

What's a Women to Do?

by David H. Roper

In our studies we have been observing the influence of various men on their times. In the past two weeks we have looked at two men, Abraham and Moses, who had a very profound effect or impact upon their times. Abraham was called by God out of Ur of the Chaldees, into the land of Canaan. Canaan was the crossroads of the world at that time and the place through which practically everyone had to go to reach anyplace else. The particular ministry which God gave Abraham, and which he fulfilled, was to be a blessing to the nations. Last week we looked at Moses and the particular ministry God had for him, which was a ministry of deliverance, when he took the people of Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness. (It was Joshua who took them on into the land of Canaan.)

This morning we would like to give equal time to women, because throughout scripture women also are described as having a great impact upon their times. We will look at the story of Deborah this morning, and, later in this series, the story of Ruth. We will view them both against their time, which is the period of the judges.

I always think of these two women as lilies in the midst of a stagnant pond, for the book of Judges describes an absolutely horrible time in the history of Israel. This was Israel's darkest hour. The book covers the years between the conquest of the land of Canaan by Joshua and the beginning of the monarchy under Saul. The book is built around a series of cycles, actually descending spirals, that are described for us in chapter 2, verses 11 to 23. This passage in chapter 2 is a pretty fair summary of the book of Judges, because it describes a series of events that happened in a cyclical fashion throughout the entire two-or-three hundred-year period that is described in this book.

The nation of Israel would do evil and worship Baal. As a result, God would give them over to one of the nations that surrounded them, and for a period of time, they would be oppressed by their enemies. Then they would cry out to God, and God would send them a judge who would deliver them. When we think of judges we envision someone in a black robe and a powdered wig, but that is not the picture of the judges described in this particular book. These judges were champions. I always think of them as something like the Six Million Dollar Man or Superman. They are great heroes whom God raised up to deliver Israel at a particularly distressing time. They may, subsequent to their act of deliverance, have carried on some sort of judicial function in Israel. Certainly most of them were wise and discerning individuals. But, their primary function was that of a champion, a military leader.

One such judge was Deborah, and her story is recorded for us in chapters 4 and 5 of Judges. These two accounts are unique in scripture. In chapter 4 we have the account in prose, and in chapter 5 we have it in poetry; thus we get insights that we would not have from merely one account. The first three verses of chapter 4 give us the setting for the story.

Then the sons of Israel again did 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; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. And the sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.

Ehud was the judge who delivered the Israelites from Moab, and the story of that deliverance is given in chapter 3. I would like to use this auditorium as a map. Let us imagine that this aisle is the Jordan River, and you people on the far side of the auditorium are the two and a half tribes who lived across the Jordan from Canaan. The Jordan runs north and south through the land of Canaan, and the rest of you are in Canaan proper. The Sea of Galilee

would be just a bit north, at the head of the Jordan River (going by the directions from Palestine, not Palo Alto). Just a little to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee was Mount Tabor. Now Hazor, where this man Jabin lived, was just north of the Sea of Galilee.

Hazor was the capital of the northern Canaanite confederacy. It was actually a city-state and all the Canaanite tribes were gathered under one leader, Jabin the king. The word "Jabin" means enlightened one, which seems to be more of a title than a name. He was allied with a man called Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. "Harosheth" means smiths, and "goyim" you will recognize as the word Jews often use for Gentiles. Together, the two words mean "smiths of the Gentiles." Sisera was a very interesting person. His name is not Canaanite or Semitic, but Indo-European. He was probably a Philistine, one of those people who came from the region of the Aegean Sea, from what is known today as Greece. The Philistines were one of the groups driven out of that area by the Greek tribes, and they came to Canaan and settled there.

The Philistines had a monopoly on iron working. As late as the beginning of the monarchy under Saul, hardly any Israelite had iron weapons. At that time the ultimate weapon was an iron spear or sword, but most had to be made of bronze. The Philistines had learned how to work iron in Greece, and they maintained a deliberate monopoly on iron working. These iron weapons were made in Harosheth-hagoyim. If any Jew wanted an iron plowshare, or an object that pertained to peaceful pursuits (which they were permitted to possess by the Philistines), they had to come to Harosheth-hagoyim to have them made or sharpened. Thus the Philistines were able to oppress the Israelites because they could prevent them from gathering an arsenal of weapons. For example, one of the champions of Israel was Shamgar, and the only weapon he had was an oxgoad, which is a piece of wood about six to eight feet long with a metal tip. The terrible oppression of the Israelites is described further in chapter 5, beginning with verse 6.

In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, And travelers went by roundabout ways. [That is, they could not travel on roads, they had to go cross-country because the Philistines and Canaanites controlled the roads.] **The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, Until I, Deborah, arose, Until I arose, a mother in Israel. Then war was in the gates. New gods were chosen;** [Wars had been fought, many Israeli cities had been conquered, and the people had been dispersed and were living in exile in the mountains.] **Among forty thousand in Israel. Not a shield or a spear was seen**

Evidently forty thousand men was the greatest number the Israelites could muster at this time, and not one of them was equipped. There were no shields or spears in Israel. This gives you some idea of their plight. They were in terrible shape. It also appears that there was no leadership in Israel, because the two leaders that are mentioned in this account, Shamgar and Jael, were not Israelites at all. Shamgar is not a Jewish name, he is described as one of the deliverers, but not as a judge. And Jael, as we will see in a moment, was not only a non-Israelite, she was a woman. There were no leaders in Israel. Though the people were terribly oppressed, there was no one who could deliver them. Now that is the setting against which we need to see the ministry of Deborah. Chapter 4, verse 4:

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Bethel was a long way from the region that is described in the first three verses of chapter 4. In those verses the area described was the territory possessed by the two tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. Ephraim, however, is about fifty miles to the south of Naphtali and Zebulun. In order to travel from this part of Canaan to Ephraim, the people had to go by way of Shiloh because the road went right by Shiloh. Now, Shiloh was the spiritual center of Israel at that time; that is where the ark was, where the tabernacle was, where the priests were. But there was no leadership there, so the people bypassed Shiloh, and went all the way to Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim to meet with Deborah and to seek wisdom from her. This is an amazing fact: there was no man anywhere in Israel they could appeal to. The priests were decadent, as we know from other accounts in the book of Judges, and certainly from the story in 1 Samuel of Eli and his sons.

There was no wisdom in Shiloh, so the people went to Deborah who had already established herself in their eyes as a woman of the Word of God. She was a prophetess. Now this leads me to believe that the first step for any woman who wants to have an impact upon her age is for her to be a woman rooted in the Word. That is where Deborah's authority came from. We will see, as the account unfolds, that she appealed continually to the Word, not to her emotions, not to her fears, not to her anxieties, but to the Word.

Now it is true, according to scripture, that men ultimately have spiritual responsibility in a couple of areas, in the body of Christ and in the home. but that does not mean that we, as men, are ultimately responsible for any other person's spiritual life, and certainly not for a woman's spiritual life. Men and women are described in scripture as joint heirs of eternal life and they have the same direct relationship to Jesus Christ. No man has the ultimate responsibility for a woman's spiritual life. Women have the same access to God and the same right to appeal to him and draw upon his resources as any man. That is where women are to begin, by getting to know God in a personal way, going into his Word in depth, acting upon the basis of his promises, and cultivating their relationship with him. The Word is the basis for all authority. That was the basis of Deborah's authority, and men sought her out for they knew she had wisdom.

Now, notice what she does in verse 6,

Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kadesh-naphtali, and said to him, "Behold, the God of Israel, has commanded, 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun.' "

If you have an American Standard Version, the margin note tells you that this is actually a question. It ought to be translated, "Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded that you should march to Mount Tabor?" Deborah was not telling Barak anything that he did not already know. She called Barak to Bethel to remind him of the truth that he already had in his possession. God had been speaking to Barak. His home was Kadesh-naphtali. "Kadesh" means sanctuary. Evidently there was a holy site there in Naphtali, and there may have been a very small glimmer of truth and light there. In any case, Barak knew the truth. He knew that he should have been a man of faith. His home was located in the very area we described earlier as that which was oppressed by the Canaanites. He was living in the center of all this oppression, and he knew the Lord. He knew that God could deliver him, but he was impotent, powerless, afraid to act. Deborah is calling him to go back to what he knows is true, and to act on it. "Has not God said to do this thing?"

The account continues in verse 7,

"I [God] will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon; and I will give him into your hand." Then Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kadesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kadesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him.

First, Deborah was a woman of the Word of God. She had put her roots down into her Lord and into his Word. Then, on the basis of that Word, she appealed to Barak to act according to truth, to be a man. Basically, that is the appeal that women ought to make to men: to act like men. Women should simply refuse to put up with anything less than manhood on the part of their men. Deborah did it graciously. She did not nag, she did not command, she did not insist; she merely reminded Barak of his responsibility before God. She told him of the truth that he already knew, and then she agreed to support him. She went with him to sustain and encourage him, not to reject him because of his cowardice. He does not appear overly enthused about the whole project. "If you don't go, I'm not going!" But she did not ridicule him for this attitude, she supported him.

So Barak went, and the passage suggests that he had to draw men to him by stealth. Under cover of darkness they gathered at Mount Tabor. Mount Tabor is a volcanic cone that rises 1,843 feet out of the valley of Esdraelon, also

known as the valley of Megiddo, the famous site of so many wars. If you ever want to have a war, that is the place to have it. Throughout history there have been many famous encounters at that place. Napoleon, Alexander, and some of the great Egyptian pharaohs, and even Allenby fought there; the roll call goes on and on. Mount Tabor is at the end of the valley. Now I am not a military strategist, but it seems to me that this is not the way to fight a battle. They did hold the high ground at Mount Tabor, because this particular spot overlooked the entire valley, but it could easily be surrounded and cut off. At the time the account was written, Mount Tabor was covered with trees. They could hide among the trees, but that was to no avail because Sisera knew they were there.

Verse 12,

Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon.

Sisera gathered his troops, his nine hundred iron chariots, and this great multitude of Philistines. They journeyed through the mountains of Gilboa around the north side of the valley of Esdraelon, and, coming into the mouth of the valley, they started advancing up the valley. Right in the middle of the valley is the river Kishon, described here as a wadi, a dry creek bed that probably looks much like the Los Angeles River. Seeing the Los Angeles River was a great disappointment to me. I saw the bridge and the sign reading, "Los Angeles River", but not a drop of water. But I was stationed also at Barstow when I was in the service, and I can recall being in the field when a storm would strike the mountain. In five minutes those dry creek beds could become raging torrents. I have seen walls of water, 4 to 5 feet high, come down those dry wadis. That was the way the Kishon was. It ran right through the middle of the valley of Esdraelon.

Sisera utilized the dry creek bed, and he began to advance, with all his men and chariots toward Mount Tabor. Now I want you to get this picture firmly in mind. Here are ten thousand Israelites, not a very large group, without weapons and hiding in the trees; while up the valley of Esdraelon come the Philistines with nine hundred chariots of iron and many foot soldiers, all fully equipped. Notice what Deborah says in verse 14--she says "Charge!". Do you know what you men would say? You would turn to one of your lieutenants and say, "Isn't that just like a woman! What do you mean, charge!?" But Deborah knew something that Barak did not know.

"Arise! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands; behold the Lord has gone out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand 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. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.

Do you know what happened? If we had only the straightforward prose account of chapter 4, we would never know any more than this. But chapter 5 tells us what occurred. Look at verse 4.

Lord, when Thou didst go out from Seir, When Thou didst march from the field of Edom, The earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, Even the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked at the presence of the Lord, This Sinai, at the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.

Deborah goes back into the history of Israel to remind them of the events that took place when Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Law. You recall what happened? A storm broke over the mountain, with thunder and lightning and rain; and the people feared because of the storm. And Deborah calls Mount Tabor "this Sinai". Now look further in chapter 5, at verse 19.

The kings came and fought [the Canaanite kings, for there were no kings in Israel]; Then fought the kings of Canaan At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo; They took no plunder in silver. The stars fought from heaven, From their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. O my soul, march on with

strength. Then the horses' hoofs beat From the dashing, the dashing of his valiant steeds.

Do you see what happened? Sisera is charging up the valley. He knew it was the dry season. He was no fool; you would never take your chariots out in the rainy season! So, while he is charging up this wadi and ten thousand Israelis are charging off the slopes of Mount Tabor toward him, a storm breaks over Tabor, somewhere up in the mountains of Gilboa. A great wave of water sweeps them away, down the Kishon. Their chariots become bogged down and they turn and try to flee. As you read this poetic account, you can almost see the chariots jostling, the beating of the horses' hooves, the panic of the horses as men try to drive them out of the mud; but they are cut to pieces. Now Barak did not know this would happen. Deborah did not know precisely what God was going to do, but she had faith. When Sisera and his men start coming at them, she said, "Charge! Go out to meet them! God will fight for you." And God did.

As we know, Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled toward the east. He received sanctuary in Jael's tent and she slew him. You have to remember that her culture was one of extreme violence. She was from a wild Bedouin tribe, and this was something fairly common to her. Scripture in no way condemns her; nor does it condone what she did. However, later Deborah praises her for what she did, in contrast to the people in another little town, Meroz, who evidently did nothing while Sisera fled. Jael is blessed because she slew him.

In chapter 4, verse 23, we read:

So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel.

God did it. Barak did not receive the honor. Deborah had told him that a woman would receive the honor. She was not referring to herself; she was referring to Jael. God did it. It is so obviously God's work. Deborah's ministry was to point Barak to the source of his help. That was all she could do. She could not take up the sword, though she may have liked to. She could not usurp the place of leadership that the men of Israel had in that day; but she could encourage men to be men, to act on the basis of the Word. And Deborah says in her note of thanksgiving, in chapter 5, "Praise the Lord, that the leaders led!" Barak believed. He acted on the basis of the Word that she turned him to. He was able to stimulate two tribes to follow him, Naphtali and Zebulun, and others came, too, as we read through the account. Ephraim, in verse 14, the tribe of Benjamin, Machir (which is the western half of the tribe of Manasseh), and Issachar all followed Barak.

Deborah not only was able to encourage Barak; she encouraged the entire nation. The entire nation was turned around because of the efforts of one woman. She was a woman of the Word, and she called her men to a knowledge and obedience to the Word. She encouraged them and supported them in that role. She describes herself in this passage as "a mother in Israel". That is a great term. Men are described as fathers in God's house; Deborah is described as a mother, with all of the authority, with all of the dignity, with all of the opportunities that a mother has to make an impact upon her age. That was Deborah's role.

It is interesting to read the book of Hebrews with this story in mind, because when you come to the great roll call of heroes in Hebrews 11, there are a number of judges whose names are cited as examples of faith. There is Gideon and Jephthah and Samson, and there is Barak. What is notable is that there is no mention made of Deborah. And if it were not for this story we would never know of Deborah's place in history. She was content to take that role. Now God may have exalted her as a leader; he could have, and sometimes he does, but not always. She saw her role as a mother in Israel. She could stand behind Barak, call him to the Word, call him to manhood, encourage him, support him in the ministry that God had given him, and be content to let him have the credit. That is what it means to be a mother in Israel. What a great ministry you women can have in our lives. How much we need you. How foolish we are to resist that kind of counsel.

Thank you again, Father, for the influence of this mighty woman of faith. May we learn from her. May we men learn humility and may we learn not to be threatened when we are encouraged and counseled by the women in our lives. May the women here see the great dignity and power that lie in their roles. We thank you for that. In Christ's name, Amen.