

GOD PORTRAYS WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

DEBORAH

Judges 4-5

IN THE BOOK OF Judges we are frequently reminded of the patience and mercy of God with His erring people. Time and again we come across the words, “**And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord.**” Though they deserved to be cast off as His people, He still remained faithful. He let them eat of the fruit of their ways which proved bitter indeed. “**Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them out of their distresses**” (Psalm 107:6). God always has the man or woman ready for such an hour, one who has a heart for God and for His people.

Israel had become so socially chummy with their worldly Gentile neighbors that they soon found themselves subservient to them. And truly the bondage proved irksome. But among them lived a remarkable woman, a homebody. We do not know whether she had a family or not, but she had a motherly heart and her home became known as “the Sanctuary of the Palm.” The Jewish records tell us Deborah made wicks for the lamps of the Tabernacle. The troubled and distressed came day by day to her to unburden their hearts, and they found a ready ear to hear and “a heart at leisure from itself to soothe and sympathize.” After she commended and committed them and their trials to the Lord, they returned to their homes with lightened eyes, heart and feet.

Deborah knew what it was to sit at the Lord’s feet and hear His Word, and there she learned divine wisdom, to know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary. She gave godly counsel to all who came, yet she did not pose as a specialist. She did not seek admirers or a following. She simply ministered to all who contacted her, whether prince or pauper.

Her husband Lapidoth had a keen appreciation of her abilities and of her helpfulness to those who sought her counsel. He had a character great enough and sufficiently above suspicion to allow her to act before God in blessing to others. She was modest and unpretentious, seeking no official recognition. Her mental and “judicious abilities and true spirituality were gladly recognized by all classes of people.

Conditions in Israel were in such a sorry state that the highways were deserted, folk were afraid to travel because of robbery and violence. It wasn’t safe to go to draw water at the wells for fear the arrows would come flying from ambush.

The wells had been the social centers and places where they discussed the Lord's things, or **"rehearsed the righteous acts of the Lord"** (Judges 5:11) and sang hymns, but now they were strangely silent and deserted. To venture in the open was to take their lives in their hands. Israel put up with this state of affairs for twenty years. The path to Deborah's door was well worn. The Lord showed her it was time to throw off the yoke of Jabin, king of Canaan, and his captain Sisera with his terrifying nine hundred chariots of iron.

Deborah recognized Barak as the logical man to lead Israel against the usurper. After much prayer she was assured she had the mind of the Lord and sent for Barak and said, **"Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded saying, Go and draw toward Mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon, Sisera the Captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand"** (Judges 4:6-7).

The Lord knows all that are against us and all that we dread, but if He is for us who can be against us? (See Romans 8:31.) Deborah did not presume to lead as a general but recognized the abilities in others and heartened them. How sadly we need those men and women who can call on us to reclaim, by the word of the Lord, that which we have lost through apathy and lack of courage to maintain! We can almost hear her say to Barak, "To you we throw the torch; be yours to hold it high."

And Barak said unto her, **"If thou wilt go with me, then I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go"** (Judges 4:8). Though she had given him the exact commandment of the Lord as to the place, the size of the army and where to obtain the soldiers, and the assurance that God would draw Sisera, his chariots and his multitude, and that He would deliver them, yet Barak's heart failed him. The word of God alone was not enough for him. He would go if he could lean on someone who trusted in God.

He was not alone in this. Many will count on a mother's prayers when they should lean on God for themselves. Her presence would not increase his safety or honor; but if it would hearten him, Deborah would sacrifice her home comforts to help deliver the land from its oppressors.

Lapidoth did not interfere with her going.

"And she said, I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honor; for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hands of a woman. And Deborah arose and went with Barak" (Judges 4:9).

They toured the north country calling for volunteers. Some responded heartily offering themselves willingly, whereas others made excuses; they agreed the cause was just, but they must tend to their sheep. Some must not neglect their fishing, while others like Meroz in the very vicinity of the battlefield not only refused to help but heaped scorn on the general and his brave companion. The army they gathered seemed inadequate to meet Sisera, his multitude and his iron chariots. Because of their servitude to the Canaanites and their alliances in worshiping their gods they had been disarmed and rendered defenseless.

Can you hear Barak saying to Deborah, “Our army is so impoverished that we can’t find a shield or a spear among forty thousand of Israel”? Surely it looked hopeless! “If we win a victory, it will be by the hand of God.” Some of Sisera’s reconnaissance men reported to him that ten thousand Israelites were gathered on Mt. Tabor. Sisera hastily gathered his hosts from the west in the plain of Esdraelon below Mt. Tabor. Chariot warfare is ineffective in the mountains.

All militarists are weather conscious. Early one morning Deborah, who had been studying the weather reports, cried to herself, “**Awake, awake Deborah, awake, awake, utter a song**” (Judges 5:12). One would think she belonged to the tribe of Judah who led to battle with praise. Then she called to Barak, “**Arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive**” (5:12). “**Up; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand. Is not the Lord gone out before thee?**” (4:14).

Surely it is a comfort to know that the Lord precedes us. Peter was told that Satan desired to have him that he might sift him as wheat; but for his comfort the Lord adds, “**I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not**” (Luke 22:32).

Already the Lord was gathering His storm clouds which were about to burst upon the advancing army, beating them in their faces. Israel charged down the mountain, the rain on their backs. Sisera’s army and chariots advanced but soon the plain was a mire and the unshod horses made poor progress and grew panicky with their plungings and prancings, even breaking their hooves so that the charioteers and armored men forsook the chariots and fled. They were seized with panic before the pursuing Israelites who caught up their abandoned weapons and hunted them to the river Kishon where the enemy hoped to escape. But the violent storm had so filled the river from its various tributaries that it had broken its banks and become a raging flood. In seeking to escape, many were drowned and the rest were put to the sword so that “**there was not a man left.**”

But where was the general who had “**put his trust in chariots**”? “**So that Sisera lighted down off his chariot and fled away on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber**” (Judges 4:15-18). Heber was a Kenite whose encampment was near the scene of battle. ‘Tis true they were allied with Sisera, but it was an unhappy alliance and their sympathies were with Israel, who were related to them through Moses’ father-in-law.

Jael saw Sisera rushing toward her home and with seeming friendliness she went out to meet him. It was a breach of nomadic etiquette for a man to enter a woman’s tent, and most unchivalrous to seek protection from one.

Jael made Sisera comfortable, covering him with a blanket. But he was too excited to sleep after his discomfiture and race for life. He cried out, “**Give me, I pray thee, a little water to drink, for I am thirsty**” (4:19). Instead of giving water she gave him milk, which should have been sufficient to warn him she was not a friend but a foe. True, she gave it in the best, “**a lordly dish,**” which her camp afforded.

Still uneasy, he besought her to stand guard at the door and to lie about who he was.

Instinctively she felt that she must deliver the country from the tyranny of this man if they were to be liberated, and this was her opportunity. What could she use? She was not the first person to use what came to her hand for God. Shamgar used an oxgoad; Samson the jawbone of an ass. All she had was a wooden tent pin and the mallet.

Taking the tent pin she smote it through his temples and fastened it to the ground.

Barak had noted the direction Sisera ran and followed him. Jael saw him coming and went out to meet him saying, “**Come and I will show thee the man whom thou seekest**” (4:22). As Deborah had prophesied, Sisera did not fall by Barak’s hand. That privilege was given to Jael. She had remained in her own tent door and was ready to act when the opportunity was given her. Some of us may not serve in public but we need to be ready and meet for the Master’s use and prepared to every good work. Someone has well said,

A noble life is not a blaze
Of sudden glory won,
But just an adding up of days
In which good work is done.

How were they to celebrate and rehearse the righteous acts of the Lord?

- At the Red Sea, Miriam took her timbrel in her hands and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances saying, “**Sing ye unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously.**”
- At the victory over Goliath the women celebrated by singing, “**Saul hath killed his thousands and David his tens of thousands.**”

Ah! Deborah is still meet for the Master’s use and led in attributing all the success to the Lord Himself. She was as modest as ever. She sought no glory for herself but recognized the way the Lord had helped them. She also paid tribute to everyone else—governor, prince, the willing people, and Jael, who had contributed to the success of this battle.

We have seen Deborah as a wife, a judge, a prophetess, and one willing to go to battle if necessary. Now we learn she was one of the finest writers of extempore poetry. She may even have composed music. It would need to be fine music, with major and minor keys, to be worthy of the words of so high an intellectual conception. There was praise and blame, history and irony, exultation and lamentation and worship of God at the beginning and the end. All honor was given to God who in His majesty went forth to battle and made the heavens fight for Israel, discomfiting Sisera, who trusted in chariots of iron, with drops of water; he trusted in iron chariots but was overcome by a tent pin in the hands of a woman. When Deborah referred to herself she was still content to be “**a mother in Israel.**” She was not occupied with her gifts or accomplishments, nor with a career; she still longed to comfort needy souls.

The last stanza of her song depicts most graphically a scene in the palace of Sisera. His vain old mother, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, was looking out the window to view the return of their conquering hero.

She called out, “**Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?**”
They answer, “**How could they return so soon? They are collecting the spoil.**”

But her ladyship, engrossed with herself and what she could get, was thinking of the handsome garments her son would bring her; already in her imagination she was turning them over and trying them on, seeing the rich embroidery on both sides.

How many lives are thus frittered away!

Shall we look back shudderingly at useless lives spent in vainly bedecking ourselves and spending our days being entertained? Let us rather be ambitious for a useful life, pursuing virtue, holiness and wisdom. Let us be like Phoebe and Deborah, “**a succorer of many.**”

Her influence was not confined to one place but, because she used it for the glory of God, the whole land had rest for forty years.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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