

Judges 4

Intro January 28, 2007 God's Agents of Change

An icon of American humor is the light bulb joke, that endless-variation covering every imaginable culture, belief, occupation and special interest group. So that the question is asked:

How many members of a (given demographic group) does it take to change a light bulb?

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb? Three, but they're really only one.

How many Roman Catholics to change a light bulb? None. They always use candles instead.

Evangelicals? Evangelicals do not change light bulbs. They simply read out the instructions and hope the light bulb will decide to change itself.

How many Atheists does it take to change a light bulb? One. But they are still in darkness.

Methodists? Undetermined. Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb.

Unitarians? We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb.

However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

How many Lutherans to change the bulb? None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

How many Amish does it take to change a light bulb? What's a light bulb?

How many charismatics? A: One, since his hands are in the air anyway.

How many independent Baptist's does it take? Only one, anymore would be ecumenical.

How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? You know only God can change a light bulb!

Scottish Presbyterians: One. If there were two involved, someone might think they were dancing.

Cornerstone Presbyterians? We won't know till after our congregational meeting this afternoon to determine what we authorized the Session to do about our impending change.

When we know change is necessary, we may desire change, but don't have a clue what it looks like.

We may think change must occur in me or those around me, but still change is a challenge.

If you know of nothing you need to change in your life, this sermon will be of no benefit to you. You are excused and you may report to the nursery where there are plenty of babies who need to be changed. But if you struggle with change, real, deep change, then Judges 4 is for you.

The Book of Judges is about change. As the Jews settled the Promised Land they were commanded by God to be agents of change in that land. They were to rid the land of the intruders who settled there over the past centuries. But change did not come easily, largely because there was not a change in their life. Rather than change, they were fascinated by the cultures surrounding them. Affected by spiritual ADD, they soon apostatized, were distressed and then delivered. But as the pattern continues throughout Judges we see the pattern in our own lives, too. READ Judges 4.

Our passage begins with the need for a change, because one thing has not changed, the people again do evil in God's sight. In order to effect change, God gets his people to see their need for change. This time he does it at the cruel hand of Jabin, king of Hazor and his commander, Sisera.

Jabin of Hazor may not ring a bell for you, but it did 3000 years ago. It was only a generation or two before these events that Israel faced another king of Canaan called Jabin. In Joshua 11 Joshua obliterated the town of Hazor and killed Jabin, the king. Jabin is most likely a title more than a name, like Pharaoh. God, in a sense, resurrects an old nemesis that goaded Israel so that they see the need to change.

But the goad was more than just a king; it came in the form of the advanced military technology of the day – iron chariots. I think it is hard to imagine the fear that overcame Israel, knowing that something had to change, but uncertain how that would happen. The pattern we see here shows us what the agents of change that God uses to make us what we are called to be.

God's Word is for our use

We are introduced to the prophetess Deborah as one to whom the Israelites look for answers. Her position under the palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, points to the acceptance of her role as one who will communicate to the people what God desires.

So when she summons Barak to action, there is no debate as to the validity of her words. God has commanded Barak through her and he does not doubt the authenticity of what she says.

Some see a wimpy man in verse 8. Not at all. First, the author of Hebrews holds Barak up as a man of faith. In 11:32 he is listed among others from Judges as a man of faith, who in the context of this hall of faith in Hebrews 11 are those who believe God's Word. His calling for Deborah to come is not hiding behind her skirts, but his admirable trust in God's Word.

But he has reason to be afraid. What God is telling him to do is suicide. Yes 10,000 men verse 900 chariots seems like good odds to us, but we don't understand Iron Age warfare.

While Jabin and Sisera terrorized Israel, the advantage of the mountainous high ground northwest of Galilee, kept them safe. But God commands them to move out of that protection and down toward the river Kishon, which flowed down through the valley of Jezreel onto the plain of Megiddo. The Jews would be defenseless on such a battlefield. Armed with sword, stick or sling is not much defense against a man racing at you shielded by iron. Yet Barak does not flinch. All he asks is that the one who speaks for God accompany him.

Ah, but you say that v9 is a rebuke. Not really. The reader is left to wonder who will be that woman who will defeat Sisera. At this point, we assume Deborah. But whomever it will be, we do know that glory in the change that will take place does not belong to Barak ... and that is a good thing.

God's Word gets all the glory

Who is the focus here? The immediate issue that jumps out for many is that of Deborah.

This passage has become a magnet for preachers from various traditions to prove their point as to the role of women in ministry. When we come to a text with our questions before we read the text to see what it is saying, we will see in the text whatever we want to see.

Our text does not present Deborah in a negative light. Deborah's primary work is that as a prophetess. We are told she is judging, but if she is to be considered a judge, she is quite unconventional. The story lacks the typical statements used of a judge.

- She is not introduced as one whom the Lord raised up
- She goes to battle, but there is no indication she was a warrior
- The typical description that she *saved* Israel is missing
- Sisera is given into Barak's hands, not hers
- The poem in the next chapter calls her the mother of Israel¹

So, while her work as a Judge is dubious, what about her role as a prophetess? That is clearly stated without any qualifications. Certainly the times in which she lived were different, but I am not comfortable saying that the only reason she is serving as a prophet is because of the sinful times. To wonder why God did not choose a man is pure speculation. God chose her to be a prophet. That is all.

First we must be careful not to make this circumstance normative any more than we think Ehud's knife in the belly or Jael's peg through the skull is the norm. Second, we go to what is clearer, pointed teaching in the Bible to determine the subject. We should not form our theology from narrative, but go to the didactic texts. Third, we have to be comfortable with the fact that when God wishes to make a change, he does so the way he wishes to do it. Don't be too quick to draw negative conclusions just because you aren't comfortable with the story. It may be the unusual nature of the events are meant to draw us to see something different.

Our text is not about women's roles or poor male leadership. Rather verse 14 helps to capture what is happening here. The Lord enacts change by placing the problem into the hands of Barak, but all the while, it is the Lord who goes out before Barak. It is the unusual nature of the events that reinforces that the glory is not our own.

What we see from this scene is the trustworthiness not of Deborah or the military might of Barak, but the faithfulness of God to what he has promised, no matter how foolish it may seem. Barak, as a man of faith, knows that he cannot go to battle without the certainty of God's presence.

For there to be change, our hope must be, first and foremost in God's Word. When God promises that if you are a Christian, that sin has no power over you, our understandable response is to see 900 iron chariots facing us ... and they have home field advantage. We'll get mowed down in a heartbeat.

When faced with overwhelming odds, you may succumb to worry, that paralyzing fear keeping you from trusting God, so when you turn to Philippians 4:6 only to be told that the cure for your worry is to pray, making your requests be known to God – it is too easy to brush that aside, thinking that such advice works only for the small problems life throws your way. But change comes not by what we think we have to offer, but in God's Word.

Like Barak, we should find refuge in what all around us seems misguided. Instead of looking deep into our own resources to bring about change, we should find it in a place the world thinks foolish, the pages of Scripture. To our culture, it would be little different than in this age to ask a woman to accompany you to battle. If you seek change apart from God's Word, you are facing a battle you cannot win.

CHANGE COMES BY THE AGENCY OF GOD'S WORK

4:10-16

God's Work requires our participation

The command of God calls us to obedience. Barak doesn't hide behind Deborah nor does he sit back and let God do all the work. It is not enough to read God's Word and think that is the end, but one must then obey what is found there. Barak was obedient to what he has been told to do.

The writer then inserts this seemingly senseless tidbit about Heber. All we know now is that this non-Jew, a descendent of Moses' father-in-law is in the wrong place. The Kenites were to the south, in Judah, but Heber seems to have moved north into the fertile region near Kedesh. While Barak is obeying God's Word, events unbeknown to him are falling into place.

Meanwhile, Barak's back on Tabor, marshalling the troops. Sisera gets word of this insurrection and calls out his storm troopers and wait in the valley below. God speaks again through Deborah and the call goes out to do the unthinkable – attack by leaving the safety of the mountains, where chariots can not go, and enter the valley of Jezreel where escape is impossible for Israel.

Barak obeys, if for no other reason than God commands it. Down the mountain he goes and routs Sisera and all his troops. Not a man was left. How could this be?

We have a clue as to what God did, that Barak could not know. He was an agent of change as he obeyed God and God in turned did something unexpected. Judges 5 gives us a clue as to what may have occurred, retelling of the events in poetic form.

In 5:2 we are told that the earth shook when and the heavens dropped water.

In 5:21 the torrent of Kishon swept away.

Simply put, on the plain of Jezreel, by the waters of Kishon, it rained like crazy and the chariots got bogged down in the mud. Once stuck, they were no longer the death machines of the age, but iron tombs of their own demise.

God's Work gets all the glory

When it comes to changes in our lives we cannot use God as the excuse for our own sinfulness. God's Word instructs us to obey, it tells us what behavior is pleasing, what are harmful.

But we should not imagine that it is our obedience that makes this change work. Rather, God is at work in us, as we trust His as he is revealed in His Word, so that as we move forward, we know that a loving God goes before us.

What are the 900 chariots awaiting you tomorrow? Are you tempted to worry; to cut corners in what you know is right? Your debts may well be more than you can ever pay off, but to compromise God's Word to effect change is never the answer.

Earlier in Philippians Paul describes this relationship of our obedience and God's gracious working in us. To look in faith to God working to change us never leaves us off the hook to obey.

Philippians 2 describes the necessity to put our agendas aside so that we serve others and then in v12 he calls his readers to obey and in so doing, work out their salvation with fear and trembling. He then describes the power of this work – it is God who works in us to will to work and to do the work.

God's Way uses whomever He will

The next events once again remind us that the Bible is not a children's book of moral tales, but will challenge our preconceptions every time we turn its pages. Sisera escapes the swords of Israel and flees on foot, trying to make it back home to the northeast. But since home was too far, he knew he had an ally close by – Heber the Kenite

It is not too clear as what happens and why next. What we are told is that Sisera is making his way to Heber when Heber's wife, Jael sees him, comes out to greet this weary general and makes a hospitable offer. She brings him in, covers him with a rug, to warm or hide him. Having just run for his life, he asks for water, she again extends kindness and gives him milk. Knowing that there are soldiers looking for him, he commands her to take a post by the door and if anyone inquires if there is a man there, to send them on their way.

But her actions with the tent peg beg the question as to motive: she is at peace with Jabin, she is not an Israelite. She is at first kind, and then this act of deceit leaves us more fearful of this black widow than Ehud's treachery.

What turns this kind ally into a crazed Girl Scout on camping trip? While we don't know all the answers it may be that her offer of sanctuary was at first genuine, but the situation changed as she recognized that this general's presence spelled the end of their allegiance to Jabin. So she may have been an opportunist and wanted to align her household with the new regime. She may be disgusted with the cowardice of a general hiding under a rug, taking milk from a woman and demanding she protect him. Some see some sexual overtones here as the forceful general commands her to keep watch by the tent's opening and infers something about her character, since he expects people will stop by her tent and inquire whether there are any men inside.

Nevertheless, the end of Sisera is a smashing success for Israel as Jael pegs this warrior, so that in the end, Israel is now capable to rid themselves of Jabin's tyranny. By the end of the story Barak is successful, but God used Deborah to instruct him and an enemy's wife to deliver the final blow. The change God uses in our lives is rarely predictable or manageable. But it is not for us to decide when, where or how God should act. It is always for us to trust and obey Him.

Someone has once said that

"When it comes to change, there are three seasons of timing: People change when they hurt enough that they have to, when they learn enough that they want to, and when they receive enough that they are able to."²

The suffering we endure should drive us to Christ seeking change, His Word instructs us what change should look like, but what God gives us to be able to change may certainly surprise us. The reason for all this is simple...

God's Way gives Him all the glory

All Barak can do is stand with mouth agape and arms slack. Yet he is not at a loss here, for he was faithful in what he was to do. It was not to be his glory, nor does the glory belong to Jael or Deborah. It is the Lord who sold Sisera into her hands. He receives all the glory.

Whatever changes need to take place in your life will likewise come down to that? How will God be glorified in and through you? Change in your life is not about you looking good or right or healthy or happy. But how does that change reflect the grace of God at work in you?

Again in Philippians Paul speaks of the changing circumstances in his life in which God proves himself faithful to Paul. In 4:10-13 Paul knows that while God's ways vary, God will not change his giving Paul strength to endure. What makes you think your present financial struggles are a sign of God's abandoning you? Rather, they are the painful opportunity to seek what His Word tells you to do and to be obedient to Him.

Change. It is never fun nor easy. But for there to be growth in your life as a Christian, change must begin with God's Word, it will involve your applying that Word, that is, obedience that springs out of your trust that what he says is true, and then hold on as God's way of change takes place.

Changing a light bulb may vary, but to change a life takes God working in you.

¹ Daniel Block, *The New American Commentary*, Judges, Ruth, 193-194.

² *Leadership Wired*, June 2003