

Heroes of the Faith Series

Incisive and Decisive

for the Lord

Deborah

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Heroes of the Faith

THE SONG OF DEBORAH – Read Judges 5

The Song of Deborah is one of the earliest poems in Scripture – a great shout of praise to the God who has just won a great and essential victory for His people after a time of great oppression.

It was written by Deborah, a most remarkable women in the Bible, who would have taught this song to her army, who, in turn, would have passed it on to the next generation as a reminder for the generations to come of the things that God had done. Like all prophetic scriptures, there is much that we can learn through it about the heart of the God we serve.

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Historical Background

Unlike the Koran and other sacred writings, the Bible is unique in consisting largely of history as we follow God's dealings with the individual monarchs, leaders and prophets who shaped the nation. But this is sacred history, not just dates and times and places, that records examples of God's wider initiatives and purposes.

In the Old Testament God sent His Spirit upon individuals – such as Gideon and Samson: perhaps twelve in the entire book of Judges out of a nation of two million. He was sent for a brief period of time to accomplish specific tasks – quite unlike the present age in which the Holy Spirit indwells the children of God.

During the difficult days that followed Joshua's partial conquest of the Promised Land the Israelites often forgot their Lord. Many kings rose up against them, of which one of the nastiest was Jabin, whose commander, Sisera, cruelly oppressed Israel for twenty years - very much as Russia oppressed countries such as Hungary and what was then known as Czechoslovakia.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help. Judges 4:3b
'For the oppression of the poor, and the sighing of the needy, now will God arise.' (Psalm 12:5 NKJV) God heard the cry that went up for the land and determined that the time had come to deliver Israel out of the hands of Jabin.

Sisera was a four star general, a prototype Rommel, invincible in battle as a result of his superior technology who oppressed Israel for twenty years. His 900 chariots were the panzer divisions of his day.

Anti Complacency Measures

It doesn't take very long of things going well for us to become complacent. One could say that the land had had peace for too long. Instead of growing in gratitude and devotion, complacency set in, as it

does so quickly when times are easier. (See Deuteronomy 32:15-22). The people had kept to God's way as long as their leaders had been restraining them, but when Ehud passed away the way was wide open for everyone to go their own way. The people removed themselves from the Lord's protection (Jeremiah 11:15) and the Lord 'sold them' into the hand of Jabin (4:2).

Have we not enshrined in law almost everything we can that is contrary to His ways? What do such passages have to say about our own situation?

It takes a lot to get some people praying.
Is prayer a first resort for you or a last resort?

Follow my leader

"Israel's leaders took charge, and the people gladly followed. Praise the LORD!"
Judges 5:1-2

The simple fact is that leaders cannot lead unless soldiers are willing to obey. Are you a willing soldier? ***We must be willing to engage in the spiritual fight.*** Whenever God has wanted to do something extraordinary in the history of Israel, as throughout church history, He raises up special leaders to accomplish it. They see the wider picture and know how to motivate others. Rather as Churchill roused the British nation at its lowest point, Deborah stirred General Barak into action, and he then brought 10,000 people together under his command.

At this low point in Israel's history, the Lord raised up a woman to be its means of salvation. We know little about Deborah except that she had the twin calling of being a prophetess who knew the ways of God, and a leader who knew how to dispense the justice and to motivate others into participating in the plans of the Lord. She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went to her for judgment. **(4:5)**

One person's faith and obedience can make a difference in history! ***Leaders lead from the front and make things possible.*** Israel had been in the depths of despair before Deborah took over (vv. 6-8), but she turned things round. You never know the effect of what you are sowing! If you are anointed in some area, develop it, expect God to use you and to work through it.

In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, and in the days of Jael, people avoided the main roads, and travellers stayed on winding pathways. There were few people left in the villages of Israel until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel. When Israel chose new gods, war erupted at the city gates. Yet not a shield or spear could be seen among forty thousand warriors in Israel! (5:6-8)

From verse 6 onwards Deborah recounts the depressed state that Israel was in under Jabin's tyrannous rule, both in order to be historically accurate but also so that the greatness of their deliverance might shine out the more clearly.

Like present day Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, trade was halted; there was no one to protect the businessmen from the attacks of the enemy and no magistrates to restrain and punish lawbreakers. All commerce had ceased and the roads were not used. There were no caravans of merchants passing through as before, no travellers, and no ploughing of the fields. Everyone was obliged to remain in walled cities.

Just how bad had things got?

The song recognises that there was no spirit left among the 40,000 to arm themselves and fight: a sure sign of how leaderless Israel was. Like all true prophets, Deborah saw exactly what it was that had caused their plight. The people had chosen new gods, and this is why all these calamities had come upon them.

We can summarise the situation like this because the principle holds true for every age: God would not rescue the land from its enemies without His people – but His people could not do it without Him. God had designed it that they were meant to be dependent on Him and to partner together.

Deborah's name means 'busy bee'. Deborah's hard working wisdom made her sweet to her friends but sharp to her enemies. She was neither ambitious nor power-hungry. Deborah As one of the outstanding women in history, God used her to bring about a remarkable deliverance. She was always keen to give God the credit but she in no way denied or resisted the unique position that the Lord had given her.

The Prophet's Role: to anoint and to inspire

Deborah sent for Barak son of Abinoam and said to him, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: Call out 10,000 warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor. And I will draw Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, along with his chariots and warriors, to the Kishon River. There I will give you victory over him."
Judges 4:6-7

A prophet's heart must always be where the Lord's own heart is. Deborah's definitely was as she announced, *My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people*, (5:9) God is always seeking 'willing volunteers' for His kingdom rather than mere upholders of traditions.

God luring people? What a strange idea! Read the example of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:17-23 (cf Hosea 2:13) and see what you make of it.

The most precious thing at the start of any new venture is to know that God has commanded it. **We must work as if it all depended on us, but pray and trust as if it all depended on God.** Without courage, nothing gets done. Deborah needed enormous courage to assemble a force to challenge Sisera.

The role of a prophet is first to hear from God and then to motivate people to do what God has shown them. This is exactly what Deborah did when she appointed General Barak and outlined God's strategy to him. As she did so, she had no doubt that God would give the victory.

Was the General a wimp?

Barak told her, "I will go, but only if you go with me." (4:8)

Barak insisted that Deborah came in person to the field of battle. He was unwilling to obey the summons at all, in fact, unless she did. Many have seen this as a sign of cowardice, but I am by no means convinced this was the case. I prefer to think that he recognized the spiritual importance of Deborah's counsel and prayers, and the inspirational impact that her presence would have on the troops – rather like Joan of Arc had on the French army in their struggle against the English.

Deborah agreed to go with him. (v9). To her credit, she wasn't prepared to send him anywhere she herself was unwilling to go.

She did however warn Barak that his glory would be eclipsed by a greater glory that would be given to her. (4:4-9) To his credit, Barak does not mind. He would rather the enterprise were successful than enjoy the honour that would have been his due as a successful commander. To recognise true anointing in others is a sign of greatness. It is worth asking ourselves: is that always our chief motivation u that the Lord be glorified?

Overview: Womanly intuition and prophetic awareness

[That was how things were] until I, Deborah, arose as a mother for Israel. Deborah's clear sightedness shows that spiritual women often have that acute prophetic awareness which may in part be intuitive but also contain a generous measure of direct inspiration as to whether a particular course of action is right. (Knowing how and when to implement what you have heard is always a second-stage procedure, of course). Men, whether husbands or leaders in the church, are foolish when they ignore the wisdom of women who have a proven track record of inspiration. We men have much to repent of in this respect, for we have crushed many women's giftings, rather than identifying and developing them.

- Deborah did not use her great giftings for selfish gain but rather to serve the nation. (Judg. 4:4)
- She listened carefully to what people had to say to her, but she also kept her ear turned to God (Judges 4:5)
- She knew how to mobilise others (Judg 4:6,7)
- She showed true leadership qualities by not asking others to do what she was not prepared to do herself. She was a servant leader rather than despot. (Judg 4:8-9)

Josephus tells us that the children of Israel came to Deborah to ask her to pray to God for them as well as to pray for deliverance for the nation; Samuel, who is the most likely author of this book, fulfilled much the same role that Deborah did though in an itinerant capacity (1 Sam. 6,8).

Deborah saw no need to be "mealy-mouthed" about the part she had to play in restoring the work of God in her day. *Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, a mother in Israel.* (5:7) Some of us should perhaps be more convinced that we have a part to play in the vital work of restoration in our own day. By her concern and burden for her people's well-being she showed herself to be a true mother in Israel.

She by no means underestimates her own role in this. She says, 'all that was happening until I, Deborah, arose,' (v7), to deal with those who disturbed the public peace and to protect people for their businesses, so that men could go forth again to their work and labour (Ps 104:22-23). And thus she became a 'Mother in Israel' who took care for the public welfare. Those who serve the nation in such ways are worthy of double honour.

Mothers and Fathers in Christ

- *Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do **not** have **many fathers**, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.* (1 Cor. 4:15)
- Paul said that he was like a nursing mother travailling with burden for his newly planted churches (Gal. 4:19, cf 1 Cor. 4:15). It is a special thing to be mothers and fathers in Christ who both make and care for young believers, but also a costly calling.
- Are you a mentor and father or mother to others? Do you have such a person to go to yourself? Without becoming over-dependent on them, what are the benefits of having such a person in your life?

It's time for action!

Sisera called for all 900 of his iron chariots and all of his warriors, and they marched from Harosheth-haggoyim to the Kishon River. Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the Lord gone out before thee?"

Judges 4:13-14

I love the directness of Deborah's speech which galvanizes into action. Throughout Scripture we see the words of prophets stirring people into action and achieving what would otherwise never be attempted.

If we hesitate when God has shown us what He wants to do, it gives the devil a big advantage. Those who are resolute fare better in their minds and in terms of achieving things for the Kingdom. May the Lord make us both resilient and prayerful!

Trusting God is hard when what you think He is saying to you sounds decidedly odd! God had a battle plan. The leaders could have relied on human wisdom, and said that God's timing and positioning of the battle were crazy, and tried to force the battle in the place of their choosing. But God's way would neutralize the vastly superior forces that they were up against.

The Lord sees from many more directions than us. He knew that He was going to turn the tables round and neutralize the military advantage that Sisera held.

Can you think of other examples of God using the weak to shame the strong so that all the glory goes to Him? If the Israelites had tried to do things their own way, they would have been putting their ideas above God's – which would have meant that they were no better than the Canaanites.

Know that the Lord goes before you (4–5, 31). The God of history can help you do exploits for Him today if you will trust Him and do His will. He is able! **What is the Lord asking you to do?**

And what are you asking Him to do?

The Power of Heavenly Music

Consider the voice of the singers at the watering places. They recite the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel.
(5:10)

The prophetess' heart is stirred and finds appropriate expression in song: *Awake awake, Deborah ... break out in song!* (5:12). Significant parts of the Church have come a long way since Tozer described worship as the missing jewel in the evangelical crown. God is restoring worship to its rightful place, right at the very forefront of what He is doing. The Lord uses those whose hearts are seeking Him to bring down many strongholds of unbelief and darkness.

Worship brings the Presence of the Lord, and it releases His power.

The Host of Heaven becomes involved when we worship in such ways. When we speak what God shows us to pray and do what He tells us to do things come into being, just as they do when God Himself speaks. No wonder the Psalmist tells us to *sing and play as skilfully as we can.* (*Psalm 33:3*)

Since Heaven is full of music, the Lord would have us enjoy heavenly music. We are not ‘worshipping music’ as some choirs and worship bands seem to do. Our musical skills are an asset only in so far as we do not trust in them, however. It is easy to put your trust in yourself, however unintentionally, when you are very good at something. Real power comes by constant surrender.

Real worship ranges from the happy and joyful to sharing the Lord's grief over situations that are wrong. It is the sound of God's people coming together to seek the face of the living God and to enquire of him. Paul said, *I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind.* (*1 Cor. 14:15*) just as he prayed with both his mind and with the Holy Spirit. We in the West think and pray far too much with the mind.

The elders in the book of Revelation were always singing *new* songs. It glorifies the Lord when His people on earth do so too. This is where music soars beyond the range of the printed range of a song to play in the mode and the mood of whatever subject the Lord may be laying on our hearts, be it something joyful or sad. There will be songs of rejoicing to share, but there may equally be songs of mourning of lament and of intercession as the Spirit pours out a spirit of supplication on us.

Inspired and anointed music enables us to ‘feel’ an issue perhaps more deeply than words alone could ever do and itself becomes an integral part of our spiritual warfare.

In all our busyness, let us not forget the front line role that singers and musicians occupy. When God has done something really special, it is great to celebrate it in music and worship and song. And it gives Him delight to hear His servants’ joy. It is good to put this to music as soon as possible after a great victory while impressions are fresh in the mind. This song, like the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21 and Deut. 32:1-43 teaches us many things about the Lord Himself.

Luther claimed that music dispels the powers of darkness faster than anything else except the word of God. It seems to me to be the most logical thing in the world therefore, to put the two together – and that most definitely includes a willingness to improvise and to create new music under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Pray for the spirit of prophecy and of godly conviction to stir as we rise up in music. Pray for musical prophets to lead the people of God, – and for anointed worship leaders both in our own clusters and right across God's Church.

The few and the surprising

“One plus God is still a majority.” (David Pawson)

As we have seen, when Deborah, by God's direction, ordered Barak to raise an army of 10,000 people to oppose Sisera's army (v6,7), she made it clear that this is a command of the Lord, and that the Lord has promised to draw Sisera, to him, Barak and give him into his hand. Only the sons of Naphtali and Zebulun are to be recruited to this enterprise because they are the nearest, and they are enough for the task.

God promised first that there would be a battle and second that He would win it – despite the overwhelming superiority Sisera enjoyed as the result of his 900 chariots. The Lord does not hide from us the magnitude of such challenges. What Sisera intended for the subjection of Israel, God intended for its deliverance (Is 8:9 and Rev 19:17-18).

When the naval Task Force set out from Britain to reclaim the Falklands Islands that the Argentinians had seized, the Lord gave me a word as I was praying about it. 'There will be a limited war, and this is My will. I will give Britain special protection during it, but there will still be a cost. I am going to bring down the Argentinian junta because of *los disparados*.' (These were the huge number of people who lost their lives as a result of the oppressive military regime).

Events happened exactly as the Lord had prophesied. . Time after time we saw God exercise remarkable protection, (not least when bombs bounced off decks of ships without exploding), but there were casualties, and there was a cost to pay. The aftermath has been nothing short of remarkable. Humbled by this defeat, the way was prepared for Argentina to enjoy what has long since been the world's longest ever running spiritual revival.

Deborah's victory was achieved through a remnant of the nation, (5:13). This is a theme that recurs again and again in Scripture. It almost seems as though God prefers to win His mightiest victories against the most apparently overwhelming odds. The Lord is a much greater dramatist even than Shakespeare! There is always hope so long as there is a single person seeking God.

It is easy to forget what a mighty victory this really was. It is sobering to remember that the Israelites were fighting not only against a numerical superior force but against an enemy armed with iron chariots which had sharp scythes fastened to the axles that would have inflicted terrible damage to the limbs of footsoldiers. If mankind had been as ingenious in caring for each other as they have in inventing methods of destroying each other, what a different world this would be!

Don't choose new gods!

Deborah describes in verse 8 in four words what it was that had brought this misery upon them: *they chose new gods*. Matthew Henry says it was their idolatry that provoked God to give them up into the hands of their enemies. They had grown weary of the Ancient of Days and must have new gods, which they were as fond of as any children of new clothes, they must have gods of their own choosing. It was at that point that they removed themselves from God's protection, and war came to the city gates.

Rise up women of the truth

There is a wonderful verse in Jeremiah 31:22 which says, '*behold I will do a new thing in the earth. A woman shall surround the man.*' When we think of all that women can do in our time that they could not do even a hundred years ago, we can see how the Holy Spirit is applying this verse in our own times.

Bearing in mind the context in which this passage was given, however, we can see here how the Holy Spirit, rather like a pianist playing cross-handedly, rests His hand upon the woman's head, choosing someone who is weaker physically in the world to provide the direction that was so vitally required. But for Deborah, Barak would never have had the courage to do what he did. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Barak was afraid when he saw the size of the enemy ranged against him.

Without getting bogged down in the vexed and thorny question of female leadership, perhaps we could think of it this way: if the devil can make more than half the Church feel excluded from assuming a leadership role because they are of the wrong sex, another fifth because they are ‘past their shelf-life’ mark, and yet another fifth because they are too young, then it only leaves a few young bucks to rule the herd.

I have the uneasy feeling that there are some in the Church who would be only too pleased to settle for that. But the Lord wants to harness all His willing volunteers. Did not the Lord Jesus continually surprise people by overturning immature prejudices? To entrust His first appearance after the Resurrection to a woman, (whose testimony in those days was legally invalid), was a remarkable example of how much He was prepared to trust in women.

Never too young or too old

There are lovely stories emerging around the world how He is using even very young children in most powerful ways. At the other end of the scale we knew a couple who began what became a fully fledged mission to what was then Soviet Eastern Europe when they were nearly seventy years old! Let not the assumptions and prejudices of men prevent the true impulses of the Holy Spirit who is always doing new things in order to achieve impossible goals.

Who was it who came to the help of the Lord against the mighty?

At the end of any venture it is good to take stock and see who has done what. Deborah proceeds to make profound observations about who took part in the action, who the opposition was, and who endeavoured to remain neutral. (5:13,15, 23b)

Verse 19 makes it clear that Jabin was not the only king of the Canaanites who fought in this battle. Other kings had recovered from their earlier defeats at the hands of Joshua: Amalek, Hazor, Jericho and so on. We often think we have overcome an issue, only to find it returning by a different route. Perhaps the Lord allows many such issues to remain as a test of our commitment to warfare – exactly as He allowed many of the original nations inside the Promised Land to live on (see Judges 3:1-4).

What particular spiritual forces and counterfeits do you see ranged against the people of God today in these days – and against you in particular?

Translating belief into Action

The princes of the small tribe of Issachar were with Deborah. We know from 1 Chronicles 12:32 that they were a people who understood the times, and what they should do because they knew the both the character and the heart of God. The two are not necessarily the same thing. Many Bible-based Christians understand a lot about the character of God in their heads without really feeling and understanding His passionate longing for His people to move in step with the Spirit.

What effect does trouble have on you?

Zebulun and Naphtali lay closest to Jabin and, having suffered accordingly, fought the hardest. It is often only when an issue becomes in some way personal to us that we fully mobilize our resources, both spiritual and practical.

Trouble brings out the best in some people. A question we will often have cause to test ourselves in is whether trouble makes us fight the harder in prayer or whether it simply makes us crumble inside. The saints through the ages have turned the toils of trouble into the tool of the Lord through which to see something positive, even mighty, accomplished for the Lord.

How do you handle trouble? Do you just roll over and die, or do you fight back with spiritual weapons and cry out to God for Him to overcome?

Heavenly Intervention 5:20-22

*The stars fought from heaven.
The stars in their orbits fought against Sisera.
The Kishon River swept them away –
that ancient torrent, the Kishon.
March on with courage, my soul!
Then the horses' hooves hammered the ground,
the galloping, galloping of Sisera's mighty steeds.*

Not only did these tribes take part in the action, but it is recorded that *From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera (5:20)*. Since we hear of the River Kishon sweeping them away, torrential rain must have fallen, causing the usually shallow river to become a rushing torrent, drowning those who attempted to pass through it, bogging down the heavy iron chariots and forcing the drivers to flee on foot (see 5:20-22).

None of this would have happened unless the people had been obedient in leaving the advantage of the high ground on Mount Tabor and coming down

onto the plain, where, in theory, they should have been completely at the mercy of the chariots. If the Lord shows us what He wants us to do, we are most unwise if we refuse to do it.

The 10,000 Israelites, who were lightly armed and highly mobile, engaged in the combat with the cavalry and chariots of Sisera.

The story indicates the direct intervention of God, who inspired the prediction of Deborah and sent the storm just in time to defeat Israel's enemies. Interestingly, much the same thing happened when Napoleon defeated the Turkish army at the Battle of Mount Tabor on April 16, 1799; when hundreds of fleeing Turkish troops were swept away and drowned.

There is no doubt at all that unnatural weather patterns have often proved decisive in military campaigns through the centuries. Heaven was causing trouble for Sisera just as Heaven intervened to save Britain during the Second World War. For those who are interested in exploring recent history from a spiritual perspective I would highly commend *Rees Howells Intercessor* by Norman Grubb, (Lutterworth), which charts many remarkable answers to prayer.

Have there been times when you have faced totally impossible situations, but God has given you a clear promise so that like Barak and Deborah you are on your mountain fastness with only a limited amount of resources looking out at a seemingly much greater enemy force? How has He rescued you? It is good to remember the deliverances that you once craved so urgently and which we forget so easily once the danger is passed. Use the memory of these victories as a springboard to faith for facing future challenges.

It was no coincidence that the English Channel was so unusually still during the evacuation at Dunkirk. It was this which enabled small boats to cross the channel to bring a quarter of a million otherwise doomed soldiers home again. It was no coincidence either that the Germans stopped sending their planes across in the Battle of Britain at the very time when our last fighter reserves were in the air.

“Oh my soul, march on with strength”

Deborah's own spirit was fighting against them – just as Moses conquered Amalek by lifting up his hand, so Deborah conquered Sisera by waging warfare in her heart, the strength of God being deployed through her to tread down her enemies and His. What do you need to continue to be strong in prayer for?

Overcoming Excuses! 5:16-17

*Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds—
to hear the shepherds whistle for their flocks?*

*Yes, in the tribe of Reuben
there was great indecision.*

Gilead remained east of the Jordan.

And why did Dan stay home?

*Asher sat unmoved at the seashore,
remaining in his harbours.*

The more unity there is in a group or a church, the easier it is for Him to work in power. When the different tribes gathered to affirm David as their leader, they were all of one mind (1 Chron. 12:38). We cannot perhaps say quite as much in this battle against Sisera. The tribe of Reuben, for instance, was caught up in great heart searching. They could not agree on whether they should honour their covenant agreement to help one another or not. In so far as the nation had drifted from worshipping the Lord into worshipping the Baals the nation had lost its central unity, and was hence much more vulnerable to attack (cf Judg. 2:14).

What one person, or portion of a Church says or does has a real influence on the rest, for good or ill. Siding with the fatal hesitation in calling evil evil which so characterises our age, permits much unrighteousness to flourish, causes us to miss out on grasping opportunities. Spirits of division play upon such hesitation and ‘liberal’ spirits rally to justify our hesitations, often with disastrous consequences.

Do not let others discourage you (13–18, 23). Not all the tribes responded with faith and courage; in fact, some refused to get involved in the battle. Some sacrificed their lives while others made excuses and stayed at home.

There follows a post-mortem on who did what and perhaps equally as important – who did not do what amongst the tribes of Israel. We hear of Reuben and Gilead staying among their sheep – a far more comfortable place than risking their lives in conflict. Do we have a heart for the wider wellbeing of the church and the Kingdom, and the fate of non-Christians, or are we just taken up with our own interests? How would you rate yourself on the excuse-making scale?

Are we like the person who declined the invitation in the parable and said, ‘I have sheep to look after, pray have me excused!’ (Matt 22:1-24)

It is a sobering thought that generations of Reubenites would grow up hearing in this popular song how their ancestors had missed the opportunity. God does not always let our mistakes and cowardice be quickly forgotten!

It speaks of there being great divisions and describes the heart-searching that went on in Reuben. Whether that was simply a question of ‘should we go, shouldn’t we go?’ or whether some people were jockeying for position to be ‘in charge’ of the army, we don’t know, but it sounds as though they got themselves tangled up with power-struggles. Does this sound familiar? God works best through those who put each other and the Lord first! I love what Paul says of Timothy (although it represents a fairly hefty criticism of his other workers): *I have no one else like him, for everyone else is looking out for their own interests and not those of Christ Jesus (Phil. 23:21)*

Dan claimed it could not leave its ships and maritime pursuits, and Asher stayed at home and repair the breaches which the sea had made upon its land and to attend to its trading vessels. It doesn’t take much to make us stay at home if we are reluctant to go into the heat of challenge!

Every excuse we use, others have had the courage and the resolution to overcome. Zebulun was also a coastal region, and yet it took part. By far the strongest condemnation, however, is reserved for a place otherwise unknown to us called Meroz. (5:23).

The judgement of God comes in direct proportion to the opportunities afforded. It must have been a place of importance because something important was expected of it. It appears to have been cursed so thoroughly that no trace of its subsequent history has come down to us. This is why we are right to be so concerned for Western Europe. We have enjoyed spiritual and political freedom for so long, and yet have so little honoured the One who gave us this freedom that we are in extreme danger of having it taken away from us, whether by stifling political correctness or outside religious forces. (see Matthew 11:20-24).

The main challenge, however, was directed against Meroz and a curse pronounced upon them, because they came not to the help of the Lord (v23). Refusing to face challenges is rarely wise. The Lord was able to do it without them, but as a result they received a curse pronounced by the angel of the Lord and we hear no more of Meroz in scripture, rather like the fig tree which Christ cursed – it will have withered away and disappeared from the pages of history.

The city of Meroz was afraid of the iron chariots and its citizens stayed away from the conflict. How good are you at facing challenges? **What does the ‘fear of Jabin's iron chariots’ mean for you?** Does it keep you from challenging what is wrong, and testifying to that which is right?. May our names and record stand in the annals of heaven as another Deborah, and not another Meroz! Some of you may prefer to shsr your fears out loudf with each other; others may find it easier to draw them.

A most unlikely heroine

You never know when God may use you to do something heroic! Corrie Ten Boom was the most unassuming watchmakers daughter; there was nothing in the first fifty years of her life to point towards the incredible way in which she would be used both during and after the Second World War. Even if God has no such dramatic plans in store for your life, you will find Him still an amazing rewarder of those who live a life of devotion in constant faithfulness and attentiveness to Him. So far as we know, Jael had done nothing noteworthy in her life until her moment came – and she had the courage to take it. Quite what Jael felt as she committed the act is not shared with us – whether she was afraid that he would wake up, or some of his supporters would turn up and catch her in the act – none of this is recorded.

The way God used Jael is a reminder that although your life may be spent largely in an unassuming place (like serving in a tent like Jael did), at any point you may be called upon to be greatly used by the Lord. Ones prognosis for the life of Corrie Ten Boom, a watchmakers daughter, would have been that she would have been such a spinsterly woman for the rest of her life, attending to her watches. But then God called her to care for Jews in danger and the sequence began which led to the loss of her entire family, but also the start of an amazing ministry of reconciliation and evangelism that reached thousands in need of Christ.

Whatever we make of Jael’s action from our supposedly more civilised twentieth century standpoint, Deborah had no hesitation in praising Jael’s action. Sisera had ‘thought to destroy Israel with his many iron chariots but is himself destroyed with one iron nail’ (M. Henry).

The humblest person who serves in the most humble role in life shall in no way be less highly regarded by God than the noblest warrior if he or she simply makes themselves available to God from one day to the next.

God is not squeamish

What happens next is not for faint hearts, but there again, very little in the book of Judges is. It is easy to present a sanitized version that leaves out the gory details. Sisera fled to the tents of the Kenites, the brother-in-law of Moses, who had no doubt maintained his links with Moses' people, and would have recognized that the hand of God in the battle that had just taken place.

In the very place where Sisera thought he was safest, he was in fact about to meet his doom. He who had ruled with an iron scythe attached to his chariot would now be destroyed by having an iron nail driven through his temple.

Result of the victory

The victory was a major turning point. Henceforth the kings of Canaan no longer exercised any major pressure on the people of God. One could argue that if the children of Israel had been more diligent about destroying the Canaanites earlier on as God had commanded, they might not have had to deal with this crisis now but God does not deal with 'if-only's'. He takes things as they are. If you are facing an 'if-only' moment in your mind, do remember that God has no second-best when we submit ourselves afresh to His leading. He can rework the threads of our lives and accomplish His best for us.

It is not the spirit of revenge that motivates the Song that Deborah sang, but rather jubilation that God has roused Himself in judgement against godlessness in all its manifold forms. Just as David rejoiced that God was 'training my hands for war, my fingers for battle (Ps 144:1), we are likewise being trained for warfare for the times we find ourselves in.

It is fitting for men to pray to have a heart like David, and so to be a man after God's own heart. Perhaps it would be equally as fitting for women to pray to have Deborah's heart. Her name means a 'bee,' and she was both industrious and sweet, but with many a sting for her enemies. Her example is a timely one for our generation. And always remember ... 'When the people willingly offer themselves ... there is no limit to what God can do.' Deborah's victory was a far-reaching one which secured peace for Israel for a whole generation.

Deborah's final fervent prayer is one that we can also utter: that the forces of evil be overthrown and that all God's friends be comforted and upheld and be 'like the sun when it rises in its strength' (5:31).

The land had rest for 40 years (kings of Canaan no more a threat) until such time as the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord and He handed them over into the hand of Midian and Gideon would be sent for to deliver them.

Is compromise ever legitimate?

We know that there are certain situations in which we are called not to compromise. Once the Lord has broken through in a particular area, it is important that we follow it up to the full. The Israelites therefore pursued Jabin until they destroyed him. If they had not done this, he would have lived to fight another day and to cause Israel more problems. Many of their problems indeed sprung from the fact that they had never fully conquered the land the Lord had given them.

For those who like to go deeper:

When Joshua died, there was no one straightforward successor. In all probability, the 'judges' who emerged after this were not formal positions, so much as people whose giftings were acknowledged and respected by others. In other words this was probably more a case of functional leadership than positional, institutionalized leadership. The judges would have been local leaders commanding the loyalty of local tribes rather than the whole nation.

The word judges is a misleading term, because the only Judge mentioned in the book of Judges is God Himself. Perhaps it might be more accurate to see the Judges fulfilling the role of trouble-shooters who rescued the nation at times when they were going astray. Not only did they have to deal with all the sundry differences and disputes between fellow tribesmen: the nations that previously dwelt in the Promised Land had by no means been fully driven out and hostile nations continued to attack Israel at various times: the Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Moabites, the Midianites, and the Philistines – not to mention problems with the kings of Jericho – Moab, and Hazor.

By the time of the judges we find a nation that was losing its direct awareness of God. Second, third and fourth generation settlers in the land rarely have the passion, commitment and vision that the original pioneers did (halfway

covenant). After the death of Joshua, people quickly fell back into various forms of idolatry, which led to increasing godlessness, which caused God to allow things to become difficult for them – which in turn drove them to seek the Lord – albeit quite possibly less in true repentance than out of a desire to escape the adversity they were facing. It did not dawn on them, however, that the difficulties they were facing came precisely as a result of their backsliding. It is the task of the prophet to make this link between cause and effect clear to people. This is something that Haggai did supremely well.

What does this have to say to our own generation? Are we not arrogant, overfed and unconcerned? Read Ezekiel 16:48-50

In the Book of Judges we see seven of these cycles of apostasy, oppression and cry for deliverance, salvation and rest. Although Israel consistently failed to learn from its mistakes, the times of rest and peace are actually longer than the times of bondage. God showed Himself immensely creative in the way He delivered His people.

The Canaanites were idolatrous and God wanted them destroyed. If you live amongst an idolatrous people, it is harder to resist absorbing their practices – which of course the Israelites had done.

Inter-marriage with local tribes caused further deterioration in the spiritual well being of the nation. As many have said in the past, ‘those who marry children of the devil are bound to have problems with their father-in-law!’ It is always the case that we are more likely to be influenced in the wrong way when we deliberately mix with non-Christians than the other way around.

The office of the best of these prophet-judges was entirely different from that of the despotic rulers of other nations. There were periods of peace, such as the eighty years without war after Ehud’s victory, but the chronicler passes over these in silence. They are no more interest to him than a good marriage is to the author of the soaps: it is the major disturbances that are most interesting, and the tension that provides the drama.

Complimentariness

Just as Deborah and Barak cooperated in fighting the battle and also in praising the Lord, so their names are linked together in praising the Lord. Deborah would, after all, have been powerless without Barak, just as he would have been directionless without her. We have seen already that she was the mouth and he the hands.

Churches and organisations function best when there is this combination of prophetic and pastoral input. Prophets have eyes to see what it is that God would do, and pastoral input to channel and interpret these thoughts so that the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ and the ‘what’ can alike be worked out. It is almost impossible in practise to be both pastor and prophet at one and the same time, because the prophet’s task is to stir up and challenge, while the pastor has to work things out ‘at ground level’.

All too often, pastors are too wary of change to commit themselves fully to what has been revealed. The ‘prophets,’ however, may be more self-seeking and immature than they realise, too little aware of what it takes to implement a vision at ground level. Both prophets and pastors will benefit from studying each other’s calling, and asking the Lord to deepen their understanding of the ways of God.

As an example of how prophets and pastors can work well together in tandem, prophets are often right in substance but unclear as to the timing and the manner of how their vision ought to be worked out. That is why the one needs the balance of the other, and why it is a great delight to the Lord when there is real trust and flow between prophet and pastor: it makes it easier for the power of God to flow through a congregation. What examples have you seen of this that have worked – and that have not worked?

If your strengths lie in very different areas from someone who means a lot to you, look on it more as complimentariness rather than a frustration. As my father said of Ros and I at our wedding: ‘Like a pair of antique vases, they are much more valuable as a pair than on their own!’

The Song of Deborah – A study in prophecy

Deborah used her gifts as a prophetess in writing this song; the images are lively and the feel of it is fine and lofty rather like in Habakkuk 3 there is a delightful combination of sweetness and yet majesty. As Matthew Henry says, ‘no poetry is comparable to sacred poetry!’

Like the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, the song of Deborah could only have been written by a prophet. The language is high and lofty, yet also sweet and intimate. Like David, Deborah had a heart of worship. In true Scriptural style it contains both testimony and warning: testimony of the mighty power of God, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him, and warning of what happens to men and nations who follow other gods. It is a call to people of all ranks to give themselves wholeheartedly to the service of the Lord.

Deborah calls to kings and princes to join her in the song and to heed the subject matter for she would have them know that there is one who is higher than they are, and whom it is in their interests to submit to.

Deborah was particularly concerned that those who are in positions of authority in the land who 'ride on white asses', one could say 'those who are driven in the diplomatic limousines' should recognize what God had done. Let them be thankful that the sword of government has not been struck out of their hand by the sword of war – as Matthew Henry put it

Deborah, as prophetess, arouses herself to compose a song and sing it. 'Awake, awake,' she charges herself. There is a time when it is right to stir oneself up so strongly. The song needed to be prepared thoughtfully and 'rehearsed' carefully. Praising God is a work we should awake to and awake others to as well.

In 5:4-5 Deborah recalls the time when God led His people Israel through Edom en route to the Promised Land, when Sihon and Og were spectacularly defeated. She also refers to the glory and majesty that attended the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, when the earth literally did tremble.

I love the fact that in 4:14, Deborah describes an action that has yet to happen in the past tense as though it has already happened – so certain is the Lord's leading. Grammatically, this is known as the "prophetic perfect tense".

Let your minds dwell on manifestations of the power of God. Let them fuel your faith for the future. There have been plenty in recent years of epic proportions – as, for example, when He opened the door for the gospel to reach Russia and the other eastern European countries. He showed a group of us who were praying at the time that the door would open, but we sensed it might not stay open for ever.

It is so important to follow through on the opportunities the Lord gives and to make the most of these opportunities. By God's mercy, tens of thousands were saved – although opposition is again increasing, and openness is less than it was ten years ago.

When the worship group Wellspring were ministering in Karachi cathedral, the power of the Lord came so powerfully that hundreds of people literally ran down the aisle to be prayed for. One person who left early looked back at the cathedral and saw it lit up as if by huge lightning - and yet there was no storm around. God was moving by His power.

Where do you put your trust?

*Some nations boast of their chariots and horses,
but we boast in the name of the LORD our God.
Those nations will fall down and collapse,
but we will rise up and stand firm. Psalm 20:7-8*

Sisera's fate is a warning to those who put their trust in horses and chariots (or in money and possessions in our day). In the very place where Sisera thought he was safest, he was in fact about to meet his doom. He who had ruled with an iron scythe attached to his chariot would now be destroyed by having an iron nail driven through his temple.

In verse four Deborah recalls great breakthroughs of God's presence and compares this with the greatest of these. Are you inclined to think of God's deliverances as being in the past? He is the same from one dispensation to another, His arm is not shortened, and He is forever renewing His mercies.

How incisive and decisive are you?

When the Lord asks us to do something new, it often feels too big. How do you respond?

- Do you instinctively wait to see if circumstances confirm it?
- Let the Lord know that you are willing to be obedient, even if you don't yet fully understand what is going on?

- Wait to see if someone else is prepared to follow the vision first?
- Lament that you would be a lot more decisive if only (such and such) happened in your life first?

- Hold back because whenever you have stepped out in the past it has had mixed consequences?

- Come to the conclusion that some are born to be decisive but that you are not?

- Step out in faith, determined to follow any sign of the Lord's leading?
- Remember the day when you used to act like that, but have either
 - a) learned to be more discreet these days? Or
 - b) allowed fear to stop you from taking major risks at all?