

JUDGES

DEBORAH, A WOMAN

GENERAL

(4:1–5:31)

When God promised the land of Palestine to the people of Israel, He instructed them to drive out the inhabitants of the land. Their disobedience to this command caused a problem that occurred so often in the Book of Judges that it established a predictable pattern that can be quickly recognized. Because the people did not drive out the nations around them, they began to make treaties with those people, and they began to worship their gods. Each time they went into this idolatrous apostasy, God allowed one of the foreign powers that they had not driven out to conquer them. The overrunning powers always treated the Israelites cruelly. It seems that the enemies of Israel took extra advantage of the opportunity God gave them to punish His people and were exceedingly cruel to Israel. It was not long under that cruel punishment until the people began to realize that they had made a mistake, and they repented and cried to God for deliverance. Because He is a God of mercy, again and again He forgave them and sent a deliverer. So the pattern appears: apostasy, punishment, repentance, and deliverance. This pattern is again repeated in chapter 4.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the story of Deborah. This is a peculiar story because the deliverer was a woman. Our society today is male dominated, but Israel had an even more male dominated social structure. For a woman to have the position of prominence that Deborah had was most unusual.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES (4:1-3)

The record of how God had delivered Israel from the people of Moab under the leadership of Ehud is given in chapter 3. Ehud was

probably one of the great judges who were recognized throughout the land. Near the end of the chapter, another deliverer, or judge, is mentioned: "And after him [Ehud] came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel" (3:31). Some of the judges are spoken of only briefly. We do not know anything about Shamgar. We do not know what judging meant in his case except that he, on one occasion, was particularly successful in battle and, therefore, is called a deliverer. Ehud was more prominent than Shamgar.

Chapter 4 begins,

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. And the sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years (vv. 1-3).

Is it not amazing how compact the Scriptures are? In just three verses, the first three steps in the pattern are laid out. Under the leadership of Ehud, the deliverer God had raised up, Israel had been set free from the oppression Moab had brought to them. Within a short time, the people left that peaceful relationship with God and did evil again in the sight of the Lord.

God, therefore, allowed another power to overrun them. The Canaanites, led by Jabin, king of Hazor, enslaved them. It was not long until Israel began to see their helplessness. The enemy had nine hundred iron chariots and oppressed them severely. The iron chariots are not to be understood as being solid iron, but rather, as would have been characteristic of that day, as having iron sheeting on them to make them strong and safe. This iron coating made them heavy, and this fact will be important in the following events. Attached to the chariot wheels were probably spokes that were like sharp knives. As the chariots were driven through a group of men or horses, those knives would cut them down. Such instruments of battle were available at this time, and very likely, they were included on "iron chariots." Obviously, these enemies had tremendous capability. The Canaanites were strong and evil. They oppressed Israel

for twenty years, so the people cried to the Lord.

THE CRY FOR DELIVERANCE (4:4, 5)

As soon as the people cried to the Lord, we are introduced to a woman named Deborah. She already had a significant position of leadership in the land. She was a prophetess. Joel 2:28, 29 prophesied about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit which would be fulfilled in Acts 2. According to Peter, the Spirit would be given to sons and daughters who would then be able to prophesy. This no doubt refers to the imparting of spiritual gifts to Christians by the Spirit-baptized apostles. Note that some women had spiritual gifts in the first century A.D. Some women prophesied, both in the Old and New Testaments. They are the exceptions, not the rule. Perhaps Deborah was one of God's spokeswoman. She was a judge perhaps in a more formal sense than others, for she actually had a specific place to conduct her judging: "And she used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment" (4:5). The people recognized that God spoke through her and gave her wisdom to judge. They recognized that she was one of God's appointed leaders.

In some instances, a judge was not over all of Israel, but only over a limited area. That is clearly seen in Abimelech, who may not actually have been a judge. He is referred to as a king (9:12, 16, 22), but as far as we can tell from the Scriptures, he only reigned in Shechem. It seems that Deborah, in sharp contrast to Abimelech, may have been an influential figure throughout the land. Evidently, all of Israel brought their cases to her.

Consider the significance of the place where Deborah judged. The land of Canaan was later divided into three distinct parts: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Although that division came later in Bible history, it may be helpful at this point to remember that a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel would be in the area which would later become Judea, probably about ten miles north of Jerusalem.

Harosheth, the location of the Canaanite army, lies near the base of Mt. Carmel between the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps five miles down the river is

Hazor. That is where Jabin was. He was the principal figure—the king, the leader—of the oppressors. West of the Sea of Galilee toward the Mediterranean Sea is a mountainous region. One of the mountains is Mount Tabor, another significant landmark in the events which took place. Near the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, over the mountain, the river Kishon begins. It runs across that area to Harosheth and empties into the Mediterranean.

THE CALL TO ARMS (4:6, 7)

Deborah called for Barak, who was from Kedesh. Kedesh seems to have been a popular name for Israelite cities; at least three different cities in Israel were known as Kedesh. The most famous one is in the southern area, Judah. This one, though, is in northern Israel, in the tribal land of Naphtali. The two tribes in this region were Naphtali and Zebulun. Just to the south of them was Issachar, a tribe which also figured into the story. Deborah called for someone from Naphtali. The logic of that is immediately apparent. The king, Jabin, was in that area in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was in Harosheth, which was also in Naphtali. The people who would have been most oppressed by the Canaanites were the people of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar.

God's judge called for a man from Kedesh-naphtali, a man by the name of Barak, to go to Mount Tabor and call for followers from the two tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. A note here will help in understanding Deborah's song in chapter 5. Anytime part of the nation of Israel went to war, everyone was expected to go with them. While the call was for the men of only two tribes, it was expected that men from other tribes would go as well. Some men from Issachar did volunteer to go. Conversely, men from Reuben and Dan did not go. In chapter 5 Deborah chided them as she sang her song.

THE CONFLICT (4:8-16)

Before Barak called for the men of Naphtali and Zebulun to follow him into battle, he voiced his need of God. He did not want to go without the presence of the Lord. He recognized Deborah as the Lord's leader. He wanted Deborah, a woman, to lead the army into battle. Not only was she a prophetess and a judge in the fullest

sense of the word, but at this point, she was also a woman general. Barak's request was unusual, especially in that day. Deborah's answer is most intriguing: "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman" (4:9).

Suppose for a moment that you did not know the rest of the story. Into the hands of which woman would God sell Sisera? We would expect it to be Deborah, would we not? However, another woman, the wife of Heber the Kenite, later became involved in the story. In fact, 4:11 introduces her family.

Heber the Kenite had moved to the north somewhere. There was peace between Heber and the Canaanites who were led by Jabin and Sisera. That peace was very important, because Sisera sought shelter with his friends, his allies. We are told that Barak gathered ten thousand men at Mount Tabor (4:12ff.).

The location is important again. These events happened near to one another. Mount Tabor is about five miles from Harosheth. Sisera was certain to know what was happening. He knew that Barak was gathering his men at that place. He did exactly what God intended for him to do. He gathered his army with all nine hundred iron chariots. God had even said through Deborah, "I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon; and I will give him into your hand" (4:7). These points are so close that the two armies could see one another. The army of God appeared on the foothills of Mount Tabor, and in the valley at the river of Kishon were all the Canaanites with their nine hundred chariots. The Lord said through Deborah to Barak, "Arise! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the Lord has gone out before you" (4:14). What do you think the Lord meant when He said that He had gone out before him? This chapter does not tell us. The answer is found in chapter 5.

He delivered Sisera into Barak's hands: "And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot" (4:15). Who could be in such a hurry that he would not

want his horse slowing him down? Why would he leave his chariot behind when he fled? Chapter 5 suggests a reason.

In chapter 5, after the battle had ended, Deborah and Barak sang a song of victory, which was characteristic of the Jews. This song was particularly jubilant. They began by remembering some of the great things that God had done in battles before. Verses 1 through 5 deal with the time prior to this. They sang of when the Lord marched down from Edom: “. . . the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water” (5:4). Why did they mention this event? The Lord had won battles for them in previous times in various ways. Why did they single out this time when the clouds dripped? We also read, “The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent of Kishon. Oh my soul, march on with strength” (5:20). Do you get the picture? It must be that the Lord went before them by sending a deluge to that valley.

Think of what happens in a river valley when the rain starts falling and gets very heavy. First, it gets muddy. Second, little rivers can rise so quickly that they actually become floods and sweep the people away. Sisera left his chariot behind when he wanted to run because it was mired in the mud. The reason these ten thousand were able to go against a multitude of Canaanites with iron chariots was that the Lord went ahead of them and caused the mud and rendered their chariots useless. Iron chariots do not roll well when they are mired in mud! Therefore, the circumstances put the armies on even footing. The Lord benefited Israel additionally: He enabled them to strike down those Canaanites with the sword, and they all fled.

Some of the Canaanites were getting away with their chariots. Israel pursued them all the way back to their home base at Harosheth and killed them. However, Sisera got away.

THE CONQUEST (4:17-24)

As Sisera fled, he came to the tent of Jael. She was the wife of Heber the Kenite, who was at peace with Jabin. Jael said to Sisera, “Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be

afraid” (4:18). He was looking for a place to rest, so he came in and she hid him under a rug. He was thirsty, and she brought him some milk in an ornate bowl (5:25). Sisera instructed Jael to stand in the door of the tent and say to anyone who asked about him that he was not there. He was exhausted from the battle and soon fell fast asleep. Jael placed a tent peg on his temple, and driving the peg through his head with a hammer, pinned him to the ground (4:21). It was not long until Barak came looking for him. Jael calmly went out and said, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking” (4:22).

The record of these events ends by saying, “So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. And the hand of the sons of Israel pressed heavier and heavier upon Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin the king of Canaan” (4:23, 24).

LESSONS FOR US

God Leads

God chose on this occasion to lead and deliver His people through women. Deborah had a leading role in the events of chapters 4 and 5. Three women, in fact, Deborah, Jael, and even the mother of Sisera, are mentioned. A contrast appears near the end of the story. Deborah was singing the song of victory, and Jael was praised: “Most blessed of women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; most blessed is she of women in the tent” (5:24-27). Notice the shift in verse 28: “Out of the window she looked and lamented, the mother of Sisera through the lattice, ‘Why does his chariot delay in coming? Why do the hoofbeats of his chariot tarry?’” Notice the answer that her wise princesses would give; she would repeat their words, showing her anxiety. “‘Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A maiden, two maidens for every warrior; to Sisera a spoil of dyed work, a spoil of dyed work embroidered, dyed work of double embroidery on the neck of the spoiler?’” (5:30). However, all of that was wishful thinking. The song ends. “Thus let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might” (5:31).

Three women are prevalent in the story.

Perhaps Israel was short on male leadership at this time and God used Deborah in their absence. It was a dark hour, but God provided. God always provides leadership for His people.

God Delivers

The deliverer in the story was not Deborah; the deliverer was not Barak; the deliverer was the Lord God. Deborah was God's spokeswoman as she said, "Barak, go and gather some men." This was the commandment of the Lord. Later, she said that the Lord had given Sisera into Barak's hands.

This truth is added in 4:15: "And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; . . ." Who did it? The Lord did it. That song of chapter 5 is a song to the Lord, a song of praise for what He had done. The first five verses deal with what He had done before. Verses 6 through 30 tell what happened this time, giving the Lord all the credit. Notice the last verse: "Let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might" (5:31).

The psalmist wrote,

Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates, and lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory (Psalm 24:7-10).

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident (Psalm 27:1-3).

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from whence shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep (Psalm 121:1-4).

God's people today are not asked to take the sword and go into a valley and fight physically

with the enemy. The New Testament tells us of our warfare. Paul said that we are not fighting "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). The devil and his angels are real and are doing battle with us. The only way we can be successful in our warfare against our enemy, the devil, is by the strength of the Lord. We are totally dependent upon the Lord for victory.

I like the song "He Is Able to Deliver Thee." We can see God's deliverance demonstrated in Barak and Deborah's battle against Sisera and Jabin. If we look, we can also see its application in our daily lives at the office, at school, in our neighborhoods, or in the privacy of our homes. The same God who controlled the forces of nature and used the river to bring victory for Barak and Deborah, and the same God who used the strength of ten thousand men to overcome far superior numbers, can make us victorious today. The Lord is the deliverer. May we lean on Him.

God Forgives

When people repent and obey God, He forgives. I do not know why He is so merciful, gracious, and forgiving, but that has always been His nature.

The Israelites again did evil in the sight of the Lord, and they saw their punishment approaching. Notice their reaction: "And the sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for [Sisera] had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years" (4:3). They cried to the Lord, and He heard them. This pattern was announced in 2:18: ". . . for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them." God was moved to pity. In 10:16 these words appear in the middle of one of the stories of deliverance: "So they put away the foreign gods from among them, and served the Lord; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer."

When people who have been in sin repent in obedience to God's will, no matter what they have done, no matter how long they have been doing it, our God of mercy will forgive and deliver them. Each of us needs a deliverer.

Everyone needs to live by God's strength. No doubt each of us needs from time to time to repent. We need to ask for His cleansing daily. When we turn to God, He will hear us every time. He will cleanse and deliver us and give us the victory.

GOD'S INVITATION

Are you at this moment in need of a deliverer? You can come in repentance and appeal to the deliverer of Israel. Peter said in Act 2:38, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." If you need to be baptized or if you need to be restored, come to the Great Deliverer.

EXEGETICAL NOTES

4:6-10—Note the geography. It is important to the development of the story.

5:4, 20, 21—God used rain and a swollen river to mire nine hundred iron chariots in mud.

4:4-7; 18-21; 5:28-31—Note the contrasts between the three women in the narrative.

An Outline of Judges

- I. Background: Failure to drive out the Canaanites (1:1-25)
- II. Introduction: Cycle of apostasy (2:6—3:6)
- III. Cycles: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord"
 - A. Othniel (3:7-11)
 - B. Ehud (3:12-31)
 - C. Deborah (4—5)
 - D. Gideon (6—8)
 1. Abimelech (9)
 2. Tola and Jair (10:1-5)
 - E. Jephthah (10:6—12:7)
 1. Ibzan (12:8-10)
 2. Elon (12:11, 12)
 3. Abdon (12:13-15)
 - F. Samson (13—16)
- IV. Tribal depravity: "Everyone did as he saw fit"

A. Danites (17—18)

B. Benjamites (19—21)

The message of the book is that the problem was not the Lord's fault, but was created and sustained by Israel's continued disobedience. The judges period was characterized by acts of depravity, not just individually, but on the tribal level. This is conveyed by the two sets of refrains that recur in their respective sections of the book. Each cycle in chapters 3—16 is introduced by the observation that "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1), indicating the tendency toward theological apostasy. The second refrain serves as an inclusio by appearing at the beginning and end of chapters 17—21 (17:6; 21:25): In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he saw fit. The first half of the phrase is used in two other places as well to sustain the narrative in between (18:1; 19:1).

A Survey of the Old Testament

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton

Dangerous Surroundings

Chuck Swindoll,¹ in his book *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, related an incident that happened in his high school chemistry class. The instructor placed a frog in a beaker of cool, clear water. Then he placed a Bunsen burner beneath the beaker and very slowly heated the water. For over two hours the frog stayed happily in the beaker as the temperature increased. Before it sensed what was happening, it died from the rising water temperature. The change took place so gradually that the frog felt no discomfort and did not jump out of the beaker.

Since World War II, dangerous, almost imperceptible, changes have occurred in our society. Although we have profited greatly from the advances made in science and industry, moral erosion is now evident. Like the frog, we were unaware of what was taking place. But looking back, the deterioration alarms us.

Judges

Cyril J. Barber

¹C. R. Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1983), 93.