

DEBORAH AND BARAK

Judges 3:7-5:31

Key Verse: 4:14

Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.

In today's passage, we learn the courage and faith of Deborah who challenged the complacency of her generation. We also learn how important it is for God's people to participate willingly in the work of God.

I. OTHNIEL, EHUD AND SHAMGAR (3:7-31)

Look at verses 7-8. *"The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years."* The cycle of Israel's sin repeated again. When the Israelites forgot the Lord again and served the pagan gods of Canaan, God allowed them to be oppressed by the king of Mesopotamia for eight years. Then the Israelites repented of their evil and cried out to the Lord for deliverance. In his mercy, God raised a judge, Othniel, to deliver his people.

Who was Othniel? He was Caleb's nephew (1:13). Caleb, of course, was one of the spies who went into the land of Canaan when Moses led the nation out of Egypt. Both Caleb and Joshua gave a good report about conquering the land, while all the others responded negatively. In chapter 1, Caleb promised to give his daughter Achsah to the man who would take the city of Kiriath-Sepher. Othniel took the challenge and married Caleb's daughter (1:11-13). So this man married a good family. Othniel was the first judge and was one of the only four judges of whom the Scripture says, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him" (10; the other three were Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson). The Lord gave king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel died.

Look at verse 12. *Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel.* This time, God sold the Israelites into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab. Moab was the son of Lot by incest with his older daughter. Eglon ruled over Israel for 18 years. When the Israelites cried out, God raised up a judge named Ehud, the son of Gera the Benjamite (15). So how did God use Ehud, a young shepherd with a passion, to set his country free? The times were dark and shameful when Israel had to pay tribute to her ancient enemy, Moab. But Ehud was a young man with a passion to save his nation. When he was given the responsibility of taking the tribute to King Eglon, he made an elaborate plan to break free his nation from the iron grip of Eglon. He was a man of courage; he decided to go alone to the enemy king. And he did not go with any fire power either. He did not take a

machine gun with him. The only thing he took was a double-edged dagger which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.

Ehud was a military strategist. He plotted to kill Eglon, by tantalizing him with a secret message. He had an escape route planned as well. Everything went according to his plan including his getaway (17-26). When he was alone with Eglon, he drew his dagger with his left hand from his right thigh and plunged into the belly of the unsuspecting king. Then, he was able to rally all of Israel. Instead of attacking the city, he went down to the Jordan because he knew the Moabites were going to retreat across the river into their own country. That is where he headed off, and the Israelites killed 10,000 Moabites, all vigorous and strong.

Ehud was a left-handed man. In other words, he was handicapped. Someone with skill and ability is called 'dexterous,' which means 'right-handed' in Latin. But Ehud used his handicap to take Eglon by surprise and kill him. Ehud teaches us that we can turn our disadvantages into advantages for the Lord when we have faith in God and passion for God's people. Ehud was a shepherd who helped his people serve God in peace for 80 years. After him came Shamgar, who saved Israel from the Philistines (31).

II. THE FAITH OF DEBORAH (4:1-24)

Look at 4:1-3. *After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.* Israel's situation during the 20 years following Ehud's death was quite serious. The king of Canaan oppressed the Israelites so much that their life was unbearable. The highways were deserted (5:6). There was no communication or travel. Village life in Israel ceased as everyone moved from the country to the cities for safety (5:7). The Israelites chose new gods in hopes that they might deliver them from the terrible oppression. But there was no safety in the cities. War came to the city gates. But they were totally defenseless. Not a shield or spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel (5:8).

On the other hand, their enemy was formidable. The commander of the Canaanite army was Sisera, and his strength is described as having 900 iron chariots. His headquarters were located at Harosheth-Haggoyim which meant "smiths of the Gentiles." The Philistines had learned how to work with iron, and they maintained a monopoly in this field. Whenever anyone wanted something made out of iron, they had to go to the Philistines. Israelites who wanted to buy an iron tool had to travel to Harosheth-Haggoyim. No wonder the Israelites did not have any weapons!

After enduring the cruel oppression for 20 years, the Israelites finally cried to the Lord for help. How did God help them? He raised up a judge by the name of Deborah. Look at verses 4-5. *Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 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.*

Deborah was the fifth judge of Israel, a prophetess and the only female judge. Her husband's name was Lappidoth. Her home was in the hill country of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah. The palm tree under which she sat and judged Israel was a landmark; it became known as "the Palm of Deborah" (5).

The name Deborah means "honey bee," implying that she was a sweet presence in a society that was barren, immoral and godless. Her faith and devotion to the Lord must have been a source of encouragement to many people who came to her for her wisdom. But more than that, Deborah was a spiritual leader of Israel. She did her best to teach the people God's word and his ways. This was not an easy task. After the 20 years of severe oppression, the Israelites were resigned to their fate. They were filled with fear. They had no strength to overcome their helplessness. It required courage and faith to challenge the status quo. So what did Deborah do?

Look at verses 6-7. *She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'" Deborah prayed and called Barak to go and fight Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army. She assured him that God would give him victory over Sisera's iron chariots. She urged him to make a decision of faith to take action—to do what God commanded him to do. She had a clear understanding of her role. Perhaps she wanted to pick up the sword herself and lead the Israelites into battle, but she knew that God wanted to use a man like Barak in leadership against the Canaanites.*

What was Barak's response? Look at verse 8. *Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."* Like many Israelites at that time, Barak lacked confidence. He was a reluctant warrior. He agreed to go only if Deborah would go with him. What did Deborah say to him? Deborah did not put him down despite his reluctance. He did not rebuke him. She did not bruise his ego by saying, "You, coward." Instead, she encouraged Barak. Look at verses 9-10. *"Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.*

What was the outcome of the war? Deborah and Barak's army consisted of only 10,000, while Sisera had a multitude of fighters and 900 chariots of iron. The battle line between the two armies was drawn at the Megiddo Valley. At the end of the valley, Mount Tabor rises about 1,800 feet above the valley floor. You would think that this might be an advantageous position, a vantage point where an army could command the valley floor. But Israel had become sitting ducks. Sisera could bring his 900 chariots, surround Mount Tabor, cut off all Israel's supply lines, and simply wait for their starvation. It was an absurd battle plan. Sisera laughed aloud for his good fortune. But Deborah once again encouraged Barak by reminding him of the power of God. Look at verse 14. *Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera*

into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.

What Sisera did not realize was that Israel had a powerful ally that he did not know about. God was on Israel's side. As Sisera's 900 chariots marched down the valley floor, suddenly the floodgates of the heavens opened. God sent a torrential downpour of rain down on the valley. The River Kishon was a dried up riverbed, but suddenly it sprang to life and water flooded the valley so that the whole area became a sea of mud and water (5:21). The 900 iron chariots got stuck in the mud. The Canaanite army had to abandon them and run for safety. The Israelites pursued them as far as Harosheth-Haggoyim, and there they destroyed them completely. Deborah and Barak won a great victory with the help of the Lord.

Look at 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 the clan of Heber the Kenite.* The Kenites were descendants of Moses' father-in-law Jethro. Sisera thought he could get help from Heber the Kenite; so he fled to his tent on foot. But Jael, Heber's wife, knew that in time of war there can be no neutrality. She made a decision of faith to stand with God's people. She deceived and killed Sisera (18-22). So Jael became a hero of this war. As Deborah had said, Barak lost his chance to become a great hero. *On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him (23-24).*

What spiritual truth can we learn from Israel's war against Sisera's army? We learn that God can defeat very powerful enemies in our life, even those enemies with iron chariots. There are certain enemies we are willing to take on because we think we can defeat them. But some enemies look invincible that we don't even attempt to fight them. But this passage teaches us that there are no enemies that we cannot defeat, because God can defeat any powerful enemies in our life. God is powerful, more powerful than any army in this world. So what we need is not iron chariots but faith in God. When we go against our enemies by faith, God sends a helper in the person of the Holy Spirit who can lead us and direct us through our battles. Up until the mid-1980s, the Iron Curtain looked impossible to penetrate. But since some men and women of God went to Russia with the gospel of Jesus by faith, the Holy Spirit has been working powerfully in the hearts of Russian students.

Another lesson we can learn from this passage is that women are very important. We live in confusing times with respect to the roles of men and women in the church. But God has designed each man and woman to have a valuable role in his redemptive work. For example, Barak was called to be a leader. It was more responsibility than privilege. But Barak lacked faith and courage that was required to carry out his responsibility. He needed help which came from Deborah. Deborah was a prophetess and a judge. She was a capable woman with a deep faith in God. But she saw her job as being a helper to a man who was reluctant to be a leader. She encouraged him to act on the basis of God's word. In this way, Deborah served God's work. May God raise up many women of faith like Deborah among us!

III. THE SONG OF DEBORAH (5:1-31)

Judges 5 is an epic poem that Deborah and Barak sang as a duet after God had given a great victory against the mighty army of Sisera. In this victory song, Deborah and Barak proclaimed God's greatness by giving him credit for the victory. Look at verses 1-3. *On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:*

*“When the princes in Israel take the lead,
when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the Lord!
“Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!
I will sing to the Lord, I will sing;
I will make music to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

Deborah and Barak also praised God for the valiant princes who willingly participated in the battle. Israel had been greatly oppressed by the Canaanites. They were harassed and helpless. People could not even travel on the main roads. Village life ceased. Deborah, a mother in Israel, arose and challenged the princes of Israel with God's word. She challenged them to follow Barak into the battle against Sisera. And many tribes volunteered to join in the battle. They risked their lives. They came with an eager spirit to volunteer on behalf of the nation. They fought and won a great victory. Look at verses 9-14:

*My heart is with Israel's princes,
with the willing volunteers among the people.
Praise the Lord!*

*“You who ride on white donkeys,
sitting on your saddle blankets,
and you who walk along the road,
consider the voice of the singers at the watering places.
They recite the righteous acts of the Lord,
the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel.*

*“Then the people of the Lord went down to the city gates.
‘Wake up, wake up, Deborah!
Wake up, wake up, break out in song!
Arise, O Barak!
Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.’*

*“Then the men who were left came down to the nobles;
the people of the Lord came to me with the mighty.
Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek;
Benjamin was with the people who followed you.
From Makir captains came down,
from Zebulun those who bear a commander's staff.*

*The princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
yes, Issachar was with Barak, rushing after him into the valley.*

Look at verses 18-20:

*The people of Zebulun risked their very lives;
so did Naphtali on the heights of the field.
“Kings came, they fought;
the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo,
but they carried off no silver, no plunder.
From the heavens the stars fought,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.*

However, there were some tribes who refused to lend a helping hand in the battle. Reuben had great resolve of heart, but he took no action. Look at verses 16-17. *“Why did you stay among the campfires to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.”* The people of Meroz did not join in the Lord’s battle, so they were cursed (23). They lived for themselves, refusing to risk what they had and, as a result, they lost what they had.

We learn here that it is important for us to willingly participate in the work of God. The Lord works powerfully when the coworkers in a fellowship willingly give their hearts to serve the work of God. When the tribes of Reuben, Dan, Asher and the people of Meroz did not join their brethren, they showed their selfishness not only toward their nation but also toward God.

In conclusion, we learn that God uses those who have courage and faith to challenge the complacency. May God raise up many women of faith like Deborah! May God help us to volunteer to fight in the battle against God’s enemies!