**DEBORAH, WOMAN OF FAITH**

July 21, 2013

Judges 4:1-5:31

Key Verse 5:7 “Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel.”

Deborah is called, “a mother in Israel.” She was a mother to the Israelite nation, and it also says, that she brought life back into the village. Deborah is a good example for mothers today. She demonstrates how they can bring life back into their village. Our world, our nation, our city and our churches desperately need women who will answer the call of God to Motherhood, Mothers who will bring life back into our homes, churches, cities, nation and our world. Because in many homes and in many places many young people are lifeless with cowardice, and idolatry. We need many Deborahs who will stir up a spiritual renewal in this campus and nation. When there is one woman of faith like Deborah, she can revive spirits of many young men like Barak to do great things.

Look at verses 4:1-3. “After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.”Once again, we see the Israelites’ persistent bad habits to turn away from God. Why were they so easily led astray? Because they did not listen to God’s word. They didn’t like to study the Bible. When they did not study the Bible, they were easily carried away by false teachings and idols.

Israel’s situation during the 20 years following Ehud’s death was quite serious. Jabin, the king of Canaan, oppressed the Israelites so much that their life was unbearable. The highways were deserted (5:6). There was no communication or travel. Village life in Israel ceased as everyone moved from the country to the cities for safety (5:7). Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the king of Canaan came and ruined them. He took away all the livestock and kidnapped many people for slavery. The Israelites chose new gods in hopes that they might deliver them from the terrible oppression. But there was no safety in the cities. War came to the city gates. But they were totally defenseless. Not a shield or spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel (5:8).

On the other hand, their enemy was formidable. The commander of the Canaanite army was Sisera, and his strength is described as having 900 iron chariots. His headquarters were located at Harosheth-Haggoyim which meant “smiths of the Gentiles.” The Philistines had learned how to work with iron, and they maintained a monopoly in this field. Whenever anyone wanted something made out of iron, they had to go to the Philistines. Israelites who wanted to buy an iron tool had to travel to Harosheth-Haggoyim. No wonder the Israelites did not have any weapons!

After enduring the cruel oppression for 20 years, the Israelites finally cried to the Lord for help. How did God help them? He raised up a judge by the name of Deborah. Look at verses 4-5. “Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.” Deborah was a prophetess and the only female judge. She was a housewife. The name Deborah means “honey bee,” implying that she was a sweet presence in a society that was barren, immoral and godless. Her faith and devotion to the Lord must have been a source of encouragement to many people who came to her for her wisdom. But more than that, Deborah was a spiritual leader of Israel. She did her best to teach the people God’s word and his ways. This was not an easy task. After the 20 years of severe oppression, the Israelites were resigned to their fate. They were filled with fear. They had no strength to overcome their helplessness. It required courage and faith to challenge the status quo.

What did Deborah do? Look at verses 6-7. “She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’” Deborah prayed and called Barak to go and fight Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army. She assured him that God would give him victory over Sisera’s iron chariots. She urged him to make a decision of faith to take action—to do what God commanded him to do. She had a clear understanding of her role. Perhaps she wanted to pick up the sword herself and lead the Israelites into battle, but she knew that God wanted to use a man like Barak in leadership against the Canaanites.

Deborah encouraged Barak to get a group of unorganized soldiers and go fight against a well trained general by the name of Sisera and a seasoned army that had horses and iron chariots. It is great to know that God never sees a situation in quite the same way we see it. God knows in advance what he is determined to do through our lives. He asks us to believe that he has a perfect plan. That is not always easy when we look at the size of the problem in front of us. Yet the problem is that we are looking at the size of the problem, rather than at the size of the God that we serve. All Barak has to do is to call 10,000 farmers, merchants and field hands together who have no weapons to go fight a mighty well equipped army. Do you think Barak is going to say, “Oh sure no problem.” Look at verse 8. “Barak said to her, ‘If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me. I won’t go.’” Barak means “thunderbolt.” But unlike his name, he was a coward. He could not believe God’s word. It looked impossible to fight against 900 iron chariots.

He exemplified Israel’s other warriors at that time.

What did Deborah say to him? Deborah did not put him down despite his reluctance. He did not rebuke him. She did not bruise his ego by saying, “You, coward.” Instead, she encouraged Barak. Look at verses 9-10. “‘Very well,’ Deborah said, ‘I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.’ So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.” In Hebrews 11:32, among the heroes of faith, Barak, not Deborah, is commended for his faith. Though somewhat hesitant at first, he obeyed the Lord by faith and delivered Israel. We can imagine that when Sisera heard that Deborah was leading the army into battle, he must have had a good laugh at that one. “Barak was afraid to come alone, so he is bringing a woman with him.” Little did he realize that not only was Deborah a woman, she was a woman with the power of God on her life.

What was the outcome of the war? For the battle site, Sisera cleverly chose the Valley of Jezreel along the Kishon River, where his chariot forces would have ample maneuvering space to range the battlefield and attack in numbers from any quarter. The Israelite army of 10,000 was in Mount Tabor. You would think that this might be an advantageous position, a vantage point where an army could command the valley floor. But Israel had become sitting ducks. Sisera could bring his 900 chariots, surround Mount Tabor, cut off all Israel’s supply lines, and simply wait for their starvation. It was an absurd battle plan. Sisera laughed aloud for his good fortune. But Deborah once again encouraged Barak by reminding him of the power of God. Look at verse 14. “Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?’ So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.”

What Sisera did not realize was the power of the Lord who would fight from heaven for Israel. As Sisera’s 900 chariots marched down the valley floor, suddenly the floodgates of the heavens opened. God sent a torrential downpour of rain down on the valley. The River Kishon was a dried up riverbed, but suddenly it sprang to life and water flooded the valley so that the whole area became a sea of mud and water (5:21). The 900 iron chariots got stuck in the mud. The Canaanite army had to abandon them and run for safety. The Israelites pursued them as far as Harosheth-Haggoyim, and there they destroyed them completely. Deborah and Barak won a great victory with the help of the Lord. Even in modern times storms have rendered the plain along the Kishon virtually impassable. In April 1799, the flooded Kishon River aided Napoleon’s victory over a Turkish army in the Battle of Mount Tabor.

Look at verse 17. “Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite.”The Kenites were descendants of Moses’ father-in-law Jethro. Sisera thought he could get help from Heber the Kenite; so he fled to his tent on foot. But Jael, Heber’s wife, knew that in time of war there can be no neutrality. She made a decision of faith to stand with God’s people. Jael means “mountain goat.” Jael gave Sisera milk, most likely goat’s milk. Since the Middle Eastern custom prohibited any man other than a woman’s husband or father from entering her tent, Jael seemed to offer Sisera an ideal hiding place. But she drove the tent peg through his temple and killed him. So Jael became a hero of this war. As Deborah had said, Barak lost his chance to become a great hero.

We learn that God can defeat very powerful enemies in our life, even those enemies with iron chariots. There are certain enemies we are willing to take on because we think we can defeat them. But some enemies look invincible that we don’t even attempt to fight them. But this passage teaches us that there are no enemies that we cannot defeat, because God can defeat any powerful enemies in our life. God is powerful, more powerful than any army in this world. So what we need is not iron chariots but faith in God. When we go against our enemies by faith, God sends a helper in the person of the Holy Spirit who can lead us and direct us through our battles. When I was a Ph.D. student, I was fearful of a qualifying exam. It was an oral exam, and exam to see whether my supervisor would accept me as his student. He was supposed to bring his colleague to the exam. He was really a smart guy. I felt like an elementary student in front of him. I was very nervous and was afraid of failure. On the day of the exam, his colleague got sick and he was replaced by another professor. I could not answer any of my supervisor’s questions but I answered another professor’s questions. I heard their arguing whether to give me a pass or not. In the end, they decided to give me a pass. Only by God’s grace, I was able to get a Ph.D.

We also learn the importance of a woman of faith like Deborah who brings life back into our homes and encourages young men to do great things. When my brother-in-law graduated with a civil engineering degree, he did not know what to do with his life. He thought about making a living by delivering newspapers. But his mother said to him, “Go and apply to the graduate school.” He went by faith, and amazingly there was one professor in environmental engineering who was looking for a student. He got a Ph.D. in environmental engineering by using his computer skill which he acquired by playing many video games.

In verse 5:2, Deborah and Barak also praised God for the valiant princes who willingly participated in the battle. When Deborah, a mother in Israel, arose and challenged the princes of Israel with God’s word, they followed Barak into the battle against Sisera. And many tribes volunteered to join in the battle. They risked their lives. They came with an eager spirit to volunteer on behalf of the nation. They fought and won a great victory. In verses 5:16-17, Deborah remembered those who did not come to help. Reuben had great resolve of heart, but he took no action. Gilead (Gad) did not cross the Jordan to join in the battle. Dan remained in ships, and Asher sat idly at the seashore. The Bible notes carefully those who fought in the battle and those who stood passively by, unwilling to risk their safety in God’s cause. So it is today: God knows who is actively confronting the world and the devil and who is sitting back and simply watching. We learn here that it is important for us to willingly participate in the work of God. The Lord works powerfully when the coworkers in a fellowship willingly give their hearts to serve the work of God.

In conclusion, we learn that God uses those who have courage and faith to challenge the complacency. May God raise up many women of faith like Deborah! May God help us to volunteer to fight in the battle against God’s enemies!