

“THAT WILL LEAVE A MARK!”

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Text: Judges 4:1-24 NLT

God’s Word: Judges 5:1-15 NLT

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4 After Ehud’s death, the Israelites again did evil in the LORD’s sight. ² So the LORD turned them over to King Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-haggoyim. ³ Sisera, who had 900 iron chariots, ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help. ⁴ Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet who was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment. ⁶ One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. She said to him, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: Call out 10,000 warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor. ⁷ And I will call out Sisera, commander of Jabin’s army, along with his chariots and warriors, to the Kishon River. There I will give you victory over him.” ⁸ Barak told her, “I will go, but only if you go with me.” ⁹ “Very well,” she replied, “I will go with you. But you will receive no honor in this venture, for the LORD’s victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ At Kedesh, Barak called together the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, and 10,000 warriors went up with him. Deborah also went with him. ¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Moses’ brother-in-law Hobab, had moved away from the other members of his tribe and pitched his tent by the oak of Zaananim near Kedesh.

¹² When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ he called for all 900 of his iron chariots and all of his warriors, and they marched from Harosheth-haggoyim to the Kishon River. ¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, “Get ready! This is the day the LORD will give you victory over Sisera, for the LORD is marching ahead of you.” So Barak led his 10,000 warriors down the slopes of Mount Tabor into battle. ¹⁵ When Barak attacked, the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and warriors into a panic. Sisera leaped down from his chariot and escaped on foot. ¹⁶ Then Barak chased the chariots and the enemy army all the way to Harosheth-haggoyim, killing all of Sisera’s warriors. Not a single one was left alive. ¹⁷ Meanwhile, Sisera ran to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because Heber’s family was on friendly terms with King Jabin of Hazor. ¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come into my tent, sir. Come in. Don’t be afraid.” So he went into her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. ¹⁹ “Please give me some water,” he said. “I’m thirsty.” So she gave him some milk from a leather bag and covered him again. ²⁰ “Stand at the door of the tent,” he told her. “If anybody comes and asks you if there is anyone here, say no.” ²¹ But when Sisera fell asleep from exhaustion, Jael quietly crept up to him with a hammer and tent peg in her hand. Then she drove the tent peg through his temple and into the ground, and so he died. ²² When Barak came looking for Sisera, Jael went out to meet him. She

said, "Come, and I will show you the man you are looking for." So he followed her into the tent and found Sisera lying there dead, with the tent peg through his temple. ²³ So on that day Israel saw God defeat Jabin, the Canaanite king. ²⁴ And from that time on Israel became stronger and stronger against King Jabin until they finally destroyed him.

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We come this morning to one example of what I consider to be the most difficult part of the Bible to understand. So I'm just going to name it for what it is, right up front. This scene of Deborah calling members of the Israelite tribes into battle is just one story among many of the seemingly "God-endorsed", militant takeover of Canaan, the Promised Land that occurred in the generations following Israel's exodus from Egypt. We don't like these stories because they clash so much with the God we see in Jesus Christ in the New Testament—a God who is loving, peaceful, and even anti-violent. And, unfortunately, I don't know how to explain these Old Testament stories of war to you except to say that God had made a covenant with Abraham that his descendants would settle in Canaan. Yet in the meantime, the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years and other tribes had settled in to the Promised Land, but God's plans had not changed. So it is that, as we continue our look at women of the Old Testament, we come this morning to a judge by the name of Deborah. Since, instinctively women aren't prone to violent tendencies quite like men are, we might think that the presence of a woman would soften the brutality of the ongoing story a bit, but it doesn't really; actually, not at all. So let's look at what's going on here.

By way of introduction, Judges does not tell us a whole lot about Deborah. But in a world dominated by males, it's worth noting that the only thing the Bible tells us about Deborah's husband is his name. This woman Deborah is known by her own merits. She is a judge, a decider, a leader, a prophetess. She is so well respected by the Israelite people that she has set herself up in a place where she can be easily reached by many people from the surrounding towns and villages. And the tree under which she holds court is called by her name, "the Palm of Deborah." Deborah, it seems, was just that kind of person; kind of like the CEOs and "high-achievers" of our day. Place her anywhere, and before long, her mark was so indelibly on that place that the inhabitants forget what they once called it and simply give it her name.

Some might argue that the Israelites had been suffering a lack of strong leadership since the days of Joshua, and so Deborah was just the best among a bad crop. This was a critical time in Israel's history. For several generations they had been a nomadic people, eventually moving to their Promised Land and taking it by conquest. Now, though, they must settle the land and become a nation, but the displaced surrounding nations were not cooperating; it was to their advantage to destroy Israel before it had time to establish itself. During those perilous days, there was no central government and no structure for selecting leaders or for passing leadership from one generation to another. It was just this 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 talent, 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, of divine purpose.

So, who was qualified to lead such a people on such a quest? In the Old Testament, those roles typically and expectantly fell to men. First there was Abraham, then Noah, then Moses and Joshua. Later came Elijah and Elisha and King David. But God doesn't always work in the "expected" way, does he? And when God wants to break through in unexpected ways, he often does so through prophets, and sometimes, those prophets are women. So it is that Deborah makes her way onto the stage of Israel's history; a strong leader chosen by God after generations of faltering leadership.

The name Deborah is Hebrew, and the meaning of this Hebrew word is bee. Deborah knew who she was and she was utterly confident that God was with her. Deborah goes to action, and her presence is felt, in some cases like a sting from a bee. The Bible does not tell us that God spoke to Deborah or that he came to her in a vision; nevertheless, Deborah was so confident in God's endorsement of her leadership that she didn't hesitate to give unqualified orders to the best military leader in reach. And she was so clearly in command that General Barak had no problem following her orders.

Now, a man taking orders from a woman at this point in history is odd enough in and of itself; but it doesn't stop there. It's not as if Deborah just gives the command to Barak and he goes off and takes care of the problem from the threatening General Sisera. Rather, Barak gives a qualification for following this command from the judge, Deborah. "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." It was quite unlikely for a military leader to speak to a woman; women kept the home fires burning so that when the warriors returned there would be a place of celebration in victory or of solace in defeat.

Barak was wise enough to know that Deborah, the bee, possessed some intangible qualities that were essential to their nation's unlikely venture as they faced the 900 charioteers of King Jabin's army. Really, Israel had no chance against the superior forces of Canaan; but if they were to have a chance, it lay in this woman, Deborah.

We begin to see how Deborah possesses those unique leadership qualities; she clearly has that special divine connection required of an Israelite leader, and now she is being leaned upon for her military prowess as well. General Barak immediately heads out to do as Deborah instructed. He gathers men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali; ten thousand in all. And Deborah went up with him. Barak had insisted that she go with him, and she did. It seems that with his 900 charioteers in tow, Sisera approached the Israelite army feeling quite superior. But Sisera hadn't reckoned with Deborah, who essentially took on the role of field commander. She said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going before you." This was certainly no well-thought-out military plan, but the instructions from Deborah and the endorsement from the Lord were enough for Barak to lead his armies into what became an Israelite rout of King Jabin's forces.

As Sisera fled from the battlefield on foot and word returned that the woman Jael had driven a tent stake through his head, killing him, Deborah and Barak began to sing in celebration. Sisera had oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, and now it was Israel's turn to sing in celebration. These people had been living in fear, burdened by the heavy hand of King Jabin's rule over their lives. Yet because of Deborah, the mother of Israel, blessed tranquility 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. The Bible doesn't really tell us any more about Deborah than what you heard this morning. No mention is made of her physical prowess—she is 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 aren't really so important. And the Bible tells us all we need to know; that much like a bee fending off its attacker, Deborah left her mark.

It's hard to know what to make of Deborah, exactly. Deborah 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 her. She didn't make excuses about her gender or the daunting task God laid before her, she just listened to God and then acted accordingly. In the midst of a rather violent story of military victory, I think that's the legacy Deborah leaves more than any other. She listened to God. That trait, above all, must be what made Deborah a great leader.

I think God speaks more often than we know. The problem is not that God is silent, but that we are so often inattentive. We don't listen. There's an important lesson in this for all of us. We humans are so distracted that we just don't hear God most of the time. And the result is the same sort of oppression these Israelites were experiencing at the time Deborah came on the scene.

We 21st century people know what distracts us: television, the internet, Twitter, Facebook, just to name a few. There were distractions in Deborah's day, too; they were called false gods. Whatever we call those things that keep us from being attentive to God, we would do ourselves a favor to follow Deborah's example. She heard 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 great victory over the armies of Canaan.

But the war was not over, and it continues on today. We face battles on a regular basis in our lives. We are distracted, we feel cheated and oppressed, the pressure of life's insistent ordinariness gets to us. And it's always hard for us to keep sensitive to the purposes of God. But Deborah was able to win the great battle of her day, and the victory lasted forty years. Sometimes it is a big deal for us to "win" for just forty minutes, especially in the private battlefield of our own souls. But if we will listen to God and heed what we hear, there is assurance of victory for us all!

Thanks be to God!