

DEBORAH

"Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time." Judges 4:4

Deborah was an exceptional leader, the only woman in the Bible who was placed at the height of political power by the common consent of the people. The rabbis teach that Deborah was a keeper of the lamps in the Tabernacle. If that is so then it is most appropriate as she inspired a great spiritual vision that enlightened all of Israel.

Deborah inspired confidence. She was a counselor to her people in a time of great trouble, she was a judge in their disputes, and proved herself as a deliverer in time of war. Described in the Bible as ***"a mother in Israel"*** she rose to prominence during a most desperate time.

For twenty years, Jabin, king of Canaan, had oppressed the children of Israel. Their vineyards have been destroyed, their produce and property looted, their women dishonored and their children slain. Many Israelites had apostasied and turned to the worship of the Canaanite idols. We read that it was not safe to travel on the roads, people were unsafe in the villages, and ***"there was war in the gates."*** Judges 5:7-8

Deborah was a homemaker and her home was close to the road between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, where olive and palm trees flourished. It was under one of the date palms that Deborah would sit and give counsel to the people of Israel.

The book of Judges records a most desperate time in the history of Israel. Many of the people forsook God, and God allowed them to fall in the hands of their enemies. ***"Every man did that which was right in his own eyes"*** (Judges 17:6) becomes a theme repeated throughout the book of Judges. Judges records seven apostasies, seven seasons of servitude to heathen nations and seven deliverances.

The book begins with compromise and ends with confusion. Judges 1 records six failures in succession where the children of Israel fail to drive out the Canaanites. Then Judges records a series of disobediences which lead to a series of defeats and failures. ***"And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars. But you have not obeyed My voice. Why have you done this? Therefore I also said, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you."*** Judges 2:2-3

Judges 2:7-11 records that for the persistent sin of idolatry, the Lord punished the people of Israel by allowing them to fall under the oppression of the Canaanites for eight years. When they cried out to the Lord for deliverance He raised up Othniel. ***"The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war and the Lord delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand...so the land had rest for forty years..."*** Judges 3:10-11

Judges 3:12-31 records how the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. In punishment for their idolatry and immorality the Lord allowed Eglon, king of Moab, to oppress Israel. ***"But when the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them: Ehud...and by God's grace the land had rest for eighty years."***

Judges 4 and 5 record: ***"The children of Israel again did evil in the site of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera...and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel."*** Judges 4:1-3

It is at this desperate time that Deborah was chosen by God, called, raised up and empowered by God to lead the children of Israel to deliverance.

Deborah must have been an exceptional woman of faith. She is one of only three prophetesses mentioned in the Old Testament (the other two were Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah, during the reign of king Josiah (2 Kings 22:14-20). In the New Testament we read of Anna, the old woman who saw the baby Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:36) and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9).

Deborah was also the only woman ever called upon by God to be the national, political and judicial leader of His people, Israel.

Deborah was surely not the only person to see the problem, but she was apparently the only one who saw the need and was committed to do something about it. She was critically realistic about the situation, but Deborah went beyond critical evaluation to goal setting. She had a very clear goal - the defeat and destruction of the Canaanites, and freedom for her people, Israel.

Deborah was a team player. She enlisted qualified help. She sent up north for a man who had distinguished himself as a soldier, Barak. She then motivated him, confronting Barak with God's command: *"has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Nephtali and the sons of Zebulun."* Judges 4:6

Deborah also strengthened and encouraged Barak with God's promise: ***"I will deliver him into your hand."*** Judges 4:7

In addition, Deborah responded positively to Barak's request that she go with him to the battlefield. Barak had pleaded: *"If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!"* So she said: *"I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sysera into the hand of a woman."* Judges 4:4-9

Even more than seeing the need and being committed to doing something about it, beyond having clear goals and enlisting qualified help, Deborah developed a plan. Barak was to recruit ten thousand men from the tribes of Nephtali and Zebulun, they were to march to Mount Tabor. Tabor is on the plains of Esdraelon, close to Sisera's headquarters. Deborah's plan was to meet the enemy at his strongest point on the plains, near the Kishon River.

In the army we used to speak about three kinds of people in the world: those who make things happen; those who watch things happen; and those who don't know what's happened.

Well, Deborah was one of those who made things happen.

In military intelligence they would frequently divide up people into the 5% 'who think'; the 15% 'who think they think' and the 80% 'who don't think'. This very insulting three-part division explained that for the 5% of the population 'who think' we need to devise books, conferences, documentation and thorough research. For the 15% who think they think, leaflets and video documentaries suffice. For the 80% who don't think, we are reduced to sound bites, bumper stickers and slogans. Well, Deborah was one of the thinkers *"who knew what Israel should do."*

Leadership is the ability to get people to do what they don't want to do - and to like it!

We can only wonder how Deborah and Barak managed to inspire 10,000 Israelites to rise up and walk to confront Jabin (and his 900 iron chariots) on the plains of Esdraelon.

Iron chariots represented the very best in military technology at that time. These chariots made it impossible for Israel to defend the valleys and plains. Israel was out-manned, out-equipped and out-positioned. Not only did they lack iron chariots, they lacked virtually all iron weapons. *"Not a shield or spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel."* Judges 5:8

Disarmed and helpless before a numerically superior and well-armed enemy, the military situation of the children of Israel seemed hopeless.

Yet, even in the face of Sisera's 900 chariots of iron, Deborah instructed Barak: *"Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you? So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot."* Judges 4:14-15

We are not told how many men Sisera had, but apparently he had considerably more than ten thousand. Usually only a very small percentage of an army would be in the chariots. Israel was totally under-equipped. Sisera had 900 iron chariots; Israel did not even have spears or shields. And they were going out against Sisera in his area of greatest strength, on a flat plain. (In AD67 the Jews tried this kind of attack against the Romans in exactly the same place and they were annihilated.) It is for this reason that Barak receives honorable mention in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11: *"And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephtah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."* Hebrews 11:32-34

It was indeed a brave thing for Barak to trust the guidance of Deborah and to lead his small band of under-equipped farmers on the plain of Esdraelon. Sisera was no doubt rubbing his hands in glee in anticipation of a great victory as he saw the pitifully under-equipped Hebrew farmers streaming out over the plains towards him. Surely his chariots would make short work of them. But how was defeat so suddenly snatched out of the jaws of victory? How did the Lord throw Sisera and all of his chariots and army into confusion? Judges 5:21 tells us: *"The torrent of Kishon swept them away, that ancient torrent, that torrent of Kishon..."*

The Jewish historian Josephus records that, despite this being the dry season, a storm of sleet and hail burst over the plain from the East driving right into the faces of Sisera and his men. Sisera's archers and slingers were disabled in the face of the hail, and as the storm lashed the enemy, the floodwaters now racing down the Kishon River overflowed its banks turning the plain into soft mud.

No wonder Sisera fled his chariot! The military advantage of the Canaanites was frustrated by the sudden hailstorm and floodwaters. The downpour turned the ground into a muddy quagmire and, as the chariots bogged down, Sisera's major weapon became a handicap. The Canaanite army panicked, broke ranks and fled, with the Israelites in hot pursuit.

Then, God intervened, and fulfilled the prophesy of Deborah in another way. Sisera, fleeing from the Israelites, stumbled into the tent of a Kenite named Jael. He expected to find safety as Jael was not an Israelite. We are not told what the motive was for Jael to act in the way that she did. However, considering the cruelty and the atrocities of Sisera, it is a high possibility that either Jael, or one of her relatives, had suffered at his hand.

"And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, 'Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear.' And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket. Then he said to her, 'Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty'. So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him. And he said to her, 'Stand at the door of the tent and if any man comes and enquires of you and says 'Is there any man here?' You shall say, 'No.' Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, I will show you the man who you seek.' When he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead, with a peg in his temple. So on that day God subdued Jabin, king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin, king of Canaan." Judges 4:18-24

Surely by this strange turn of events God is teaching His people to trust Him. They were terrified and enslaved by this tyrant Sisera. But, because they turned away from God to idolatry and immorality, they had absolutely no power to resist him. Now God was showing them that, as they turned back to Him, and trusted in Him, He was able to deal with the iron chariots, the armies of the Canaanites, and the tyrant Sisera. And He didn't even need a great man to do it. He could use a non-Israelite woman, like Jael. Effectively God was pointing out to the men of Israel: I don't need you, but you need Me!

"I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; and He set my feet upon a rock, making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of new praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the Lord." Psalm 40:1-3

Deborah's new song in Judges 5 praises God for how He displayed His glory in the history of Israel. She contrasts what Israel was before God's deliverance with their present prosperity, and gives the response of the people of God to the battle call of Deborah and Barak. The song describes God's victory and celebrates the defeat of the man who had oppressed and crushed the people of God.

"When leaders lead in Israel, when the people willingly offer themselves, bless the Lord!" Judges 5:2

Deborah's song rejoices in bold action. When the leaders lead and when the people willingly volunteer. ***"My heart is with the rulers of Israel who offered themselves willingly for the people. Bless the Lord!"*** Judges 5:9

The Word of God teaches us: ***"Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver."*** 2 Corinthians 9:7

God loves a cheerful giver. And Deborah rejoiced in the wholehearted, spontaneous, enthusiastic commitment of the people of Zebulun and Naphtali: ***"Zebulun is a people who jeopardised their lives to the point of death. Naphtali also, on the heights of the battlefield."*** Judges 5:18

The song of Deborah gives an honoured role to those who responded wholeheartedly and enthusiastically to the call of duty. Their motivation is made clear in the last verse of this chapter: ***"Let those who love Him be like the Sun when it comes out in full strength."*** Judges 5:31

Deborah also exposed those who failed to respond to the call to arms. ***"Among the divisions of Reuben there were great resolves of heart. Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? The divisions of Reuben had great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan, and why did Dan remain on ships? Asher continued at the seashore and stayed by his inlets... 'Curse Meroz,' says the Angel of the Lord, 'curse its inhabitants bitterly, because they did not come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.'"*** Judges 5:15-23

Just as we can find no joy in grudging, halfhearted gifts from the reluctant, neither can God accept the grudging offerings of the reluctant and halfhearted.

It is a great disgrace to stay seated when we should stand up, to remain silent when we should speak up, to stand still when we should step out, to remain at home when we should venture forth in the Lord's service. It is unacceptable that any Christian should be absent without leave when our Command in Chief calls us to do our duty. Desertion is a disgrace. God wants no pacifists in His army. It is outrageous that so many Christians are conscientious objectors in the ***"good fight of Faith"***.

As Moses challenged the children of Gad and Reuben: ***"Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?"*** Numbers 32:6

As Joshua challenged the children of Israel: *"How long will you neglect to go and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers has given you?"* Joshua 18:3

Nehemiah records: *"The Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord."* Nehemiah 3:5

"Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully, and cursed is he who keeps back his sword from blood." Jeremiah 38:10

"...They hear Your Words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain." Ezekiel 33:31

"The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few..." Luke 10:2

"And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to His will, shall be beaten with many stripes." Luke 12:47

"Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." James 4:17

At a time of deadly peril Mordecai challenged Queen Esther: *"For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet, who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"* Esther 4:14

The Lord Jesus Christ challenged the apostle Peter: *"Do you love Me...?...Feed My lambs...Do you love Me?...Tend My sheep...Do you love Me?...Feed My sheep."* John 21:15-17

"Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." 1 Peter 3:18

No wonder the Song of Deborah celebrates those who *"offered themselves willingly."*

The book of Judges makes it clear that the important thing is not our ability as much as our availability. God is able. **Are you available?**

God delights in using the weak things (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Ehud with a homemade dagger (Judges 3); Deborah - a woman (Judges 4); Gideon, the youngest, from an obscure family of the smallest tribe (Judges 6); Shamgar, with an ox goad (Judges 3:31); Gideon's little army of 300 armed with pitchers and torches (Judges 7); and Samson with a jaw bone of a donkey (Judges 15:14-19).

Think of how God used the simple staff in Moses' hand, to lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt by a mighty hand, to part the Red Sea and to bring water in the desert out of a rock. Think of how God could use one little stone in the sling of David to bring low the great Philistine giant Goliath. Think of how many thousands of people the Lord Jesus was able to feed with just five loaves and two fish, given to Him by a little boy.

"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts." Zechariah 4:6

Time and again in the book of Judges we read *"the Spirit of the Lord came upon him."* (Judges 3:10); *"The Spirit of the Lord clothed Himself with Gideon"* (Judges 6:34); *"The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephtah"* Judges 11:29; *"The Spirit of the Lord began to move Samson"* (Judges 30:25; 14:6; 15:14).

The Lord wants willing, eager volunteers in His army. We have the great privilege of being the sons and daughters, the servants and soldiers of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator, the Redeemer, the eternal Judge, King of kings and Lord of lords. He has given us His Great Commission. *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"*

Will you answer: Here am I, Lord. Send me!

The eyes of the Lord are looking for dedicated disciples like Deborah. Have you heard the call? Are you putting feet to your Faith?

Dr. Peter Hammond
Livingstone Fellowship
P O Box 74
Newlands, 7725
Cape Town
South Africa
info@ReformationSA.org
www.livingstonefellowship.co.za

The complete audio CD of this message is available from:

Christian Liberty Books
P.O. Box 358
Howard Place
7450, Cape Town
Tel & Fax: (021) 689-7478
Email: admin@christianlibertybooks.co.za

or

Frontline Fellowship - USA
1177 Branham Lane PMB 413
San Hose, CA 95118, USA
Tel: 408-370-1653
Fax: 866-796-0651
Email: info@frontlinefellowship.net
Website: www.frontlinefellowship.net