

That's Going to Leave a Mark!

Judges 4:1-5:1

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As we continue our look at women of the Old Testament, this morning we meet a woman who was called of God to be a Judge over the Israelites, her name -- Deborah.

She was the fourth Judge of pre-monarchic Israel and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. As our story begins today, we learn that God has permitted the Canaanites to enslave the Israelites.

Judges 4:1-2a, *“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan.”*

Who was Ehud? Between the time the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land and when the kings took charge, God appointed 15 Judges to rule over Israel. Ehud was the third.

And, per the Israelite Old Testament pattern, once a judge died, the people would begin to do evil in the sight of the Lord.

That's where we are today. Because the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, God placed them under the yoke of Jabin, a Canaanite king.

Jabin subsequently confines them to unproductive hilltops and denies them commercial access to the highways, causing an economic hardship.

Now, servitude was nothing new to the Israelites since prior to coming to the Promised Land, they had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years.

It was during their time in Egypt that other tribes had settled in the Promised Land claiming it for themselves. But God's plan for His people had not changed.

Deborah's story is just one, among many, of the "God-endorsed" militant takeovers of the Promised Land that occurred in the generations following Israel's exodus from Egypt.

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Deborah's tenure starts 80 years after Ehud died. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot about Deborah.

In fact, the only thing it does tell us is her husband's name. Judges 4:4, *"Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time."*

Though, some commentators feel she was an Ephraimite because she resided in Ephraim.

This limited introduction may also be the result of the male dominated world in which she lived, or God just illustrating that an impressive resume doesn't matter when He chooses a leader.

Deborah was recognized for her own merits. She was a decider, a leader, a prophetess and well respected by the Israelite people.

In fact, Deborah judged and led Israel for 60 years. Her oversight covered approximately 20 years of national hardship under the Canaanites and 40 years of peace after the war.

Deborah was like the CEOs and "high-achievers" of our day. Place her anywhere, and before long, her mark was permanently on that place.

Just like the place where she judged the people from the surrounding towns and villages. It became known as "the Palm of Deborah."

Judges 4:5, *“She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.”*

Now, some commentators believe that the Israelites had suffered through a lack of strong leadership since the days of Joshua and Deborah was just the best among a bad crop.

Indeed, this was a critical time in Israel’s history. For generations, the Israelites had been a nomadic people, until they arrived in the Promised Land.

Once they crossed the Jordan, they had to settle the land and become a nation, but the surrounding nations, who were being displaced, were not cooperating.

It was to their advantage to destroy the Israelites before they had time to establish a nation.

It was during these perilous days that Israel had no central government and no structure for selecting leaders or for passing leadership from one generation to another.

When Deborah was judge, Israel was just an awkward amalgamation of twelve tribes.

And in Israel, the role of leadership was especially difficult, because the leader had to be not only a person of political and military ability, but also someone who could nurture the nation’s spiritual responsibilities.

After all, their primary purpose as a nation was spiritual. They were to carry into the world a unique quality of godliness, a divine purpose.

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Now, in the Old Testament, leadership roles typically fell to men. First there was Abraham, then Noah, then Moses and Joshua. Later came Elijah, Elisha, and King David.

But God doesn't always work in the "expected" way. And when God wants to break through in unexpected ways, He often does so through prophets, and sometimes, those prophets are women.

God understands that leadership resides not in gender but in character and gifting. So it was that Deborah made her way onto the stage of Israel's history; a strong leader chosen by God.

In Hebrew, the name Deborah means "bee." Deborah knew who she was. She was confident that God was with her and when she went into action, her presence was felt, like a sting from a bee.

The Bible doesn't tell us how God communicated with Deborah; nevertheless, Deborah was confident in God's endorsement of her leadership.

Because of her faith in God and His instructions, she didn't hesitate to give orders to military leaders.

Judges 4:6-7, *"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 them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"*

Now, a man taking orders from a woman at this point in history is odd in itself, but General Barak had faith, both in Deborah and God.

He had no problem with her orders, but he wasn't going to follow her blindly, either.

That's why, when Deborah gave God's instructions to Barak, he evaluated the orders and then qualified his obedience with a request.

Judges 4:8, *"Barak said to her, 'If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go.'"*

Now, you have to understand that the command Deborah gave to General Barak came from God. So, in reality, Barak wasn't questioning Deborah's orders, but God's.

That's why, when Barak said he wouldn't go without her, she told him that the glory of the victory would no longer be his.

Because in Biblical times, a General didn't get the honor of winning a battle unless he captured or killed the opposing General.

Judges 4:9a, *"Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."*

Now, Barak was wise enough not to argue. He knew that Deborah, the "bee," possessed intangible qualities that were essential to their nation's victory as they faced the 900 charioteers of King Jabin's army.

Logically, Israel had no chance against the superior forces of Canaan; therefore, their only chance lay in this woman, Deborah.

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As you study this part of Judges, you begin to see that Deborah possessed unique leadership qualities.

She clearly had that divine connection required of an Israelite leader, and now she was being leaned upon for her military skills as well.

General Barak and Deborah go to Kedesh, where he assembled an army of ten thousand men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Then they proceeded to the battlefield to meet General Sisera's army.

General Sisera felt quite superior as he watched the small Israelite army approach his position.

After all, he had more than 900 charioteers, but he hadn't reckoned for Deborah, who essentially took on the role of field commander.

Judges 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, with ten thousand men following him."

This was certainly no well-thought-out military plan, but the instructions from Deborah, along with the endorsement from the Lord were enough for Barak to lead his army into what became an Israelite rout of King Jabin's forces.

The battle was so one-sided, that General Sisera couldn't leave the battlefield fast enough. So, he jumped from his chariot and fled on foot seeking someplace to hide.

Judges 4:15, "At Barak's advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot."

After which Deborah's prophecy was realized. Judges 4:17-21, *"Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite."*

Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

"Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'" But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died."

When Deborah and Barak learned of this, they began to celebrate. Sisera had oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, and now it was Israel's turn to sing in celebration.

The Israelites had been living in fear, burdened by the heavy hand of King Jabin's rule over their lives. Yet, because of Deborah, peace had finally come to their land.

A judge had guided the people in the midst of their misery. A prophet had heeded the guidance of Israel's God. A leader had emerged when Israel needed leadership most.

But she was not in it for the power as most leaders are today. Her leadership style favored a team approach; she willingly recognized those who joined and served.

She not only praised others but encouraged them to ongoing service and development as leaders.

Now, the Bible doesn't tell us any more about Deborah than what you've heard this morning.

No mention is made of her physical prowess—she’s not a female version of Samson; nor is there even a hint that she might have been a woman of enchanting beauty like Sarah, or Rachel, or Delilah.

But at this point in the story of Israel, those things weren’t important. The Bible tells us all we need to know. Much like a bee fending off its attacker, Deborah left her mark.

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Conclusion

It’s hard to know what to make of Deborah. She clearly had a magnetism that caused people to turn to her and trust her. But more importantly, Deborah was a willing vessel, ready for God to use.

She didn’t make excuses about her gender or the intimidating task God laid before her, she just listened to God and acted accordingly.

In the midst of this story of military victory, I think the legacy that Deborah leaves more than any other is that she listened to God. That trait, above all, must be what made Deborah a great leader.

God still speaks to us today, probably more often than we know, but we’re too inattentive. We are so distracted by things that we just don’t hear Him.

And the result is the same type of oppression that the Israelites were experiencing at the time when Deborah came on the scene. So, we would do ourselves a favor to follow Deborah’s example.

She listened when God spoke, and that made all the difference. The Bible tells us that the land had rest for forty years after Deborah and Barak’s victory over the armies of Canaan.

But the war is not over; it continues on today. We face battles on a daily basis in our lives. The pressure of life's insistent ordinariness gets to us.

That's why it's hard for us to keep sensitive to the purposes of God. But Deborah was able to win the battle of her day, and the victory lasted forty years.

Sometimes it's a big deal for us to "win" for just forty minutes, especially in the private battlefield of our own souls.

But if we'll listen to God and heed what we hear, there is assurance of victory for us all!