

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Curds in a Noble's Bowl – (Judges Chapter 4-6:10) This week we will explore the life and times of Deborah the prophetess and Barak, the judge. Last week we studied the first three judges mentioned in scripture and saw the various capacity in which they were used to bring deliverance to the people of God. Each had a critical role to play in the cycle of apostasy, servitude, repentance and restoration. One in particular (Ehud) was the most unlikely candidate and tells the tale of God the true Judge or Deliverer of Israel capable of using whomsoever he will to accomplish his good pleasure. As we explore the passage of scripture referenced above, the cycle continues. Indeed, the text begins with the familiar refrain, *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor”* (4:1-2a).

The structure of the story herein relayed is symmetrical, meaning that there are two identified on the side of the oppressor, and two identified on the side of the savior. The two among the oppressor are: 1) Jabin, the king of Canaan, and 2) Sisera, Commander of Jabin's army. The two among the savior are: Deborah, and Barak. The role of Jael should not be overlooked as a heroine of the story as well since she is the one who actually killed Sisera; however, she may be understood better as an opportunist than as one invested in the conflict because the text relates, *“...there was peace between Jabin, king of Hazor, and the house of Heber the Kenite”* (4:17). The story concludes with a song attributed to Deborah, which allows us a poetic perspective into the way in which the various characters would have been viewed by the author.

Part One: Deborah the Bee – There are many examples throughout scripture of women being used of God to bring deliverance to his people. However, Deborah is the only woman judge in all of scripture. She seemed to serve a dual role in Israel as both prophetess as well as judge. Interestingly, she is one of the only judges that seems to have been known more for her message than for her military exploits. Later, the prophet Samuel would serve a very similar function for the people of God. In Judges 4:5 we read, *“She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.”* Whether this was common for this time period or not is not indicated by the text, but we know from the book of 1 Samuel that the practice of making a circuit through various cities in which people came from surrounding areas to receive judgment was typical during the time of the prophet Samuel.

It is also interesting to note that the author of the book of Hebrews does not mention Deborah in chapter eleven, when the hall of faith is mentioned, but does mention Barak. More will be commented on this later, but it is sufficient to say that we should not read too much into the absence of her name because every indication is given from the text that she was respected as a mother in Israel, through whom the word of God was spoken in an age where, *“...every man did what was right in his own eyes”*. It was at her bidding that the hero of the story is both identified as well as admonished to launch an attack

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against the enemy of God's people. We should not let the exploits of Barak overshadow the wise guidance of Deborah, for if she had not been a willing instrument used of God to instruct his people, Barak would have never been thrust onto the stage of biblical history. In every respect, Deborah lived up to her name, which means "bee" in Hebrew. She could both issue guidance as sweet as honey, and words of wisdom that would sting the heart.

Part Two: Barak, the Blessed One – We are told nothing of Barak's life before he was summoned by Deborah. His name means, "blessed" in Hebrew, and it could be that he was well known among Israel. There is some indication that God was moving and working in his life prior to being summoned by Deborah since the nature of the summons was inquisitive suggesting he was reluctant to obey God. Judges 4:6-7 states, "*She (Deborah) sent and summoned Barak, the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, 'Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, God gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali, and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?'*" The fact that reference to the command of God is in the past tense suggests that God had instructed Barak (either verbally or providentially) to assemble for battle, but he was reluctant to do so.

Even after the command given above, Barak agreed to assemble his troops under one condition: "*Barak said to her (Deborah), 'If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go'*" (4:8). Since Barak is mentioned in Hebrews chapter eleven as one having faith, we should not understand this comment to mean that Barak was afraid to go, and would only find strength for battle if Deborah accompanied him. Such a man would not be commendable nor would his faith have been noteworthy. Instead, we must understand the scarcity of the word of God during his day, and of the awareness that God's word was revealed through Deborah. Barak was conscious of the fact that he would be inadequate for such a task without the guidance of the word of God. Michael Wilcock is correct when he states, "Even before we are told that Deborah is a judge we have been told that she is a prophetess. Her words are identified with God's words, and this is her authority for judging Israel: she knows God's mind (contrasted with other judges who judged because of the deliverance wrought by their hand). So, what are we witnessing when Barak refuses to set out without this woman? Not cowardice – far from it – but faith: faith, that is, which is the glorious combination of a humble confession of his own inadequacy and a sure confidence in the grace of God, known in this case through his mouthpiece Deborah."¹

The enemy that was to be fought was none less than the spirit of the age typified in the phrase Canaan. Jabin is referred to in 4:2 as the King of Canaan even though he resided in Hazor, an ancient and important city located within the land of Canaan. There is a king identified during the generation of the conquest (Joshua 11:1) as Jabin, king of Hazor; however, we should not confuse the two since they apparently lived at different times. It is more than likely that the name Jabin was one of royal use or perhaps a title for this Canaanite king. His presence in the story is of one who governs from afar, since he was not killed in the exploits of Barak and Deborah nor did he appear to fight his own battles. Sisera, perhaps a vassal king himself, was the commander of the armies of Jabin, and fought his battles for him. He it was that responded to the mustering of the troops and met them at Mount Tabor. Before they reached the mountain when they were still in the valley of the river Kishon, Deborah demonstrated to Barak her worth. At this pivotal moment she said, "*Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given*

¹ Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Judges*. Pg. 63-64
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Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you? (4:14). The armies of Sisera were stalled in the river valley and prevented from continuing the advance due to the heavy wheels of their iron chariots.

According to the Song of Deborah which is beautifully provided in chapter five of our text, the destruction of the armies of Sisera was nothing short of miraculous: God was fighting for his people. The song reads, *“From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent the torrent Kishon* (5:20-21). It seems certain from this passage that there was a flash flood that filled the valley of Kishon and aided in the destruction of the armies of Canaan. Barak’s faith in the word of God spoken from the mouth of Deborah was the basis of the deliverance of Israel.

Part Three: A Royal Headache – The reply of Deborah to Barak’s condition of accompanying him to the battle was telling: *“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”* (4:9). Thank God for people who do not follow roads that lead to their own glory. The same cannot be said for Jael. I think the best way that we can understand Jael is as an opportunist whom God used to bring deliverance to his people. If the book of Judges has taught us anything thus far, it is that God uses people in spite of their ulterior motives, to further the advancement of his kingdom.

Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Moses’s father-in-law who dwelt among the people, but did not seek to join the covenant community. In fact, their affections lay elsewhere. The text informs us that there was peace between Jabin, the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. For this reason, Sisera was unafraid to turn aside into Jael’s tent, fearing nothing for his life. No doubt, Jael was familiar with the proceedings of the battle, and might possibly have been thinking of differentiating her household from the house of the king, and knew of no better way to do so than slaying the commander of the king’s army. We are not made aware of her intentions, but her actions are memorialized. She compelled Sisera into her tent, then she did three noteworthy things: 1) gave him clotted cream to drink instead of water. Clotted cream had the notable distinction of making the one who ingests it sleepy. 2) She covered him with a rug – perhaps hoping the weight of it would restrain his body. 3) She took a mallet and a nail and drove his head into the earth. Thus, Jael became the object of Deborah’s prophecy. Jael would be the one, *“most blessed among women...”* (5:24). She was the one whom God used to bring death to the face of death and destruction.

Part Four: The Song of Deborah – After the great victory over Sisera and his army, there were a series of military advances that *“...pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan”* (4:24). Consequently, both Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise unto the Lord. The song has become known simply as the, *Song of Deborah*. This perfect example of Hebrew poetry offers insight into the various events already described. The first verse is notable: *“That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord!”* (5:2) This verse is notable because it describes so well the era of the judges – a time when leaders failed to lead, and the people did not offer themselves to the Lord. By way of contrast, the period under Deborah and Barak’s leadership was exemplified by leaders taking the lead, and offering themselves willingly to the Lord.

It would have been wonderful if this attitude had remained among God’s people, but after forty years, they once again, *“...did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...”* (6:1). Thus, the cycle continues.

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Conclusion: As we think practically of how to apply what we are learning about the time of the judges to our own lives today, there is one thought in particular that stands out from our text. This is the need to allow the word of God to govern our decisions and all of life. The reason Barak appears in the hall of faith described in the book of Hebrews is not because he is more important than Deborah or Jael or any other judge not mentioned. Barak did not trust his own intuition nor did he trust circumstantial appearance to make decisions. He trusted in the word of the Lord spoken through the mouth of Deborah. Faith in God's word and the role of God's word in governing his life was what compelled him to issue his ultimatum to Deborah that if she did not accompany him, he would not assemble his troops and fight. This same faith responded without question to the command to, go "up!" or "arise!" for God had delivered the enemy into his hands (4:14).

In this vein, Barak can be compared to Moses who told God, *"If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here"* (Ex. 33:15). The indispensability of God's presence among his people both through his Holy Spirit as well as his written word is made quite certain in the pages of holy scripture. We should take instruction from this in our own lives and seek to live in a manner prescribed in God's word careful not to add to or detract from what has been written. God's word is the central means of governing and informing the life of a believer for the church throughout history OT as well as NT. It is the only source of faith and wisdom and the only means by which we will be able to defeat the spirit of our own age.

When Christ was tempted by Satan in Matthew 4:4, the response of the Son of God to the enemy of his soul was, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* Christ quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 to strengthen himself against the enemy. Barak knew the importance of God's word and was blessed; Christ knew it, and resisted temptation. As believers, we should know the word of God and allow it to be our means of overcoming sin, temptation and the world.