

Deborah: A Woman Leads Because of Men's Neglect

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 4:1-24 (text); Hebrews II:32-33

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Dear congregation of Christ: Most Christians are familiar with three of the twelve judges of Israel: Samson, Gideon, and Deborah. And for many evangelicals, Deborah is often used as proof that the Bible supports women pastors, elders and deacons. Our text, of course, tells us that Deborah is both a judge and a prophetess.

In a recent General Assembly of a confessional Presbyterian denomination with which our federation has a fraternal relationship, it was approved to appoint a Study Committee on women in ministry. This particular denomination left the very liberal church for the very same reason: women are not to be ordained as pastors, elders or deacons. Now they are starting to go back full circle.

But we have seen from many decades ago that all liberal mainline Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian and even Reformed denominations now ordain women in church ministry. Some of them even ordain homosexuals and lesbians!

So is Deborah a paradigm or pattern on which to ground the practice of ordaining women to church ministry? Our church and our federation, the United Reformed Churches in North America, do not believe so. If so, why is Deborah appointed by God to be a prophetess and a leader in Israel? Wasn't there a single man in Israel qualified to be a judge and prophet?

Our theme today is “**Deborah: A Woman Leads Because of Men's Neglect,**” under three headings: first, **Barak Lacks Faith and Leadership**; second, **Deborah Fills the Need for Willing and Faithful Men**; and third, **Barak is Negligent, But Still a Model of Faith.**

Barak Lacks Faith and Leadership

The two main Israeli characters in this chapter are Deborah and Barak. Barak is the military leader. Deborah is said to live in the hill country of Ephraim in the central section of Canaan, not far from Jerusalem. Barak lived in a place in the north called Kedesh-*naphtali*.¹

Their main protagonists are Jabin king of the Canaanites, and Sisera his military leader. The Canaanite army has 900 iron-clad chariots. His headquarters is in the northern city of Hazor, north of the Sea of Galilee, near Mount Carmel. Jabin's coalition is made up of several city-states of the Canaanites in the north, including the valley of Jezreel. This is the same valley called Armageddon, or “mount Megiddo,” in Revelation 16:16, where a final endtime “battle” will be fought. All of the major battles for control of Palestine had been fought in the valley of Jezreel where the river Kishon flowed (2 Kgs 23:29; Zec 12:11).

Because Israel again “*did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD after Ehud died,*” he sold them into the powerful hand of Jabin and his general, Sisera. Again, this was the result of Israel's disobedience to God's command to drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Notice that in Ehud's 80 years as judge, Israel did not do evil before God. Their obedience was not from the heart, but merely because of outside pressure and enforcement by Ehud. We too are often

¹ See attached map.

“Sunday Christians,” exhibiting our faith because of expectations by our Christian friends. Our youth are often like Israel, only attending church on Sundays because of pressure from parents.

Deborah lived much farther from Hazor than Barak. But from her place far from the Barak's headquarters, Deborah calls him to her palm tree. She then commands him to gather an army of 10,000 at Mount Tabor, just north of the valley of Jezreel. She tells him that the LORD had promised to draw out Sisera and his 900 chariots to Mount Tabor and give Sisera into Barak's hand.

So when Sisera went out from Hazor, he wanted to meet Barak's army in the plain of Megiddo, not on the slopes of Mount Tabor where his chariots would be ineffective. But in the next chapter, where we read of Deborah's victory song, it says in verse 21, *“the torrent Kishon swept them away.”* Apparently, the river overflowed into the paths of Sisera's chariots, and the chariots got bogged down in the mud. Israel routed all of Sisera's army and his chariots there. We see this in verse 22 of Chapter 5 where the horses are said to be galloping frantically, probably in disarray during their retreat. How did the river Kishon overflow? The text sent a thunderstorm. We see this in the word “routed” which sometimes is translated as “thundered,” as in 1 Samuel 7:10, *“But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel.”*

But going back to the beginning of the battle. The Canaanites had oppressed Israel for 20 years before they again cried out to the LORD. It was then that Deborah came into the scene and called Barak to battle. Israel's cycle of oppression was getting progressively worse. In the time of Othniel, it was eight years. During Ehud's time, it was eighteen years. Now, for 20 years, no man in Israel took the initiative to rally the men to battle. It was Deborah who summoned Barak to battle. This was a story where the roles of men and women were reversed.

Barak's unwillingness and lack of leadership is pointed out by Deborah's question to him, *“Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go!’?”* This means that God had previously commanded Barak to lead his army against Sisera. And Deborah again says to him, *“Has not the LORD told you that he would give Sisera into your hand? ... Does not the LORD go out before you?”* In other words, God had previously promised victory to Barak. He himself will lead the charge against Sisera, but he still would not act. So the LORD gave the initiative to Deborah.

Deborah Fills the Need for Willing and Faithful Men

Deborah's position in Israel is not clear. The narrator says that she was a prophetess. What did a prophet do? He proclaimed the word of God to the people, and the word could be a commendation for obedience, or warning of judgment for disobedience. The text also says that she *“was judging Israel... and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment”* (verses 4-5). So she also has the duties of a judge like Othniel and Ehud. In her victory song, she even calls herself *“a mother in Israel,”* a title of respect (5:7). As a godly judge, she would be adjudicating lawsuits and giving divine guidance in her own place under a palm tree.

However, all of Israel's judges in the Book of Judges were also military leaders who fought against Israel's oppressors. Deborah was not the military leader; Barak was. Therefore, in this

sense, Deborah was not a judge. And like the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, Deborah was not the ruler of Israel in her days. She was God's mouthpiece.

In the Old Testament, there are some 480 occurrences of the word “prophet/prophets.” Of these there are only five women prophetesses. Of these five, one was a false prophet (Neh 6:14). The other four women prophetesses were Miriam (Exo 15:20); Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14); Isaiah’s wife (Isa 8:3), and Deborah herself. Therefore, women prophetesses were extremely rare.

Why then was Deborah, out of all the men of Israel, judging and prophesying? Where were all the elders and priests God had appointed ((Exo 29:9; Num 11:16-25)? And the only priest mentioned in the Book of Judges was wicked (Judges 17-18). The elders after Joshua's time were corrupt or foolish (Jgs 2:7, 10; 8:14-16; 21). They were all grossly negligent of their God-appointed responsibilities. Perhaps the people trusted Deborah because she had both the word of God and personal integrity, a rare combination in those dark days of the judges.

The times of Israel's judges was a very dark time in which the people did evil in the eyes of the , doing what was right in their own eyes. Very few remained faithful and obedient to God. And this was especially true of the men. The stories of the judges are far from ideal. In fact, of all the judges, only Othniel and Deborah were righteous and godly. Therefore, we must not use Deborah to prove that women can hold office in the church as pastors, elders or deacons. In the New Testament, God clearly prohibits this practice. In fact, in Isaiah's condemnation of Israel's unfaithfulness, he says, *“My people – infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your guides mislead you and they have swallowed up the course of your paths”* (Isa 3:12). The rule of women over God's people Israel was a sign of judgment!

One last thing about this business of Deborah as a proof of women in ordained ministry. We read that the Spirit of the came upon Othniel, Gideon and Samson, but not upon Deborah and Ehud. On the one hand, even when the Spirit of the was upon Gideon and Samson, they were not all that obedient. Othniel had the Spirit and was obedient. If Deborah did not have the Spirit upon her, and yet was godly and righteous, should we now ordain ministers, elders and deacons who do not have the Holy Spirit in them?

So the example of Deborah is just the total reverse! Women leading in the church is a call to the men in the church to lead the church in its spiritual battles, in preaching, in teaching, and in the day-to-day, Sunday-to-Sunday activities. It is a call to the men to lead their wives and families in family worship. It is God's call to men to exercise their God-given role as the overseers and shepherds of the church. Women leading the church as ordained officebearers is, in fact, a judgment on the church, as we now see in many liberal denominations.

Barak is Negligent, But Still a Model of Faith

Deborah's summons to Barak emphasized that the has commanded him to fight against Sisera, and that the has promised victory. What more could he want? But instead of marching off promptly to meet Sisera, he issues a condition to Deborah, *“If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”* And since Deborah is God's mouthpiece, this is also a challenge to God. Why was Barak so fearful, unwilling and unsure of himself? Maybe he thinks his troops trust and respect Deborah more than him. Maybe he needed assurance that God, through the prophetess, will be with him in battle.

Deborah prophesies this in her additional response to Barak, *“I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”* The second part of the battle narrative involves another woman.

No one was left of the Canaanite army after their defeat. But Sisera was not captured, and found his way on foot into the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Heber was previously introduced in verse 11. He was one of those Gentile Kenites who settled with the tribe of Judah in the area near Jericho (Jgs 1:16). He then left his tribe and settled near Kedesh, where Barak also lived. Sisera fled to the area of Heber, since Heber had good relations, or “peace,” with Jabin the king of the Canaanites. He thought that he would be safe there.

When Sisera came to her tent, Jael invited him to go inside and rest from his exhaustion, having escaped on foot from the pursuing Barak. She asked him, *“Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid.”* So the general Sisera obeyed Jael the woman, much like Barak obeying Deborah. Jael made Sisera very comfortable by giving him milk and covering him with a blanket. Sisera then commands Jael to stand guard at the doorway so she could wave away anyone who would come. But when the general was sound asleep in his weariness, Jael took a tent peg and pounded it through his temple into the ground, killing him.

That “anyone” who came to Jael's tent was Barak, in pursuit of Sisera. Jael meets him at the door of her tent, and invites him, *“Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.”* Just as she invited Sisera, the vanquished general of Jabin, she also invited Barak, the conquering general of Deborah. The irony here is that both generals were “conquered” by two women, Deborah and Jael. In fact, Jael “conquers” both of them. How frustrated could Barak have been, that the honor and glory of capturing or killing the enemy general was taken away from him by a woman! Deborah's prophecy, that Barak will not get his glory, was fulfilled by another woman, not by a man.

So the two heroes of this story are both women, because men like Barak neglected their God-appointed roles. The parallels with Ehud's story are striking. Jael accomplishes her assassination by deception. As Ehud fashioned a dagger, Jael used a tent peg. Like King Eglon's foolish guards who discovered their dead king, passive Barak discovers his enemy already dead. And the suspense is heightened by the last-minute revelation in verse 21 of the hero who kills Sisera: not General Barak, but a simple, wise and courageous *Gentile* woman named Jael.

The only redemption for Barak is that he did eventually obey God's command, albeit through a woman Deborah. Assured of God's approval and presence, he had faith and then obeyed, and as a result, Israel had rest for the next 40 years (Jgs 5:31). This is why in Hebrews 11, he is listed as one of the “heroes of the faith,” together with Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel. These are all flawed sinners who exhibited unfaithfulness and disobedience, even foolishness, at some points in their lives.

Dear friends, we see again in the story of Deborah, Barak and Jael that God is sovereign over all the affairs of kings, of peoples, and nations. He raises deliverers to save his people from the oppression of evil kings. He gets all the glory in his people's victories. In the fulfillment of his covenant promises to his people, he sent the final and only true Deliverer, his Son Jesus Christ, who delivers his people from the oppression and tyranny of Satan.

In the same way, he promises you that he will give into your hand Satan our enemy. You will be victorious over sin and temptation and trials. This he promises in his Word. Do not allow your flaws and sins prevent you from serving the church, your families, and your neighbors. Even David, a man “after God’s own heart,” is a flawed sinner, but God used him for his glory. You may feel inadequate for service. Your past may burden you, but all your past sins have been forgiven through Christ, and better and greater tasks await you.

You may be unsure of the future, but do not keep the thought of risking your strength, or your time, or even your life from serving the church. You may think, “Is it worth it?” But go and serve God with one assurance: that God is pleased with your obedience through faith in Christ our Deliverer. No assurances of a good life and wealth, only spiritual blessings.

Finally, our nation is in the grip of much lawlessness. Police officers killing unarmed citizens. People shooting police officers in retaliation. Racial prejudice has no place in Scriptures. Jael is an example of someone different from Israelites, even outside of Israel, being used by God in accomplishing his purposes. And vengeance, taking the law into our own hands, also has no place in Christ’s law of loving our neighbors, even our enemies. What has a place in Scriptures is prayer. We are to pray that love, peace and unity that only faith in Christ can give will reign among us.

