

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Women of Faith: Deborah

Today we continue our present series of talks on "Women of Faith". We have previously considered Miriam - the sister of Moses and Aaron, and Rahab of Jericho. Next week in the Lord's will, we will be taking a look at a lesser known woman called Jehoshabeath. In our talk today we will consider Deborah.

In fact, we read of two women called Deborah in the Scriptures. The first Deborah was nurse to Rebekah, Isaac's wife (Genesis 35:8). We read in Genesis 24:59 that she went with Rebekah, when Rebekah left her father Bethuel, and went with Abraham's servant to become Isaac's wife. For many years she must have served Rebekah and would have helped raising her twin boys, Esau and Jacob. From the reference in Genesis 35:8, it would appear that after her years of service with Rebekah came to an end, she went with Jacob when he fled from his brother Esau, after stealing his birthright (Genesis 27:1-28:6). If that was the case, I'm sure she would have been most helpful in the house of Jacob, with his wives, Leah and Rachael and his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, who together bore Jacob twelve sons (Genesis 35:22-26) plus one daughter (Genesis 30:21).

The name Deborah means "a bee" and generally we think of bees as being busy and industrious. I am sure this was true of Deborah. When she died, an old lady, we read that she was buried under an oak tree at Beth-el which was called the "oak of weeping" (Genesis 35:8).

However, it is the other Deborah who is the subject of our talk today. She lived perhaps as many as 400 years later, in the times of the judges of Israel. We know more about her history from the record given in the book of Judges. In Judges 4:1-24 we read her story and in chapter Judges 5:1-31 we have her song. In our talk today, I want to look at Deborah's story, her song and the spiritual lessons we can learn from them.

Of course her name also means "a bee". As well as the qualities previously mentioned, we could certainly add intelligence. In the natural world, bees are regarded as being highly intelligent - this was certainly true of Deborah. It has been said of her that while she gathered honey for her friends, she had a deadly sting for her enemies. She lived in difficult days amongst the Israelites who, although they were God's chosen people, were very unfaithful to Him. The period of the judges of Israel follows the death of their great leader, Joshua (Joshua 24:29-30). There were 13 judges altogether, covering a period of about 300 years. Othniel was the first (Judges 3:1-11) and Samson was the last judge (Judges 13:1-16:31). Deborah is unique in that she was the only female judge. If we read Judges 21:25, the last verse in the book of Judges, we will see the condition of Israel at the time of Deborah and the other judges: *"There was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes."*

In Judges 4:1-2 we read that *"...the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud [who was the second judge] was dead. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera."*

And so straight away we are introduced to the other main character in the story, Sisera. As well as telling the story of Deborah, these chapters tell us of the death of Sisera and the slaughter of his army. If we are to learn spiritual lessons from this Old Testament story we should begin by viewing the people of God in servitude to this wicked man who was the commander of the mighty Canaanite army. Some suggest that he would be a type (or picture) of Satan himself, leading the armies of evil against the people of God in every generation. From the closing verses in Deborah's song in Judges 5:28-31 we can see that he was ruthless in battle, plundering his enemies and taking the spoils which included the captured young women.

Why were God's people in this position? It was because of their unfaithfulness to the LORD. Is this not a lesson and a warning for us as the people of God today? Peter warns us in his first epistle to *"be sober and vigilant because the adversary [of our souls], the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about seeking whom he may devour"* (1 Peter 5:8). We are blessed *"with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ"* (Ephesians 1:3), but if we fail to *"keep ourselves in the love of God"* (see Jude 1:21) our enjoyment of these blessings will soon be lost. Israel didn't stop being God's chosen people because of their failure He loved them too much for that, but He felt their rejection and used the heathen nations round about to chastise them in order to bring them back to Himself. In Hebrews 12:3-11 we read about the Father's chastening, as an act of love but we read and know through experience that *"no chastening for the*

present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:11).

In Judges 4:4-9 we read, *"And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Beth-el in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh-naphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men 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. 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. And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh."*

We don't know much of Deborah's personal or family circumstances, except what we get in Judges 4:4-9. She was the wife of Lapidoth and lived between Ramah and Beth-el under a palm tree (Judges 4:4). Palm trees were not common in that area so this tree became known as *"the palm tree of Deborah"* (Judges 4:5). We don't read of any children but in her song, in Judges 5:7, she speaks of herself as a *"mother in Israel."* However, I would think that this was speaking more of her labour towards the people of God than speaking in a natural way of her having children. In the same metaphorical way, the Apostle Paul and his companions speak of being *"nursing mothers"* amongst the saints at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

We know nothing of her husband except his name (see Judges 4:4) which I understand means *"a bright shining light"*. Together with her husband, Deborah lived between Ramah, which I understand means *"high place or heights"* and Beth-el which means *"house of God."* Perhaps we can learn lessons from the meaning of these names. Dwelling on high in communion with God, this married couple were a testimony, shining a light in the midst of an otherwise dark nation. I fear sometimes we can stretch these Old Testament types too far but certainly this would be in keeping with the Lord's own teaching to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29), *"Ye are the light of the world"* (Matthew 5:14). And so there is a challenge for us, believers on the Lord Jesus Christ today. Our nation has in the main given up God and everyone does *"what is right in their own eyes"* (see Judges 17:6, 21:25) and so our light needs to shine forth. Of course, this witnessing is not restricted to Christians as we gather together but it should also be seen in our personal walk, our marriages, our homes, our businesses and every aspect of our lives.

Deborah was a prophetess (Judges 4:4) and judged Israel in the days of Barak. Here we are introduced to the third main character in our story, Barak, and we will say more about him later. Deborah was a prophetess, one of several women called a *"prophetess"* in the Scriptures. Others we read of in the Old Testament are Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22) who lived in the days of King Josiah, and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) who lived in the time of Tobiah and Sanballat, as well as Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3), who was also called a prophetess. In the New Testament we read of the prophetess Anna in Luke 2:36 and in Acts 21:9 we read that Philip's four daughters prophesied. I mention these (and there may be some I've missed) to show that while it was not unique, it certainly was less common for women to be raised up by God to *"speak forth"* His word and His mind to the people of their day. Generally speaking, the prophets who both fore-told and forth-told the *"word of the LORD"* were men and it is a fact that the 66 books of the Bible were all written by men. However, I note when Peter says in 2 Peter 1:21, *"...holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost"*, the Greek word he uses for men is the general word for mankind and not male only.

Is there a lesson for us today in that Deborah was a prophetess (Judges 4:4) and used by God to give counsel to His people? I believe there is. How many have been helped by godly sisters, *"mothers in Israel"*, in the things of God! What a spiritual debt Timothy owed to his mother, Lois, and grandmother, Eunice (see 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:15). We need the service of godly women today and, where it is regulated by the word of God, I believe the glory is His and the blessing ours. God is a God of order and He has established His divine order which should be seen in His house - the church.

Women have a vital role to fulfil but we have clear scriptural guidance that the authority of the man should not be usurped and that she should keep silence in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34). Now I know that this is viewed as old fashioned and outdated by many but the Apostle Paul says, *"If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord"* (1 Corinthians 14:37). How refreshing it would be if we heard more often *"The Bible says..."!*

So we understand that, as well as bringing God's word to bear upon the people of Israel, Deborah was a judge (Judges 4:4). She must have had great wisdom and understanding as we read that the children of Israel came up to her for judgement (Judges 4:5). There is quite a contrast here between the position Deborah had amongst the people of God and that which Lot took in the gate of Sodom (Genesis 19:1). Living separate, she was available to instruct those who desired to seek the LORD'S mind. Lot, in contrast, dwelt amongst the people of Sodom, his soul vexed with

the filthy conversation of the wicked (see 2 Peter 2:7). Although he had a position of judgement amongst them, his voice went unheard. Even his sons in law regarded him as a mocker when he tried to warn them of God's impending judgement.

In Judges 4:6, we read that Deborah sent and called Barak and encouraged him to fight against the armies of the enemies of God's people. King Jabin of Canaan and his military commander, Sisera, had oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years. His 900 iron chariots (Judges 4:13) were a formidable, seemingly impossible foe but God had instructed Barak through Deborah that he would get the victory. Taking account of the two armies, the odds were heavily against the people of God and we can well understand Barak's reluctance from a natural point of view. How often do we make the same mistake and view our spiritual battles from a natural view point? Satan, the great adversary, with all his power and might arrayed against us, may well cause us to feel afraid, even defeated, but God promises in His word that *"greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world"*, (1 John 4:4). Barak had to learn that *"the battle is the LORD'S"*! (see 1 Samuel 17:47)

His faith was weak, so weak that he would only fight if Deborah went with them into battle (Judges 4:8). She agreed but made a further prophecy concerning the death of Sisera, a prophecy which would see the great warrior slain by a woman (Judges 4:9-10). Here we are introduced to Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite (see Judges 4:11). We will speak more about her a little later on. Here we have another lesson. How often is our faith too weak to take God at His Word! How often do we rely on the strength of others to fight the fight of faith? Of course, it is wonderful to have the encouragement and support of fellow believers but if, like the Apostle Paul, there are times when we are isolated (see 2 Timothy 4:10-12), we need to have the faith to know that the Lord is standing with us (2 Timothy 4:17). However, it is wonderful to see that in spite of Barak's lack of faith, he is listed in the great "chapter of faith", Hebrews 11, with Gideon, Samson, Jephthae, David and Samuel (Hebrews 11:32). We have often noted that we read of no failure in that chapter. At the judgement seat of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:10) when our lives are reviewed, there will be no dwelling upon our failure but every act of faith will be rewarded by the Lord Jesus Himself. How much do we covet that *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant"*? (see Matthew 25:21).

God's power shines through man's weakness and Israel got the victory that day. So great was the victory of Barak and Deborah that there followed a period of 40 years of peace and quietness in the history of the people of God (see Judges 5:31).

In her song (Judges 5:1-31), Deborah is careful to attribute the victory to the LORD, who had caused the river Kishon to swell (Judges 4:13) and swept the chariots of Sisera away in the flood water (Judges 5:21). Barak, like Moses at the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:1-31) so many years earlier, could not see the way forward but God brought about the salvation of His people by a mighty hand! What a wonderful reminder for us today to *"trust in the LORD and not to lean on our own understanding"* (see Proverbs 3:5).

Also in her song, Deborah took account of the tribes who had joined the battle willingly and those who did not (see Judges 5:13-18). Recorded for us in Holy Scripture are the names of those who were worthy of praise and those who had failed to join the battle. The Apostle Paul similarly could say with assurance at the end of a well spent life of service to his Lord and Master, *"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing"* (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Reading on in the story we learn that the defeated captain, Sisera, fled the battlefield (Judges 4:17) and thought he had found refuge in the tent of Jael, Heber's wife (Judges 4:17). As Deborah had earlier prophesied (Judges 4:7), Sisera would be slain by a woman, and Jael was that woman. She welcomed him into her tent, and gave him refreshment and shelter (Judges 4:18-19); then as he slept, she murdered him by driving a tent peg through his temples with a hammer (Judges 4:21). What she did was certainly against the customs of hospitality in that day and there is a divergence of views as to her actions. However, the end result was that the people of God did have total victory over the Canaanites and their great leader, Sisera, was slain (Judges 4:23-24).

Some Bible commentators would view Jael's act as treachery as her husband, Heber was not at war with Jabin, king of Canaan, (see Judges 4:17). A much respected Bible teacher wrote, "Such was Deborah's song. It is not the communication of God's thoughts, but of Deborah's feelings." (Darby, JN: *The Irrationalism Of Infidelity: Being A Reply To Phases Of Faith* (1853))

Others would take the view that although Jael was not an Israelite (in fact she was a descendant of Jethro, Moses' father in law), she was "blessed above woman", because in slaying Sisera she was in effect taking sides with the people of God. Her actions were therefore entirely justified, bearing in mind that Sisera was the enemy of God's people and therefore the enemy of God Himself. As we considered earlier, if we view Sisera as a type or picture of Satan, then certainly there will be unsparing judgement meted out to him in a coming day.

I must confess that I have difficulty in reconciling some of these dreadful deeds in the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament revelation of God, but we must always remember that God is Light (1 John 1:5) as well as Love (1 John 4:8,16). When able expositors of the Scriptures have such differing views, I am content to leave you to form your own view through the careful and prayerful study of the Scriptures.

I trust our study together today will encourage each one to be faithful and true to our blessed Lord Jesus Christ in these, often testing, days while we await His soon return.

May God bless you all.

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