

Sunday 8 November 2015
Otumoetai Baptist Church
Un-faithful: The book of Judges

One step forward in obedience

(BLACK)

For us parents out there, I know that what I'm about to say is going to really shock us and stretch our thinking. But imagine for a moment that your child, your precious child, does something wrong. I know, shocking right!

Maybe they do something they're not supposed to, like hit their brother or sister, or draw on the wall with felt pens, or they don't listen to you. Like I said, shocking!

So what do you do? You discipline your child, teach them the error of their ways, ask them to try harder, to listen more etcetera etcetera ... and then all is right in the world. No more disobedience. They will now and forevermore always listen to you.

At least that's what it says in the handbook you're given when you have a child. Right?

Well, it seems like children – well, at least two of mine so far! – have not read that handbook or know that is how they are meant to behave.

Instead, it seems like there's a cycle. They are really good for a time; then something will happen and they'll misbehave or be disobedient; there will be a punishment, time-out if you like, and then things will go back to normal.

Then when you think you've got a handle on things, the cycle begins again and you find that those hairs on your head that used to be black are now a somewhat grey colour. That extra amount of patience you had seems to be wearing thin. And it seems like you are eating more sugary food and drink than normal!

Or maybe that's just me!

I joke, but in all seriousness I think all us parents want is for our kids to take one step forward in obedience.

That's it. Just one step. We're not asking for the world – well, most of us anyway! - just a step in the right direction. One step forward in obedience.

We've started a new series here at OBC looking at the book of Judges.

Brian did an excellent job last week of setting the scene and tone of Judges.

(SLIDE 1)

We've named this series 'Un-faithful', because throughout the book of Judges there is a consistent theme running through it: Israel's unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness.

This is shown through a repetitive cycle, similar to the one with our kids: the children of Israel serve the Lord; then they misbehave and start serving other Gods; the Lord punishes them by delivering them into the hands of other nations (putting them into timeout if you like!); the children of Israel shout out to the Lord to save them; the Lord raises a Judge who delivers them from their enemies and brings salvation.

And then the cycle starts again. Sin, slavery, shout, salvation. Sin, slavery, shout, salvation.

For the most part of Judges, the children of Israel are portrayed as disobedient, sinful children. And the God of Israel is portrayed as a patient parent who lovingly but forcefully disciplines his children before ultimately delivering them from their oppressors.

(SLIDE 2)

Like a parent, He is looking for that one step forward in obedience.

Judges is set just after the death of the great leader, Joshua. Joshua and his followers were obedient to the Lord and the end of the book of Joshua nicely summarises this.

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In the last chapter, verse 31 we read: "Israel served

the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel."

During Joshua's time and even after his death, Israel were obedient to the Lord and lived lives pleasing to Him. You might recall that Joshua was alive during the time of Moses and became Moses' successor. So in Moses, Joshua had seen modelled to him a capable, dynamic and mostly faithful leader.

This transferred over to Joshua's leadership and how he was able to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

But more so than Moses influencing and raising up Joshua to succeed him, ultimately it was the Lord who raised Him up and enabled him to have victory during this time of Israel's history.

God raised up Moses when the people needed a deliverer. God raised up Joshua when the people needed a successor. And In Judges, we see that God raises up a judge when the people need a deliverer, a new leader.

And it is into this scene we have the first three Judges: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

Without going into much detail here, all three of them contributed to the Lord delivering His people from other nations and took steps of obedience to make this happen.

So we have the first three Judges, all men, and we see this cycle of sin, slavery, shout, salvation repeated.

This morning, we're going to locate ourselves in the next part of Israel's story and remember that this is part of the wider story of God preparing and delivering a people for Himself.

(SLIDE 4)

We're in Judges Chapter 4 verse 1. Let's pick up the story there.

When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth Hagoyim. And the children of the Lord cried out to the Lord; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel.

Here is the cycle. Sin, slavery, shout, and we're waiting for salvation.

Keep tabs on Sisera. He features prominently in this story and is not really a nice guy at all.

It's like an action movies where the writer takes the time to set up the villain first before we get to meet the hero. We know that Sisera has violently oppressed the Israelites and also that he has a decent sized nine hundred chariots of Iron to intimidate and plunder them.

Can you imagine being oppressed, being slaves to someone for twenty years? The Israelites would be made to work hard, long, and under highly stressful circumstances.

Must be time for that knight in shining armour to enter the scene. Let's keep reading.

(SLIDE 5)

Verse 4:

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Here is the first surprise in the story, the knight in shining armour is a woman. But not just a woman, a woman Judge!

Readers should be shocked when we read these verses. In a time and culture that was almost exclusively male-dominated, it is astonishing that God raises up a woman to fulfil this role.

So what do we know about Deborah?

Well firstly, she is a prophetess – she received and proclaimed God's Word. She was God's mouthpiece to the people. She spoke **to** the people **for** God. What a tremendous responsibility!

Secondly, she is a wife – the Bible doesn't tell us anything about her husband or their marriage. But it's safe to say that back then, a woman's place was in the home, while a man's is in the public arena. So this tells us something about Deborah.

But most shockingly, Deborah is a judge - *the* Judge of Israel at the time. The top position of the nation. She had the final authority in legislative, social and military matters.

(SLIDE 6)

When we hear the word Judge, we automatically think of a court room, with lawyers, defendants, a jury, “objections” and the like. But Deborah’s court room was under a palm tree and she must have been good at her job as we just read that the palm tree was named after her! I’d prefer her court room then our ones!

Okay now we’ve set the scene some more, let’s carry on the story.

(SLIDE 7)

Verse six:

Then she (Deborah) sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, ‘Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun; and against you I will deploy Sisera (There he is, that dreadful villain!), the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into you hand?’”

(SLIDE 8)

And Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!”

So she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah arose and

went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his command, and Deborah went up with him.

What’s immediately obvious here is it seems like the roles have been reversed for Deborah and Barak.

Deborah is the faithful leader. Barak seems to be the less faithful follower. Deborah is calling the shots. Barak seems to be doubting. Deborah is taking a step forward in obedience. Barak seems to be hesitant and not trusting God at His Word.

What’s **not** immediately obvious is that Barak has heard from the Lord before this. Deborah says to him, “Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded ... “

Deborah is not telling Barak something he doesn’t already know. She is reminding him of the truth he already possesses.

See, Barak’s home was a place called Kedesh-Naphtali. “Kedesh” means sanctuary. Evidently there was a holy site there in Naphtali, and there may have been a very small glimmer of truth and light there. In any case, Barak knows the truth. He knows that he should be a man of faith. He knows that God can deliver Israel, but he is impotent, powerless, and afraid to act.

Deborah is calling Barak to go back to what he knows is true, and to act on it. To trust God and His Word. To take a step forward in obedience.

(SLIDE 9)

Which begs the question, who are the Deborah's in your life? Who are the people calling you back to following God and trusting Him in his Word?

We all need to listen to the Deborah's in our lives. And take heed of their words.

So coming back to our story, initially, it seems like Barak is a bit of a wuss, the ultimate coward. And admittedly, this preaches well (especially to women folk!); however, it is not the best understanding.

Rather, it seems that Barak wants Deborah to accompany him so that he can be assured of God's presence. He wants Deborah the prophetess with him so that he can consult with her when he needs to. He wants that confidence as he goes out.

The problem though is that God's will has already been revealed to Barak, and he is reluctant to act on it or have confidence in it.

And we shouldn't be too hard on Barak as it's easy to be passive when we receive God's commands. For Barak, the command was to lead the Israelite army against Jabin's mighty army. For you and I, it will be something else.

God merely asks that we take one step forward in obedience, in faith. When we do so, God promises that He will intervene.

So Deborah agrees to go with Barak, but there is a cost. Barak will not get the glory of the battle. That prize will go to someone else, a woman. This is the second surprise in the story. And we naturally assume that this woman will be Deborah. Let's read on and see.

(SLIDE 10)

Verse eleven:

Now Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had separated himself from the Kenites and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kedesh.

And they reported to Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. So Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon.

This man Heber comes out of nowhere in the story, but this information will be important later.

So the stage is set for battle. Sisera, our villain, hears about Barak coming to face him. So Sisera gathers all his might and soldiers and goes to meet him.

(SLIDE 11)

Let's keep reading, from verse 14:

*Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this **is** the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.*

And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left. However, Sisera had fled away on foot ...

Through Deborah, Barak and the Israelites took a step in obedience that day. They believed the Lord at His Word that **today** was the day that He would deliver them.

The Lord got Sisera and his army running scared. Their time had come. Their oppression over the Israelites was almost over. And this was all based on God's Word, a good word.

Which is a good word for us as well. God has gone before us in all that we are facing at the moment. We might not understand everything, but we can trust God to keep His word and promise to deliver us from whatever may be oppressing us.

(SLIDE 12)

There is a memorable scene from John Bunyan's much-loved allegorical tale 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. The main character Christian is finding the pathway difficult and climbs over a lead to walk in a meadow bypath. The ground grows soggy and is covered with poisonous vines. The sky becomes black and poor Christian spends the night huddled at the foot of an oak tree, caught in a vicious downpour.

(SLIDE 13)

Next morning, Giant Despair comes upon him, captures him, beats him and imprisons him in the dungeon of Doubting Castle, with its grim battlements and thick, black walls. Christian tries to sing but he can't, his mood is dungeon-dark.

Giant Despair beats him mercilessly and Christian grows weaker each day.

In his cell he finds a rope, a knife, and a bottle, and for a moment he is tempted to end his misery.

But then one evening at about midnight he does something he hasn't done for a while ... he prays.

And then a little before day, good Christian, breaks out into a passionate speech: "What a fool am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key called Promise, which will, I am sure, open any lock in Doubting Castle."

(SLIDE 14)

It does! Using the key of God's promise, Christian escapes, never again to fall into the clutches of Giant Despair or Doubting Castle.

I don't know what your Giant Despair or Doubting Castle is, but I do know that we all have and experience these in our lives. Some of you may be stuck in that castle now, or experiencing that despair in your current circumstances.

If that's you, let me speak to you and encourage you.

Throughout the book of Judges and this account, the Israelites experience Giant Despair and Doubting Castle. But the promise of God – the promise made way back in the time of Abraham – to lead his people into the Promised Land and bless them is a promise that God never breaks and He won't break His promise to you either.

Coming back to our story, Sisera the dastardly villain, has done something that no general of an army would ever think of doing: he is running! He's packing himself! And it may seem like he's escaped, but this chicken is about to run into a fox!

(SLIDE 15)

From verse 17:

However, Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear." And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket.

Seems like Sisera is getting quite cosy here.

(SLIDE 16)

Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him. And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No.'"

Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in

her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

That's the brutal, blunt end to Sisera and his oppression. And the final surprise in the story! Sisera's ending does indeed come from a woman, but not Deborah, it is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who we met earlier in the story.

We don't know her motives. But we do know that God uses this woman to deliver Israel from their oppressor.

And she is a more unlikely than Deborah. Jael is not only a woman. She is a Gentile woman. She's not from one of the tribes of Israel. She is a foreigner to Israel and Israel's God.

But by the standards of ancient warfare, Jael is a hero. She decisively and courageously helped God's people at a critical moment in history.

If we keep reading, Jael waits at the entrance to the tent and when Barak comes, she leads him inside and shows him his enemy, dead.

And so all that Deborah had spoken over Barak and the Israelites happened. God's Word became true. Israel defeated the army of Sisera, and Sisera was sold into the hand of a woman.

The next chapter goes into a detailed account of the battle and who God used and didn't use (who was obedient and who wasn't) to deliver Israel, but we're going to finish here at the end of chapter 4.

(SLIDE 17)

Verses 23 and 24 conclude this account and mark a turning point for Israel.

So on that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had defeated Jabin king of Canaan.

The defeat of Sisera and his army was a major turning point in history because it put the Israelites on the offensive and the Canaanites on the defensive. It levelled the playing field for future battles.

So as we come to a close this morning, we see that God delivered Israel from her enemies using a very unlikely combination of people: a wife and mother, a hesitant general, and a Gentile woman. These people were living their normal, everyday lives. They didn't think anything was going to change, and they sure didn't think God would use them to make those changes. But God did.

And as surprising as the story is, I'm not sure what should surprise us more: that God uses ordinary people or that God gets mixed up with us unpredictable, insecure, hesitant humans at all.

No one would expect God to use Deborah to lead Israel, but he did! No one would expect Him to use Jael, a housewife, to conquer the greatest military leader of the day, but he did! No one would expect God to sacrifice his own Son to save us from our sins, but he did that too!

Through this story and the book of Judges we see God's patient, compassionate delivery of His people despite their sin and rejection of Him. And we see Deborah the Judge living her life one step forward in obedience each day.

(SLIDE 18)

And this presents a picture of Christ on the cross.

Jesus died to deliver His people—all of those who would ever believe in Him—from their sin.

(SLIDE 19)

Although most of those who followed Him during His ministry would eventually fall away and reject Him, Jesus remained faithful to His promise and He went to the cross to die for us.

And I believe that is the message from this story for us today. Despite the cycle of sin that the children of Israel repeated over and over, and despite the cycle of sin that we experience in our lives today, God is still faithful to His Word and has raised up the ultimate Judge and Deliverer for us in Jesus.

He lived knowing the Cross was before Him. He lived one step forward in obedience each day.

As I've been preparing this message and thinking about the word 'obedience', I realise that it is not easy to talk about.

People hear it and they think "Oh great here's some rules to follow." But I understand obedience to be so much more than that. I think obedience is all about revering or loving someone so much that you are faithful to them. Despite the cost.

In the middle of the word is another word – 'die'. Obedience is all about dying. Dying to ourselves. Picking up our Cross. And following Jesus.

It's about learning to live our lives the way God wants us to live and not how we want to live.

Jesus, with the Cross before Him, said "Not my will, but your (My Father's) will be done."

Jesus lived a life of obedience. He knew exactly where He was heading. He knew the Cross was in front of Him. And it says in the Bible that for the joy set before Him, He walked in obedience and He rushed to that Cross.

For his disciples. For you. For me. For us.

You know, just last night Craig Vernall from Bethlehem Baptist was preaching to us at the Hui and what he said really struck a chord with me.

As Christians, we are not called to a gospel of comfort or convenience. We are not called to sit on our lazy boys and watch the world go by.

We are called to a gospel of the Cross. That is the centre of our faith and should be the centre of our lives.

And the Cross is all about obedience.

So as you go about the next day, week, month and so on, remember the Cross. Remember that God is calling us to be a people who take up our Cross each day and follow Christ, who say "Not my will be done, but your will be done", who trust in the promises of God, and who live taking one step forward in obedience each day.

May we be that people, that church, that community of faith.

I'm going to invite the worship team back up now and we're going to finish by singing and declaring our faith. As we do can I encourage you to take this opportunity to think about how you can respond to what God is saying to you this morning.

Let's pray.