

10.18.20 A Remarkable Woman Named Deborah Judges 4.1-10, 12-23

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Judges is one of the toughest books in the Bible. Thousands of people die and there are atrocities that take place. It's not a book to read at night right before you go to sleep. The Book of Judges spans a period of several hundred years. During this time, the people of Israel consistently turned away from God. The judges were heroes and heroines of faith during a tragic era in Israel's history. The "judges" usually led one or several tribes to military victory over their oppressors. They also served as civil and religious leaders, and during their lives the people they led tended to remain faithful to the Lord.

There is great value in looking at the lives of men and women in the Bible and for the next few weeks we will look at Deborah, Samson, and Gideon. We'll hear about their stories and observe their experiences. How did each person grow and mature? What character traits do they demonstrate that we want to see developed in our own lives? What positive choices can we imitate? What errors did they make we can avoid? What lessons can we learn from their relationship with God? How did their faith find expression? What difficulties helped develop their trust in God? How was their love for the Lord displayed? We can learn and grow from their lives.

Judges 4:1-10, "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud (ee'hōōd) died. 2 So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin (jay'bin) of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor (hay'zohr); the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim (ha-roh'sheth-ha-gaw-yeem'); 3 Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah (rah'muh) and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. 6 She sent and summoned Barak (bay'rak) son of Abinoam (ah-bin'oh-am) from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "*The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at*

Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7 I will draw out Sisera (si'se-ruh), the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.' ” 8 Barak said to her, *“If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”* 9 And she said, *“I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”* Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 Barak summoned Zebulun (zeb'yōō-luhn); and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.”

12 When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, *“Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you.”* So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. 15 And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, 16 while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

17 Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. 18 Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, *“Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.”* So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. 19 Then he said to her, *“Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.”* So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. 20 He said to her, *“Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’”* 21 But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. 22 Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, *“Come, and I will*

show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

23 So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites.”

Deborah is the only female judge we have in the Old Testament. She also excelled as a prophet, military leader, and a poet/singer. This amazingly capable woman exercised legal functions in Israel for twenty years during the oppression of the Canaanites, then apparently for another 40 years after the Israelites won a mighty victory.

I want to share **four things we learn from this remarkable woman leader**. The first is **Care**. In **Judges 5:5**, Deborah is called **“a mother in Israel.”** Deborah demonstrates several qualities of a good mother. The **first is compassion**. Like any good mother and leader Deborah cared for her people. She took people’s troubles upon her own shoulders. Any true leader cares about the people she or he is leading. Selfish or narcissistic leaders care only about themselves, getting what they want, having their needs met, being liked. An authentic and genuine leader cares about the people she or he is serving and wants them to thrive and succeed. When we care we feel a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others.

Another quality of a good mother and leader is wise judgment. Any mother, especially those with more than one child, learns the necessity of demonstrating wise judgment, solving disputes, settling arguments, doing what’s right, instilling lessons in what to do if the same situation arises again, and restoring the peace. Deborah is the only woman judge in the Book of Judges and the only judge in Judges in the law-court sense of that title (4.5). She listened to people’s cases under a palm tree reflecting her wisdom in wanting people to be comfortable in the shade and her willingness to take the time to hear both parties out and helping them to a solution that all could accept and abide by going forward in a spirit of resolution.

The first thing we learn from Deborah for own lives is **Care** and the importance of compassion, taking responsibility for those we’re leading, and practicing wise judgment. These behaviors benefit any person, family, workplace, school, or church.

The **second thing** we learn from Deborah is **the value of Contemplation**. In our highly technological society and with our obsession with speed, we can easily fall into a “*ready, fire, aim*” approach to life. We can rush to send a text or email or to make a post without praying or thinking through if it is wise to do so. Many of us fall into relational traps of our own making because we act in haste. Many a misunderstanding, many hurt feelings could be avoided if we took time to pray and listen to God before acting. Deborah is presented as **a woman who waits to hear from God before acting**. She doesn’t rush the Israelites into a fight with the Canaanites even though conditions have been challenging for years. But when the word of the Lord comes that it’s time to fight, she summons Barak, a Naphtalite and tells him it’s time to do battle.

Deborah has an enthusiasm and desire for God. She is like Moses in bearing the misery and pain of her people, seeking out God, hearing from the Lord, and being willing to act and to step out in faith once the Lord has spoken. In this case, even if that means going into a battle with a bunch of farmers living in the hills against a Canaanite army equipped with chariots of iron. Barak and his men were facing a formidable enemy who possessed state of the art military hardware while *‘not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel’* (5:8). **The second thing we learn from Deborah is the value of Contemplation and waiting to hear from God before acting.**

The **third quality** we see in Deborah is **Courage**. When she tells Barak it’s time to fight, he refuses to go into battle without Deborah. Some people interpret this as cowardice on Barak’s part, others view it as further evidence of Deborah’s high standing. Either way, it says a lot about Deborah’s courage that she’s willing to take the field with her commander and their fighting men. Part of what Deborah’s courage highlights is **the importance of being a participant and not a spectator in life**. Chapter 4 lists the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun as providing the fighters. The song of Deborah in chapter 5 adds that Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, and Issachar contributed men but condemns Gilead, Dan, Asher, and Meroz for failing to participate.

We are living in a time when many people are content to be spectators to other people’s lives. There are plenty of people, and social media encourages this, who comment and criticize often anonymously about what other people are doing without

ever taking any risks, demonstrating any courage or faith, or being willing to expose themselves to any criticism at all. In a speech he gave at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, 110 years ago (April 23, 1910) titled *Citizenship in a Republic* former President Teddy Roosevelt spoke about courage, being a participant and not spectator in life, in a way that is still true today.

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Deborah is involved in a situation that requires courage, faith, and leadership. The story of the battle in chapter 5 is vivid. The Canaanites can move easily and quickly across the dry, hard plains, but the Lord unleashes a torrential rainstorm that eliminates the Canaanites advantage. Their chariots, horses, and men get stuck in the mud and they're overwhelmed and defeated. Sisera flees and is taken in by Jael who gives him milk to drink and then kills him while he is sleeping from exhaustion, thus proving the validity of Deborah's prophetic statement that God would not give Barak the honor of dispatching their foe, but that it would be a woman who eliminated their enemy. Part of what Deborah does which is admirable in any leader, is she gets at least some of the tribes and some of the people to step out of their sense of isolation and their own concerns and inspires them to take bold, courageous, action. Good leaders often challenge us to step out courageously and do something we otherwise wouldn't do.

Care, Contemplation, Courage. A fourth and final quality we see in Deborah is the importance of **Celebration**. The song of Deborah in chapter 5 is one of the Bible's oldest portions and it recounts the battle and adds details not found in chapter 4. The song depicts the battle's preparations and the Israelites despicable living conditions

under the Canaanites who controlled the trade routes, forcing the Israelites into the hills. Deborah praises God's intervention and credits God with the victory. It's important for us to acknowledge the victories and triumphs God enables us to have and experience in our lives. Those memories can sustain us in more challenging seasons in our lives.

Of all the military leaders in Judges, only Deborah is called a prophet. She's also the only judge to "sing" of the victory, illustrating the creative role played by women as shapers of tradition (see Exodus 15:20-21, Song of Miriam). Deborah stands alongside some other key women in the pre-monarchic period (Miriam, Jael, Jephthah's daughter, Samson's mother). All emerge as strong women, perhaps because during the time of the judges, a time of social and political crisis, able people of any status could contribute to group efforts. In the rural, agrarian setting of the period of the judges, with family as the dominant social institution, the important role of women in the family was more readily transferred to matters of public concern than during the monarchy, with its more formal, hierarchical power structures. Deborah is a strong woman with many gifts at a time of relative openness in Israelite society.

Deborah has the care and compassion of a mother for her people. She takes responsibility for them and for their situation and wanting to improve their living conditions. She has wise judgment like Moses and Solomon were known for in their times. She was a woman of contemplation who had an enthusiasm for God and sought to hear from God before acting. She had courage to go into battle and the creativity to praise God in poet and song for the victory the Lord had given. May we learn from this remarkable woman the value of Caring, Contemplation, Courage, and Celebration.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you find most surprising about the story of Deborah in Judges 4 and 5?
2. What character traits do you see in Deborah that you'd like to develop in your own life?
3. Why is caring important in a leader?

4. Have you ever gotten yourself in trouble because you acted hastily rather than taking time to prayer, think, and seek God's guidance before speaking or acting in a situation? Why is taking time for contemplation helpful?
5. How are inspired by Deborah's courage? If you're in a difficult struggle, what might Deborah say to you?
6. How have you been taking time to celebrate God's goodness, to remember God's faithfulness even in tumultuous year we're living through? Why is celebrating and remembering what God has done important?