. I will go if you, Deborah, go with me. And that's where Deborah's sort of rebuke comes in in verse nine. She says, okay, I'll go with you, but you're not going to get the glory. The glory is going to go not to you.

[7 : 25] It's going to go to a woman. That's an important point to remember because as we head into this next part of the story, that theme, that idea of glory is going to continue. We are going to see that Barak does not give up on this idea of glory. And then in verses nine and 10, Deborah and Barak go down.

And then in verses 11 through 16, we see that they waged war against Sisera. And at the very end, they rout them. So verse 16, all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword. Not a man was left. That is where we pick up for this week. It's important for us to know that as we come into verse 17, but Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael. For there was peace between Jabin, the king of Canaan and the house of Heber, the Kenite. Verse 16, we know that Barak is chasing him.

And it's likely here, based on what we're told about Jael, this is maybe even a prearranged site. Sisera knows, hey, I have this person who I have an alliance with. If things go sideways, I can run there. We had a little footnote in the last section about this man, Heber, the Kenite.

Verse 11, last time we were told he had separated from the Kenites. He'd moved from the south up to the north. Now, who are the Kenites? Well, we saw them in chapter one, verse 16. These are allies of the Israelites. They're the descendants of Moses's father-in-law. So they're not, they're not ethnically Israelites. They're more just associated with them. They work with them. They have an understanding with them. And so we would expect these folks to be loyal to Israel. And yet Heber, the Kenite, has gone off the map. He has decided instead he's actually going to have an alliance with Sisera, Jabin, the king of Canaan. And not only is he going to have an alliance with them, he's moved from the south up to the north. And so that helps us understand why Sisera thinks it's a good idea. He's fleeing this defeat that he should make it to the tent of JL. Sisera is on the run here. Verse 16, Barak is pursuing Sisera. And why is he pursuing him? Well, he's been told by God, remember in verse 9, Deborah gave him this word, hey, someone's going to receive the glory and the honor. It's just not going to be you. It's going to be a woman. Well, apparently, Barak thinks that he's going to be able to outrun this. Barak is going to somehow be able to overturn the word that [9 : 56] Hekka has already given. And so one commentator says this, Barak is not only running after Sisera, he is running after glory. Will Barak be able to outwit God? Will he be able to overturn

the verdict that has already been given? It's with that tension that we see Sisera running to the tent of JL. We understand there must be some sort of treaty between them, because it tells us there is peace between Jabin, the king of Hopsor, and Heber the Kenai. You'll remember, Jabin is Sisera's boss.

So Sisera's boss has a treaty with JL's husband. JL here shows him, at least initially, great hospitality. She meets him, verse 18, says, hey, come in here. There's no need to be afraid. Of course, he knows, right? There's this treaty here. Then she gives him a little blanket and puts it over him, covers him with a rug. It's almost like there's this motherly overtone that JL is putting Sisera, in a sense, to bed. He asks for water, and she, being this just great, over-the-top host, decides, no, water's not good enough for you. Actually, I'm going to give you milk instead. And then he asks her to stand guard at the opening of the tent and to make sure if anyone comes that she tells them, no, there's no one there. So we see initially, JL is showing him this over-the-top hospitality, milk rather than water. She gives him a blanket. She practically tucks him into bed. She's there prepared to protect him. But then the story shifts a little bit, and she's not showing over-the-top hospitality. JL is actually showing the opposite of hospitality.

Verse 21 is where the twist happens. She takes a tent peg and a hammer, and while Sisera is sleeping, she drives it through his head. So on the one hand, it looks like she's welcoming him with this ancient Near Eastern hospitality. On the other hand, she's been preparing this whole time to put him to bed, not for a little bit, but permanently. It's not just that Sisera here is killed. In fact, he has maybe the most disgraceful death that he could experience. He's killed not by another warrior. He's killed by a woman. And he's not just killed by a woman. She uses what would be considered to be a woman's instrument. The tent would have been considered to be the sphere that was under the control of the woman, and so a tent peg would have been a woman's tool in that time. So killed by a woman with a woman's tool, not while he's fighting and protecting himself, not in some valiant battle, but instead simply while he's sleeping. In other words, there is nothing honorable about Barak's death. God has taken the enemy of his people. He's put him to shame. He's disgraced him. It's with that that we then get to meet Barak again. He's coming in, verse 22, and you can imagine Barak is excited. It seems like maybe he's getting close to Sisera. He has exactly what he wants. JL comes out to meet him. Again, this is verse 22, and she says, come and I will show you the man whom you are seeking. Now we can imagine what's going through Sisera's mind at this point. He's been told he's not going to get the honor. It's going to go to a woman. But look, he's been successful. He has found this man. He's going to be the one to get the honor and the glory. He might be saying something to JL like this, don't worry, little lady, I'll take care of him. And so then he walks into the tent ready to be the mighty and victorious man who gets the victory. And he has the ultimate surprise, disappointment, and letdown.

[13 : 58] God's word has actually stood. God meant what he said. The glory does not go to Barak. It goes to jail.

She's not presenting him a victim to be killed. She's presenting him with a corpse. His pursuit has not overturned God's word. His pursuit has proved God to be correct. It turns out that God was right when he spoke through Deborah in verse nine. 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. Barak could not outwit or outrun God.

Barak failed to take God at his word. Honor ultimately escapes the one who runs after it. Honor comes to the one who is faithful. And we see in this passage again, the same pattern that's come before in the scriptures and the pattern that will come after, which is that God uses unexpected people in unexpected ways to accomplish his purposes. Jael is the wrong person from every perspective.

She's a woman. It's not just that she's a woman here in battle. It's that she is not even an Israelite woman. And it's not even that she's not an Israelite. It is that her husband is actually a military ally with Jabin, the king of Hazor. And so she's wrong from all these different perspectives. She's the wrong gender. She's the wrong ethnicity. She's the wrong alliance. And it's not even that. It's even more in verse nine when Deborah says, hey, I will go with you, but the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.

[16 : 02] What would be our logical assumption there? Well, we would assume, especially if we were hearing this story for the first time, that Deborah is saying, I, Deborah, am going to receive the glory.

And so this narrative, it surprises us at multiple points. It doesn't just surprise us that it's Jael. It surprises us that it is not Deborah. So that raises again the question that I mentioned at the very beginning. Why is it that God uses unexpected people? God uses unexpected people because God uses those who are obedient. God uses unexpected people because he uses those who take him at his word.

God is not interested in who is the strongest, the wisest, the most gifted, or the most talented. God is not interested in the one that everyone else expects. God is interested in using the one who obeys.

God, therefore, used Jael. He used Jael's violation of an alliance between her husband and this king. He uses her violation of these sacred ancient Near Eastern norms of hospitality.

He upends what is expected of women in general and wives in particular. He upends what is expected of hosts. That, by the way, raises a tension in this story, which is what do we do with all of those unexpected things about Jael?

[17:47] Should we see her as someone who is wicked, but God uses for good ends? Should we see her as someone who is righteous, but God uses for good ends?

Should we say that she did what she did in her way and that doesn't justify it? Like, how do we wrestle through all these things that Jael does that up in treaties and cultural norms and expectations?

Well, one of the principles that we use when we read the Bible is we believe that Scripture interprets Scripture. In other words, one part of the Bible can help us to understand another part. Thankfully, then, we have chapter 5, which we'll see next week, which follows chapter 4. And chapter 5 helps us understand how we should think about Jael. Chapter 5, and this, if you want to look ahead, it's in verses 24 through 27, tells us about Jael, and it only speaks positively about her. It tells us about Jael, and it says she's the most blessed of women. She's the most blessed of those who live among tents. In other words, the view that we're given from the Bible of Jael is extremely positive.

[18:55] She is the one who obeys when no one else does. At least the one who obeys when Barak does. Deborah, obviously, is faithful. And so in the midst of all of that discussion about how to think of Jael, we don't want to miss the main point.

Jael is the bravest of all. She is the one who remains faithful when others hesitate. Barak hesitates. Barak places conditions on his obedience. Jael does not hesitate. She places zero conditions on her obedience. In fact, Jael faces a much greater risk than Barak does.

Barak has received a direct promise of success from God. We don't see something similar from Jael. All we see is that she understands which side she's on.

She does not go after, as one person has said, after her husband's alliance. No. She remains faithful to God above everything else.

[19:56] She remains faithful and committed despite her husband. And she does whatever it takes to defeat God's enemies. So we see this ironic inversion in the story.

I've mentioned this before. In fact, we're told this very thing in 1 Samuel 2.

God says, For those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Jael honors God.

She takes great risk. And so she also receives honor. Not because she's looking for it. She's not running after it like Barak is. But because she obeys God above all else.

Now the danger, as I say things like this, is that you might think, Well, I guess it's time for me to start using tent pegs. And of course I want to pull you back from that and remind you that in the Old Testament, we see things battle as very physical.

[21:17] In the New Testament, we see this shift to things being very spiritual. Now, I don't mean to create a false distinction there, but even in blessings in the Old Testament, blessings are spoken of in a physical way.

In the New Testament, blessings are spoken of in a spiritual way. We also see here that God has given a direct mandate to Israel to go into this holy war.

That's not something that we experience in the New Testament. And so instead, as we think about people who live in the age of the New Testament, the age of the church, what it looks like for us to be like Jael, it looks like us being willing to engage not in physical war, but spiritual war.

If we were in person together this morning, we would have already read our New Testament reading, which was going to come from Ephesians chapter 6, which talks about putting on the whole armor of God.

It talks about the reality that we see in the book of Ephesians. Ephesians chapter 6, verse 10 says, Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. For us to be people who are like Jael, that's what we want to be.

[22 : 20] We want to stand strong in the Lord and the strength of his might, obeying him no matter the cost. We want to have the same kind of obedience that Jael has, which is risky obedience.

Risky obedience means we share our hope in Jesus Christ, no matter what other people might think or say. It means we raise our children to love and know God, no matter the cost or the ridicule. It means that we value human life as something that's incredibly sacred, because we know that each person's made in the image of God, and we do that no matter what it costs us in our convenience, in our comfort, in our wealth.

It means that we do what's right, even when the whole world is against us. We also see this other reminder with Jael, which is that sometimes leaders falter, and it's the little people who stand up strong.

Sometimes the leaders of God's people are the ones who are filled with fear and cowardice.

Sometimes it's the unexpected ones. Those who live in the corners of the room, the Jael's, who know God's promises, who believe them, and who take God at his word.

[23 : 43] Athanasius of Alexandria said this, If the world is against the truth, then I am against the world. Jael's husband's alliance, the rules of hospitality, the expectations on her as a woman were all against God's people and his plan.

And so Jael was against all of those things, because she stood with God. Now how do we have this type of courage, this type of obedience?

Well, we certainly don't have it by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We certainly don't have it by willing it. What we know from the Bible is we actually need a new birth, a new heart, to be able to follow God in this way.

That's what Jesus told Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. And so really we need to remember God's faithfulness and his promises to us. We obey in the way that Jael obeys, because and when we believe Psalm 20, verse 7, that some trust in chariots and some in horses.

We trust in the name of the Lord our God. We obey because of what we see in Psalm 46, verses 1 and 2.

[25 : 00] God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.

We can be faithful because God has been faithful to us. We can obey because we know that his promises are true. I asked you at the beginning, why does God use unexpected people?

And we've seen our first answer. He uses unexpected people because he uses obedient people. The second reason is this. He uses it for his own glory. We know from the New Testament, God uses the weak to shame the strong.

God wants us to trust in him more than we trust in our methods, our skills, our ways. The glory of men comes to nothing so that the glory of God would be even greater.

Isaiah 42, verse 8 says this, My glory I will not share with a man. God is not interested in sharing success with those who are hungry for glory.

[26 : 13] No, God is interested in us looking to him and trusting him alone. And so that's why as we look at this narrative, you know, it would be tempting for us to kind of get a, for me to give you kind of a go-girl message, right?

We have Deborah and we have JL showing up and being brave where the men are weak. And that is true in a sense. But if we leave ourselves there, if we place the accent mark, if we underscore that, we have missed the point of this passage.

Because verse 15 and verse 23 tell us who actually won. Verse 15 says this, Did Barak, did Deborah, did JL defeat Sisera?

In a sense, yes. Ultimately, no. Ultimately, God won the victory. He used unexpected people so that we would see his glory and we would give it to him.

Verse 23 tells us the same thing. So on that day, God subdued Jabin, the king of Canaan, before the people of Israel. Glory belongs to God.

[27 : 33] It belongs to God alone. God will honor whom he chooses to honor. God will use whom he uses.

And God will give the glory to those who honor him. Those who honor me, I will honor them. And those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.

Now we're told the same thing in the New Testament in James chapter 4, verse 6. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And so, brothers and sisters, God will accomplish his purposes no matter what.

God will do what he has said he would do. Christian, trust him. Trust what he said.

Follow him in courageous obedience. One theologian has pointed out that the image that we see here of Jael driving a stake through Sisera's head reminds us of God's promise in Genesis chapter 3, verse 15.

[28 : 48] That ultimately he is going to crush the head of the serpent. The serpent there being a representation of Satan. And what do we see here? We see someone whose name is Sisera, which sounds a lot like a snake.

And what do we see but his head being crushed? And so, as believers in the New Testament, we know now how God has brought that promise to fulfillment.

We know that he has crushed evil once and for all. He has crushed the head of the servant in his son and our Savior, our Lord Jesus. That we have already seen what a Jael or a Barak or a Deborah could only look forward to.

We have seen the faithfulness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in destroying and defeating evil once and forever. And we see that he did that when our Lord Jesus came and he lived the perfect life that we should have lived.

He died the death that we deserve to die. And what do we find in 1 Corinthians chapter 15? Paul tells us he's defeated the enemy. The last enemy to be defeated is death.

[29 : 55] And so that's where we gain our great confidence. We don't stir it up within ourselves. No, we gain our confidence from knowing that God has already crushed the head of the serpent. And so we have enormous confidence and trust in him.

God will accomplish his purposes. And he will use the unexpected to do it. Because he uses those who are obedient for his own glory.

Christian, will he use you? Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and we thank you for your word and the encouragement that we find in it.

We ask that you would be at work in our lives and our hearts. Reminding us that you have conquered evil. And using that to grow in us a great confidence in you that leads to courageous obedience.

And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Thanks to all of you for joining me this morning. And stay safe today. I look forward to seeing you all soon.

[31 : 04] Thanks so much. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.