

## More Women Like Deborah

*Judges 4:1-14*

One Mother's Day a few years ago, in the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip, Calvin was pictured standing by his mother's bed. "Hey, Mom! Wake up. I made you a Mother's Day card." "My, how sweet of you." she says. "I did it all by myself. Go ahead & read it." She begins to read:

*"I was going to buy a card with hearts of pink & red.  
But then I thought I'd rather spend the money on me instead.  
It's awfully hard to buy things when one's allowance is so small.  
So I guess you're pretty lucky I got you anything at all.  
Happy Mother's Day. There, I've said it. Now I'm done.  
So how about getting out of bed & fixing breakfast for your son."  
Signed, Calvin."*

"I'm deeply moved." said his mother. "Did you notice the part about my allowance?" he asks.

Well, we say Happy Mother's Day to all our mothers today, but we say it with no ulterior motives! On this day we are reminded of the importance our mothers have played in our lives, and in fact, we have to remember the key contributions women in general have made.

Many years ago, perhaps, you would come to church on Mother's Day and hear a sentimental, nostalgic, emotional sermon about Mom. But this is a new day, and the time is growing short. So instead of sentiment, nostalgia, and emotion, I believe the message we need most to hear is one of challenge and a call to holiness on the part of our mothers—and all women in general.

The Bible describes the lives and contributions of several women. Many of them are very well known to us: Eve, Sarah, Ruth, Esther, and of course, Mary. It was a woman who broke the alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it over the head of Jesus. It was a woman who was so grateful to Jesus for the change He had brought into her life, that she washed His feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. When the lifeless body of Jesus was placed in a borrowed tomb, there was a small group of women standing nearby watching it all. And it was a woman to whom the Resurrected Christ first appeared, a woman who first announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

When we peer into the book of Judges in the Old Testament, we read of a time in the history of Israel when people did whatever they wanted to. In fact, the book ends with these words: "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit*" (Judges 21:25). And that pretty much describes the entire book. The book of Judges tells us the stories of the up-and-down relationship Israel had with God—it's almost a picture of our relationship with God, as well!

There is a particular phrase around which the Book of Judges seems to be built: *“The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.”* It shows up six times in the first thirteen chapters (2:11, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1).

It was a terrible cycle, up and down, back and forth. When the people disobeyed God and worshipped false gods, the Lord allowed them to be oppressed by their enemies. A summary of the Book of Judges is found in chapter 2. Here is what we read in 2:14-15—*“In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as He had sworn to them. They were in great distress.”*

Then we read beginning in verse 18: *“Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, He was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.”*

These judges served during a very dark period in Israel’s history, between the time that Joshua died, and the time when Saul became the first king. They were known as “judges” but their function was quite a bit different from the magistrates we have in our day. These individuals were sent by God for a specific period of time to deliver His people from their oppressors. Because they were military leaders first of all, the people looked to them for additional leadership during a time when there was no king and no real form of government. Many of them were pretty colorful characters, including Gideon and Samson, but most of them were weak and receive only a quick mention in the story.

Fourth on the list was a woman, whose name was Deborah, whose name means “honey bee.” We know very little about her, but we do know that Deborah was quite a bit different from the men who shared that title. She was not a military leader; the Scriptures tell us in Judges 4:4 that she was a prophetess. The others were deliverer-judges, many times leading the people into battle; Deborah was a prophet-judge, whose reputation for hearing and communicating the message of God to the people was very well-known. She would sit under a palm tree, and people would come to her to have her mediate in their disputes.

The Bible doesn’t give us much detail about Deborah, but it does tell us enough for us to know that we need more women who display the kind of character qualities that she did. In our day, we need more women like Deborah! I don’t mean that we need more women judges. Let me explain:

# **1 We need more women like Deborah: women who are godly and wise, vv. 4-5**

We read in verse four: *“Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.”* Verse five tells us that Deborah *“held court under the Palm of Deborah...and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.”* The people recognized the touch of God upon her life. As she mediated between the people in their various disputes, her reputation grew and grew. She became known for her wisdom in judging between the people. That required consistency in her judgments, that time after time the people recognized the solid insights in settling these disagreements.

When the Scriptures call Deborah “a prophetess” we are to understand that she spoke for the Lord. The word “prophet” as we’ve explored many times before, basically means “one who speaks for another,” not necessary one who tells the future. There are several women listed as being a prophetess in the Scripture: Miriam, the sister of Moses was one of them. During the time of the kings there was a prophetess named Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple for circumcision when He was eight days old, Anna prophesied about the Child. We read about Phillip the Evangelist, one of the original “deacons” in Acts 21, who had four unmarried daughters, all of them who prophesied. So Deborah is not alone in the Scriptures in this regard.

But remember the backdrop of the book of Judges. Deborah lived and prophesied during a very dark time, when people were not necessarily accepting of the things she had to say to them. God raised her up during a time when there was not much male leadership. The book of Hebrews lists Barak as being a man of faith, but even Barak was unwilling to go into battle without her. How we praise God for those women who have stepped into the gap when the men were unwilling!

Godly women are recognized by others as having a special relationship with the Lord. Deborah was known as a prophetess, not because she had been elected to this position, but because her relationship with the Lord was so close and so intimate that others could see it. There was something about Deborah’s life and ministry that drew others to her.

In our day, in our families, in our churches, we need more women like Deborah—women who follow the standards for godliness as outlined in Scripture. We need women who do not get their cues for their moral standards from the world, but who look to the Lord God for their guidance. We need women who, when the leadership of men is conspicuous by its absence, are not afraid to step up and do what needs to be done.

Some might think that a woman should “stay in her place,” whatever that means. Listen! When God calls a woman to a particular task, then that task is “her place.” And one thing we need to learn is that God doesn’t always follow our rules. Many times God colors outside the lines when it comes to selecting the men and women He will use. When the men hold back and do not follow after the Lord, when the men do not take the lead, when the faith of the men is weak and impotent, we need women who will respond to the call of God on their lives. What about you? You may not ever be known as a prophetess, but have you kept your eyes on the Lord? Have you nurtured your own relationship with Him? Do others know that there’s something special about your life?

## **2 We need more women like Deborah: women who listen to God, vv. 6-7**

In verses six and seven, Deborah had a message for a man named Barak: *“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.’”*

This was not something Deborah made up. What God was saying through her was so fantastic that it could only have come from Him. We read in 4:2 that Sisera commanded the army of Jabin, a king of Canaan. In 4:3 *“Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.”* The way that verse reads, it almost sounds as though Israel put up with this oppression for two decades before they finally cried out to God for help. How long will it take us before we turn from our wicked ways and seek the face of God? How long before we heed the voice of God calling us back to Him?

Times were really tough in Israel. We see a brief description of just how tough in Judges 5—not only was there an apparent deficiency of male leadership, but the roads were abandoned because it was so unsafe. *“Travelers took to winding paths. Village life in Israel ceased”* (5:6-7). In the midst of that uncertainty and danger, God spoke to the one woman who was listening.

But God was telling them to do something that was beyond the bounds of common sense. Even ten thousand men against these nine hundred chariots would not be enough. It would be similar to a crowd of people on bicycles going up against nine hundred tanks. Some scholars believe that these chariots had sharp blades attached at various places around the hubs of the wheels, so that the charioteers could ride those chariots up into the middle of a group of men, and basically mow them down as if they had been bushhogged. It would have been a very fearful thing to go up against an army outfitted like this.

But God say “Go,” and Deborah heard what God said, and she communicated that to Barak. Today we need women whose hearts are so tied into God’s heart, whose ears are so tuned into God’s voice, that when God commands, they hear what He tells them to do. We need women

who regularly listen to what God says and who are willing to obey Him even if it doesn't make sense to our human reasoning. We need women in our day who are able to distinguish between the noise of a godless world and the gentle, small voice of the Spirit.

Will you be that one? Will you be the Deborah in your family or in your circle of influence, that one who will say without hesitation and without apology, "I've been listening to God, and I believe this is what He is saying"? Will you?

### **3 We need more women like Deborah: women who challenge others to follow the Lord, vv. 9, 14**

Barak was ready to obey God, but only with certain stipulations. His reply to Deborah is recorded in verse eight: *"If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."* You can almost see Deborah studying him very carefully for a few moments before answering: *"Very well, 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 and Barak set out for Kedesh, where they rally ten thousand men to this battle. They go up to Mount Tabor, which rises 1800 feet above the surrounding area. If you stood there today you would have a commanding view of the valley; you could see Mount Carmel to the west and Mount Hermon to the north. It would be difficult to hide ten thousand men on a mountain like that, and soon Sisera learns what is happening. He brings all of his men and all 900 chariots to the plain at the base of Mount Tabor. Here's what I see: I see Deborah standing there with Barak and perhaps a few of his key warriors, watching Sisera and 900 chariots heading toward them. The air is thick with anticipation and dread. Most of those ten thousand men with Deborah and Barak may have heard of the 900 chariots, but they probably had never actually seen them with their own eyes. Can you feel your own stomach churning as you stand there and watch this developing in front of you?

If you are on foot, and your enemy is equipped with iron chariots, and the iron chariots have sharp spinning blades on the hubs, the best thing to do is wait and let him come to you on the mountain. After all, chariots are not as effective on the mountain. The last thing you want to do is go down to fight him on the level ground of the plain. But that is exactly what Deborah tells Barak to do in verse fourteen: *"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?'"*

Can you imagine the startled look on Barak's face as he realizes that he is taking ten thousand men into the teeth of those chariots? It would have been safer to stay where they were on the mountain. In our day, we find that it is often safer to stay where we are, rather than follow the



Lord's lead into battle. But "safe" is not where the victory is! We need women who challenge others to follow the Lord and obey Him, rather than choose what is "safe."

But Barak remembers his recent hesitation in obeying the Lord, and he remembers that Deborah had told him the honor of the victory would be given to a woman. Things are playing out just the way Deborah had told him, so this time he obeys. Deborah has challenged him to obey the Lord, to do what God says, even if it goes against logic, and this time he will follow.

So here is what happened, as we read in verse fourteen: *"So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men."* Look what God did! *"At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot."* How did God do that?

Judges 5 is a song that Deborah and Barak sang to celebrate this great victory, and in verses 20-21 we learn that when Barak acted in faith and led the charge down the mountain to the plain, that God caused a thunderstorm to flood the mostly dry bed of the Kishon River. When the flood waters swept down upon them, those heavy iron chariots became stuck in the mud—they were useless! In the confusion, the men of Israel won an easy victory.

In the heat of the battle, Sisera, the commander of the army, abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. He made his way to the tent compound of Heber the Kenite, whose wife Jael lured him into her tent, presumably to hide him, then killed him while he was asleep.

We need women in our day who are able to point to what the Lord says and who are able to challenge men and women of all ages to advance in the Name of our God. We need more women like Deborah, who can stare into the face of the enemy and declare with faith, "Today the Lord has given you the victory!"

You may be saying to yourself, "Well, what can I do? I'm only a woman!" But the teaching of Scripture is that God is no respecter of persons, that what He is really looking for is a man or woman who is totally sold out to Him. We need more women like Deborah: women who are godly and wise, women who listen to God, and women who challenge others to follow the Lord.

Will you be among that number?