

Here's What Hit Me #8 – Deborah – 3.7.10

The books of **Joshua** and **Judges** were really rough to listen to, really brutal. If you were to take them as legends and tall tales, they would be a lot of fun. But I understand them to be history, and so all the blood flowing and skulls getting cracked open is a little disturbing. It's the difference between watching *24*, where a lot of people always die but it's basically a tall tale, vs. watching *Hotel Rwanda* about the genocide in 1994. The second one really happened, and it is sickening.

In the past when I read through these books, I was struck mostly by the bravery in battle and heroism of some that contrasted with the faithlessness and rebellion of others. This time, what hit me was all the backstabbing, unforgiveness, revenge, and especially the killing. It's easy to say that the Canaanites were so rebellious and sinful that their judgment day had arrived, but it would be something else entirely to go carry it out. It's one thing to say that the wages of sin is death and that we all deserve death, but it would be something else again to go storm a city and have the commander say to you, "Now your job will be to go run your sword through as many women and children as you can find, but if you see some young girls you like, save them for yourself and for the other men, and we'll take them back and give them out as wives and concubines to all the men."

I'm just saying that when we flippantly say that the Bible is our guide, we need to rightly divide the word and realize that some parts of the Bible that record history and even God's judgment do a better job showing us the need for Jesus Christ than they do in providing us guidance.

And one of the things that comes up again and again in **Judges** is that women aren't highly thought of; they are mostly interchangeable and pretty much treated as property.

And then there are these crazy, inexplicable exceptions.

In **Judges 4**, the Israelites are living in the promised land but because of their idolatry, they are under the foot of a king named Jabin and a general named Sisera who had 900 iron chariots. What did the Israelites have? Swords and spears. It would be like having a citizenry armed with shotguns up against someone with tanks and an air force.

V. 4 says: **Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.** Wait, what? Where did she come from, and how is it that a woman was leading Israel? Well, even though the Law said that priests were to be male and even though the general practice was to treat women as property (and let's face it, the Law supported this in some places [**Exodus 21:4, 7**]), the fact is that from Moses to Joshua to Gideon to Samson, God chose the leaders of Israel for his own reasons. And by the way, those reasons often had little to do with someone's character or personal godliness. Samson, for example, the great Sunday School hero was empowered by God's Spirit to do his tremendous feats of strength and slaughter, but it is exceedingly difficult to find anything in his life that can be called godly behavior.

The Law never said that Israel would elect its leaders or that the priests would appoint them. The Law said that God would lead Israel and he did so by choosing his own people. And by the time **Judges 4** gets here, he has chosen Deborah, and he showed that she was his chosen one by giving her the gift of prophecy. God spoke to her, she passed it on to the people, and what she prophesied happened. It would be a good way to be sure of God's calling on someone.

It says that **“the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali...** Now “Barak” means “lightning” and Deborah’s husband is called “Lappidoth” which means “torches” or “fire”, which leads some to think that Barak was her husband and that the author is being clever with names. It’s possible, and it would explain why Deborah called for this particular guy, but we really don’t know, and no explanation is given. **⁶ She sent for Barak...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. ⁷ 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.' "**

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."

⁹ "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."

Okay, there’s from foreshadowing, and I think I get it. Deborah is going to get credit for this win. So Barak gathers 10,000 fighting men together and Sisera gets his 900 chariots. The Israelites would have been out-gunned except that God had chosen this time to give them the victory.

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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ But Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left.

Now there were some people camping nearby, Kenites, who were descendants of the in-laws of Moses, and these folks had a working relationship with Jabin and Sisera, so Sisera fled there, knowing someone would take him in. Sisera wound up to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite

¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my Lord , come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him.

¹⁹ "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

²⁰ "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.' "

²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Oh, THAT’S what Deborah meant when she said that Sisera would be handed over to a woman!

²² Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple-dead.

²³ On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. ²⁴ And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him.

Chapter 5 recounts the battle in song. I won’t go into detail, but here are a few things:

V. 2 is apparently a tough one to translate, but in the NIV it says:

**² "When the princes in Israel take the lead,
when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the LORD!**

That’s exactly what was lacking in Israel before Deborah and it is what is most often missing when God’s people today fall into unfaithfulness. When leaders don’t lead and people don’t offer

themselves in service, the work of God Himself goes undone for he has chosen to limit himself through people. This is how he has always worked, in Israel, in the church.

The NASB says:

**That the leaders led in Israel,
That the people volunteered,
Bless the LORD!**

We can "Amen" that today too.

The song talks about how terrible it was when Israel was unfaithful and Jabin and Sisera ruled. It sings about how great it is that everyone can travel safely and gather at the wells to visit. It calls out the tribes in Israel that didn't show up to help with the battle. Then there is this poignant scene at the end:

²⁸ **"Through the window peered Sisera's mother;
behind the lattice she cried out,
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'**
²⁹ **The wisest of her ladies answer her;
indeed, she keeps saying to herself,**
³⁰ **'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:
a girl or two for each man,
colorful garments as plunder for Sisera,
colorful garments embroidered,
highly embroidered garments for my neck—
all this as plunder?'**

That short passage captures a mother's agony of waiting for her son to come home from war, AND it reminds us that women – or girls, actually – were considered as little more than plunder, property, the same as colorfully embroidered garments.

Another passage I suggested that you read is **Judges 9:50-57**, about a rat named Abimelech who caused a lot of trouble and killed a lot of people. Here's how things ended up for him:

⁵⁰ **Next Abimelech went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. ⁵¹ Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. ⁵² Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, ⁵³ a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.**

⁵⁴ **Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him.' " So his servant ran him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.**

⁵⁶ **Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers.**

I included that just because it contributes to the theme of the women smacking down the men! But the thing is, it also shows how little thought of women were by men, because the worst way to die, apparently, is for a woman to kill you. Just like it was a bit of a dishonor that Barak had to ask Deborah to go with him and therefore, as she prophesied, the credit for killing Sisera will go to a woman.

And you know what? Deborah doesn't get the respect she deserves either, because as well-known as she is today, her name isn't mentioned in the Bible anywhere outside of **Judges 4-5**. I just

discovered that this week, and I didn't believe it at first. Isn't she listed among the heroes of faith in **Hebrews 11**? No. This story is alluded to in **Hebrews 11**, but it is Barak who is named, not Deborah. Samuel does the same thing in **1 Samuel 12:11**. So Deborah doesn't get the appreciation she deserves.

The reign of Deborah was an exception to the way things usually were in Israel and in the ancient world and in the modern world too. The way things were (and still are, to some extent) is that men treat women as inferior and often get away with it. This is prophesied in the curses of **Genesis 3** where God says to Eve, "**Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you**" (v. 16). Since that is how Eve was punished, it says that this wasn't how God meant for things to be and it isn't how things have to be but it is often the way things are. Husbands rule over wives and men rule over women, and during times of war or other chaos, this tendency shows itself in the ugliest possible ways. That's what you see played out again and again in **Judges**.

Then Jesus came along and brought with him a different world. I don't mean that in just a figurative way. Jesus kept saying that he was setting up the Kingdom of God, and he meant more than simply that he was starting a church. He meant that God's way would start breaking into this world in the way people lived their lives and raised their families and in the way they treated one another. And when the Kingdom started breaking in, we would begin to see things the way God intended for us to see them, and that would include how women and men think of each other.

For instance, it's a little disturbing to take everything you've been taught about sexual purity and compare it to some of the heroes of the Old Testament, many of whom had several wives and several concubines and didn't mind visiting prostitutes. And no one says anything about it!

But that isn't how God set things up. It's how things ended up after sin, after the Fall of humanity, but **Genesis 2:24** gives us God's idea: **For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.** And Jesus in **Matthew 19**, though he was speaking against divorce (or serial monogamy as we call it) could easily have been speaking about polygamy and promiscuity in general when he said: ⁴"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' ⁵and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Paul speaks forth the way of Christ when he says in **1 Timothy 5**: **"Treat younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity."** What a contrast to the more fallen ways of people in **Judges**. Paul again speaks forth the way of Christ in **Ephesians 5:25** where he says: ²⁵**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...** That wasn't how Gideon or Samson did things in **Judges**, but it is the restoration of God's way in the Kingdom of God. And most of all, Paul spoke forth the way of Christ in **Galatians 3**: ²⁶**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

That's a universe away from the way things were done in the OT, but it shows the idea God had in his head right from the beginning in the Garden of Eden. The rise and leadership of Deborah is sort of a foreshadowing of the coming Kingdom of God in which women and men will share together as full heirs of the inheritance God has for us.

Now I realize that the church today isn't known as a place where women have full opportunity to do anything they have the ability to do. In fact, churches are mostly considered as backward and outdated in this area. This is for two reasons: One is that we are occasionally backward and outdated in our thinking (about a lot of things); and Two, because we think that even though men and women are

equal in Christ, the New Testament gives them different jobs, different responsibilities in the church. That idea seems old-fashioned in the present age, but we believe it is what the Bible teaches and we never want to disobey Scripture to seem more up-to-date. More than that, the very ideas of the equality of women and humane treatment for all – ideas that are extremely rare in the OT – can be traced back to the revolution begun by Jesus Christ. I know that Christianity isn't perfectly lived out in any culture, but the cultures of the world where Christianity has taken root are the ones that have led the way in fighting for the dignity of everyone – women, children, the disabled, the unborn, and folks who are just different. How ironic that we think we're too smart for the Savior whose message got us these good things. I think that the rise of Deborah in a man-centered world is a sign of the revolution to come in Jesus.

But here's what hit me in Judges: People can be brutal to each other, and even the people of God are no exception. And not only do I not want to be the object of God's wrath, I don't want to be the instrument of it either. That means that I don't want to get punished nor do the punishing. It would have been awful to go out and slaughter people, even if it had to be done.

Here's what else hit me: I'm glad that Jesus Christ, not **Judges**, is the ultimate Word of God. The order Jesus gave us – love your enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive as you have been forgiven – these seem hard until you see the brutal alternative for yourself. The time of the Judges shows us that.

But here's the main thing: As easy as it was to be on the wrong side of God's will under the Law, I feel certain that I would have been on the wrong side if I had lived back then. Maybe I wouldn't have been in Sisera's army, but I can see myself maybe living in one of those towns that Gideon destroyed because its leaders wouldn't help him in battle. It's too easy to get on the wrong side of God, and under the Law, the wages was death, and often sooner rather than later.

And the wages of sin is STILL death.

The difference is that today, the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. I need that. I'm so glad I live in these days of Christ.

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