

Israel's Mighty Oppression Under the Canaanites

Text: Judges 4:1-8

Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart

How many judges were there in ancient Israel? Excluding Abimelech, who was not a judge but a king ruling only part of Israel and described as the “bramble king” in Judges 9, there are thirteen true judges in the Book of Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. Adding Eli and Samuel from I Samuel brings the number to fifteen. Our focus is Deborah and Barak, who are the first judges to be given more than one chapter – Judges 4 and 5. They are the first “big” judges and the first “dual” judges, working together in a way that foreshadows the unity of different roles in God’s deliverance. Deborah stands out as the only female judge, and together, they are the only judges who composed a song – recorded in Judges 5. Judges 3 outlines Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, and Judges 4-5 transitions to the more extensive narrative of Deborah and Barak. Their story begins with Israel’s grievous oppression under the Canaanites, described as a just sale.

The Just Sale

Judges 4:2 declares, “The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan.” This may seem jarring, but Scripture often describes sin in commercial terms. While Ahab “sold himself to do wickedness,” indicating personal responsibility, here it is the Lord who sells His people. Judges 4:1 states, “The children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, when Ehud was dead.” Judges 5:8 clarifies they chose “new gods,” and I Samuel 12:9-10 identifies these as Baal and Ashtaroath. This cycle of apostasy is persistent: sin, judgment, crying for help, and deliverance. Their sin warranted God’s judgment – He *sold* them.

Before this, Israel had been sold to Mesopotamia (Judg. 3:8) and Moab (Judg. 3:12). Now, in the north of Israel, God sells them to Canaanite king Jabin and his general Sisera (Judg. 4:2). To be sold into someone’s hand means they were dominated and controlled. They were not taken into captivity like in Egypt or Babylon but remained in their land as vassals – oppressed but not displaced. Judges 4:3 says they were “mightily oppressed” for twenty years. This was longer than previous judgments – eight years under Mesopotamia, eighteen under Moab.

This oppression was severe. Sisera commanded 900 iron chariots – elite military hardware of the day. Judges 5:8 poses, “Was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?” They were vastly outmatched. Like Nazi-occupied Europe, Israel was subjugated in their homeland. They were not enslaved in body but crushed in spirit and autonomy. The language of Judges describes a divine transaction: Jehovah sold His people because they had spiritually prostituted themselves to idols. This echoes the medieval church, laden with image worship, Mariolatry, and transubstantiation. Salvation was made to depend on free will and merit. Indulgences were sold as passports from purgatory, and Scripture was hidden. The people were spiritual vassals to Rome, dominated by a false church that robbed them of peace, assurance, and the gospel.

The spiritual bondage of that era mirrors what happens in personal apostasy. Psalm 19:13 pleads, “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me.” Psalm 119:133 echoes, “Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.” When a believer sins presumptuously – knowing the truth but ignoring it – or commits great sin, they experience a kind of spiritual slavery. The sin *rules* them. The child of God, though inwardly renewed, still has a sinful nature, and yielding to it gives way to dominion. This dominion is never total or permanent for the elect, but it is real and grievous.

When God “sells” His child into this dominion, He does so with a loving purpose. He chastens to humble and restore. The selling is not into hell, but into bitter experience of bondage. The believer loses joy, assurance, and spiritual clarity. Often, such a person no longer delights in God’s Word or public worship. They are dull, sluggish, and irritable. They know something is wrong, but are often unwilling to admit the cause. Yet even here, God’s grace works. He waits for the sincere cry. Judges 4:3 says, “The children of Israel cried unto the Lord.” Their cry was not just from suffering, but from sin. The deliverance begins not when circumstances change, but when the heart repents. God is pleased to send deliverance through means, and the means here are weak, so that all glory is His.

The Weak Deliverers

In Judges, God raises up deliverers, but repeatedly, their weaknesses are emphasized. Ehud was left-handed, Gideon needed signs, Jephthah was driven out by his brethren, Samson was controlled by lust. Many had lowly or scandalous origins: Gideon from a weak family, Jephthah the son of a harlot, Samson and Samuel born to barren women. God uses the weak.

Deborah's perceived weakness was being a woman. I Peter 3:7 calls women "the weaker vessel." Barak's weakness is more explicit: reluctance and conditional obedience. Judges 4:6-8 records Deborah summoning Barak with God's command, but Barak replies, "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go." He refuses to lead unless accompanied by Deborah. This lack of initiative weakened his appearance among his men. And yet, once Barak committed, he never turned back. Hebrews 11:32 honors him as a man of faith. His early hesitations serve to highlight God's grace working through frailty.

And God delights to do it this way. He confounds the mighty by choosing what is base. He gets glory by doing great things with what the world despises. Think of the apostles: unlearned fishermen. Think of Paul, whose bodily presence was weak. God uses the weak to shame the strong. The victory over Sisera came not by the sword of Barak alone, but by the hand of a woman—Jael. Deborah too stands not as a contradiction to divine order, but as a rebuke to weak men and a testament to God's sufficiency.

Why does Scripture highlight the frailties of judges? To direct us to Christ. The flawed judges foreshadow the Messiah, who too was counted weak. Christ came without wealth, army, or status. Isaiah 53:2-3 says, "He hath no form nor comeliness... there is no beauty that we should desire him." Psalm 22:6 describes Him as "a worm, and no man." On the cross, nailed and derided, He seemed defeated. But there He triumphed.

I Corinthians 1:25 proclaims, "The weakness of God is stronger than men." The cross, in worldly eyes, is weakness. But it is God's power to save. Human wisdom desires a kingdom of force—a political messiah, a military conqueror. This is seen in Judaism's Davidic hopes, Islam's legal power, and postmillennialism's dream of a visibly Christian empire. But the gospel presents a different victory—through humility, suffering, and the cross.

Christ's reign begins with crucifixion and advances through the preaching of the Word and the work of the Spirit. The believer, likewise, learns strength through weakness. Paul says in II Corinthians 12:10, "When I am weak, then am I strong." Christ strengthens His people not by removing all trials, but by working through them. His grace is made perfect in weakness.

So when believers read of Barak's fear or Deborah's exception, they are not to scorn but to see. These point to the Saviour who, though weak, conquered sin and death. The believer who falls under sin's dominion must cry out in repentance. And looking to Christ, he finds not a worldly king but a crucified Saviour, who delivers not just from circumstance but from sin itself. Through

weakness, God brings victory. Through sorrow, repentance. And through Christ, peace.

This is the way of the cross – the way of Judges 4. God's strength is not always found in chariots or shields, but in prayer, repentance, faith, and obedience. He exalts the humble. He strengthens those who know they cannot fight alone. And He delivers, in every age, not because His people are strong, but because His mercy endures forever.

Our Father in heaven, bless to us Thy word. Overturn all the foolish worldly thinking that is naturally in us and help us to understand Thee in the light of the cross and the humility of Scripture. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.