



UNLIKELY HEROES: DEBORAH

PSALM 65:1-5; JUDGES 4 & 5

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This is the second in our series on “Unlikely Heroes” in the Bible. Many times we read stories of God’s people in a difficult situation. There seems to be no hope, and yet we find that God has had someone all along. This is the situation here. Let’s look at what is happening.

Not too long before, God had brought the Hebrews out of Egypt. He had given them a covenant in which they were to honor Him alone, and in return, God would care for them. The only condition laid down to them was to honor and obey God alone. Joshua led the campaign to take the land. Each tribe was given a portion to be their own, except for the Levites, the priests. Their part would come from donations from all of the tribes. In God’s vision and plan, the people were to take the land and subdue it. They were to be the ones who would show God’s glory and give witness to His love and mercy. Keep in mind, all of this was to foreshadow the coming of a Messiah, one like Moses, a great prophet and leader. This would be the awakening that would draw all people back to God.

As Joshua’s generation died off, there arose the need for leaders, and this is what we read about in this book, Judges. The judges were people whom God raised at certain, isolated times, to deliver the people from a particular enemy. These people were not “judges” in the sense of our modern usage. The word in the bible means a deliverer. Typically, these were men from different tribes with some renown or exceptional quality.

When we come to the book of the Judges, the people have settled into the land in their territories. However, as we can see in Deborah’s story, the land was not entirely subdued. The people were living among the foreign tribes, and in some cases, they even took on the habits and rituals of those tribes, and, as in this story, foreign kings ruled over some of the areas and the Hebrews living in those areas.

These two chapters, Judges 4 & 5, tell the same story. Chapter 4 is the prose, and Chapter 5 is the poem or lyric version of the story, often called “The Song of Deborah.” This story starts with the words, “Again the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord.” This was not the first time, nor would it be last. Because of the evil that was done, a Canaanite king was ruling over them. We are told that “God sold them into the hands” of this king. The people had been in this situation for 20 years and cry out to God for help.

In a male-dominated society, we are introduced to the only female judge, Deborah. She is a prophet and a leader of the people. Remember, God had told Moses that He would raise prophets among the people, once they were in the land. Deborah is one of those, and she is not the only female prophet. Others are Moses' sister, Miriam; Huldah, in II Kings 22; Noadiah in Nehemiah 6; and Isaiah's unnamed wife in Isaiah 8. Deborah had such respect that the people came to her and asked her to decide disputes among them.

God heard the people's cry, and Deborah called for a man named Barak to gather an army of 10,000 to go against King Jabin and fight against his army under the leadership of a general named Sisera. She tells him to gather an army from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Why just these two tribes? It is explained in Chapter 5. We are told that Reuben is indifferent to what is happening to the other tribes. The Reubenites stay among their flocks and keep "searching their hearts." Dan & Asher don't want to jeopardize their financial position and relations with the Phoenicians/Sea people. Gilead, or Gad, stays beyond the Jordan, not interested in what is happening to the others. Along with Naphtali and Zebulun, we learn that the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir, or Manasseh, and Issachar also send men to join with the army. The tribes of Judah and Simeon are far removed from all of this and therefore are not bothered by this.

When Barak comes forward, notice his words to Deborah. He says to her that he will go but only if she goes with him. Barak, probably thinks that when the people see Deborah, they will be encouraged. If you think of his plight, he did have a right to be somewhat afraid or worried. The general, Sisera, had the most advanced military technology of the time, 900 iron chariots, along with a highly trained, battle-hardened army. Barak would only have untrained volunteers.

Nevertheless, as we read in Chapter 5, this fight belonged to Yahweh, and it was Barak's place to trust in Him and see the battle through despite the odds. How often are we intimidated when the odds seem to be stacked against us? Like Barak, we have only one thing to do, and that is to place our full faith and confidence in God, who has called us. Because of his lack of faith, Deborah tells him that she will go, but the victory over Sisera will be given to a woman.

We read that Barak does follow God's plan. Sisera heads out with his army to annihilate him; however, God turns the tables and, as we read in Chapter 5, causes a downpour. As happens in those parts, when the rains come, the rivers swell into mighty waters and often flood their banks. This was Sisera's downfall because his chariots got stuck in the mud, and Barak's soldiers routed them. The great general then runs for his life. He heads off to the tents of a man who is a relative of Moses' father-in-law. His name is Heber. This clan had made peace of some sort with King Jabin, so Sisera believed he would be safe. Heber's wife, Jael, welcomed him in genuine Middle Eastern hospitality. She gave him a place to rest; she gave him something to drink, and blankets to keep him comfortable. She even said that if anyone came by, she would tell them he wasn't there. Sisera soon falls into a deep sleep, and this is his end.

Jael, like any woman, was the one who would be in charge of setting up the tents as they moved about, so a tent peg and mallet would not be foreign to her. This was her weapon of choice. When Sisera was finally sound asleep, she drove the tent peg through his temple and with such force that it came out the other side and into the ground. Barak has been tracking Sisera and comes to Jael's tent. Jael shows him what has happened, and as Deborah had declared, the victory over Sisera was given to the hands of a woman.

Deborah means ‘bee.’ Bees are responsible for the pollination of flowering plants. Pollination is what creates seeds that grow into other plants. One-third of the human food supply depends on insect pollination of plants and bees play a significant role in this. The biblical Deborah, like a bee, fulfilled an active and vital role in bringing life to the community. Although Deborah did not lack confidence, she did not allow pride to taint her. In the heat of the battle, she identified that ‘Does not the Lord go out before you?’ (Judges 4:14) She never got carried away with her significance. It is a godly attitude that promotes a person. People will respect and heed your ministry once they see the love and character of God flowing out from you.

We find this to be true in all of the Scriptures. When we come to the New Testament and look at Jesus’ ministry, we see many women among his followers. When Mary anoints his feet with oil and then wipes them with her hair, Jesus honors her. At the scene of the crucifixion, we find it is the women who are standing with his mother at the foot of the cross. The first apostle and preacher of the good news, “Jesus has risen,” is Mary Magdalene. Even the apostle Paul, acknowledges and honors the women who serve the Lord with him. Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, took Apollos into their home and instructed him in the Gospel. Priscilla was a trusted and valued co-worker with Paul and respected among the people. Paul’s highest compliment to women in his ministry is given in Romans 16. He is speaking of Phoebe, a deacon, and tells the people to receive her in a manner worthy of the Lord. Then he says, “... give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a ruler over many (lit.) including me.” He then goes on with his list of people to greet and welcome, and mentions several women who are important to him and the ministry.

In this story, Jael, too, is also a valuable player. The name Jael means “mountain goat,” a free ranger. When she invited Sisera into her tent to rest and to hide, she was doing what any reasonable person of that time would do. To invite someone into your tent, to offer hospitality, was saying to that person, as long as you are under my roof, you are under my protection. You are safe. When she then used that tent peg and mallet to kill him, this was a significant violation of the hospitality code. This could have cost her quite a bit in social standing. It could even have caused retribution from her husband, Heber, who had made some sort of peace with the Canaanites. For Sisera, a great general, to die at the hands of a woman was a disgrace in that society.

Nevertheless, Jael was used by God to accomplish what the Israelites would not do for themselves. Sisera was under the general sentence of the “total destruction of the Canaanites.” It was not considered a victory until the leaders were eliminated.

This story holds a great lesson for us. When we look at the battles we face; when we see the powers in high places that work to undermine the work of the Church, then we realize that just like the Israelites, we have to conquer also. We may not be a mighty army taking physical territory, but we have battles of our own to fight. In Christ, we need to recognize that He has won the war, he has given us the victory over all of the things that can hold us back, or “oppress” us. That is when we have to enter the land and take what Jesus has already secured for us. There are times when we may get discouraged or fearful, like Barak, and another will have to come alongside us. This person may not be the one we or society would choose, but we need to heed that person’s advice and direction.

Throughout history, and particularly in the US, we have had people rise to sound the call, and bring life to our society. Just like Deborah, they have been bees who have had to waken us, or mountain goats, “free rangers” like Jael, who do what needs to be done despite the cost to them. I think of women like

Clara Barton, who saw the needs of the wounded soldiers and went to the battlefield to care for them. Harriet Tubman, a slave who made her way to freedom, and then became one of the primary conduits for other slaves who were running to freedom on the Underground Railroad. I think of Rosa Parks, called the mother of the civil rights movement, who decided it was enough, and took her seat at the front of the bus, knowing what it could mean. I could name many more, but the one common thread among all of these women is that they were women of faith, pollinating society to waken us; they were “mountain goats,” going into strange places over rough terrain, but confident of their footing because of the grace of God within them.

Let us aspire to be like Deborah and Jael; women who were raised up to do a task. In the face of a society that would have demanded them to “sit down,” they gained the respect of the people because of the love and grace of God that flowed through them, and let us sing with Deborah, “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I, even I, will sing to the LORD; I will praise the LORD, the God of Israel, in song.”

Amen