

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

March 10, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Godly Women of Impact: Deborah (Judges 4)

Introduction:

A. Series introduction

Thanks for sharing your heart Leroy, and thank you Tommy for leading our Missions Committee. It's a privilege for our church to continue to be part of God's work through Leroy in the lives of high schoolers. And now God is letting us impact under-resourced youth with \$10,000 worth of Youth for Christ scholarships, so they can go to camp and be impacted by the love of Jesus and bring that impact to others.

So we praise God as He lets us participate in His kingdom work because He's placed in us a desire to impact people. We all long to make a difference in the lives of people, for our life to matter. And God has put in us gifting and talents and passion and yearnings and experiences and things we don't even know how to define. And they're not there by accident, God placed them in you so you can impact others. And not only has God placed incredible things inside of us, but His Spirit works through us, and He's given us His Word and His people so that together we can make a kingdom impact.

So I'm excited for us to look together in God's Word at some godly women of impact over the next few weeks. We all, male and female, have much to learn from the godly women of Scripture, and churches haven't always done the best job encouraging and affirming the impact of godly women. I look forward to us, by God's grace, applying things from His Word that help us grow into people of greater impact. To say it in Northwest terms, helping you take next steps with Jesus so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus, spiritual impact. Let's ask God for help.

B. Background to the book of Judges

The godly woman of impact we're looking at today is Deborah, so if you've got a Bible, turn to the Old Testament book of Judges, chapter 4. If you're new to reading the Bible, Judges is towards the front, it's the 7th book. As you turn, the big numbers you see are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers. Judges chapter 4.

Deborah lived about 3,200 years ago, 1,200 years before Jesus, during the period of the Judges, which was after Moses freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt but before Israel had kings like Saul or David. Judges was a rough period, the Israelites living ungodly lives with

terrible consequences. After years of this negative cycle of sin leading to judgment, the people would finally cry out to God, and God would respond.

I. God's people are oppressed (4:1-3)

And that's what happens in Judges chapter 4, starting in verse 1, which says:

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. ² So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. ³ Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

Israel has been participating in the evil of their Canaanite neighbors to the north, worshipping false gods and living immoral lives. And God lets Israel suffer the consequences of involvement with the wicked, as the Canaanites start oppressing Israel's northern tribes.

Chapter 5 of Judges tells us more about this, that with its superior military, led by General Sisera, the Canaanites plundered Israel's possessions and kept them from using the highways and took their weapons and trafficked their women.¹ So General Sisera was an evil warlord, and Israel has suffered under his cruelty for 20 years. 20 years ago we were worried about Y2K, think about how long ago that was, all the way to the present.

II. Deborah and Barak partner (4:4-10)

A. Deborah's service as prophet and judge

Finally, after 20 years of sin and its consequences, Israel cries out to God in repentance (1 Sam 12). 20 years of sin, yet God responds with grace. Verse 4 says:

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.

Here we meet Deborah, a prophet. In the Old Testament, prophets were people of godly character who knew the Scriptures. And God would sometimes speak through a prophet to bring a message that His people were to obey.

In verse 4 we also see that Deborah is leading, or judging, Israel. In addition to ruling on disputes, like judges do today, the judge was also the main leader of the people.

¹ See Judges chapter 5. 5:30 suggests plundering of goods, 5:6 suggests highways abandoned (perhaps due to oppressive tolls and/or plundering their goods), 5:29 suggests trafficking of women, 5:8 suggests either weapons taken (or that things are so bad you wouldn't dare show one).

Verse 5 tells us that Deborah is in the middle of Israel's territory, some distance from the Canaanite oppressors up north. From there Deborah brings needed godly wisdom and leadership. When Israelites can't work out their disputes or someone has suffered an injustice, they bring it to Deborah, who rules justly. And this godly woman's impact is about to spread as God works through her not only to bring justice within the nation, but to set in motion God's plan to bring justice to their oppressors.

B. Barak's service as military commander

It starts in verse 6, which says:

⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

Deborah, as judge, sends for Barak. Then in her prophet role Deborah gives Barak a word from God: to gather an army, lead them to Mount Tabor, and trust God to deliver Sisera's forces into their hands.

God has been graciously patient with the Caananites, they've had 20 years to turn from their wickedness, but judgment has finally come. And God wants to bring it through Barak as he assembles an army and leads it against Sisera's forces.

This is no easy ask. Israel has been beaten down for 20 years, their weapons taken, and this new army is all volunteers. On the other side, Sisera has a trained army with more troops and vastly superior weaponry. And Barak is from northern Israel, so he knows the Canaanite's power. Now to his credit, Barak is willing to lead this army, but he adds a condition in verse 8:

⁸ Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

Perhaps Barak wants Deborah to go so he can get divine guidance during the battle, or for Deborah's leadership skills, maybe other reasons, the text does not say. But whatever the reasons, Deborah has given Barak a prophetic command straight from God - to assemble and lead the army and trust God to provide the victory.

So it is wrong for Barak to say to Deborah, "I'll obey God's command only if you go with me." That's a conditional obedience. But before we judge Barak too harshly, we may remember moments when we said, or at least I've said, "God, I'll obey you in this only if..."

And Barak is not the only Old Testament figure who hesitated with a hard calling from God. Moses at the burning bush, Gideon in this book of Judges, the prophet Jeremiah, all hesitated at God's call.

C. The blessings of partnership in the Lord

In verse 9, Deborah responds to Barak's condition, saying:

⁹“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Deborah is full of faith and ready to support Barak. Back when I started going to church, the way this story was explained to me was that Deborah really shouldn't have been a prophet or leader, and that God only raised Deborah to those positions because the men of her time, like Barak, were flawed.

But as we look together at this story today, I don't think that's the best way to understand what's happening. If godly women aren't supposed to ever lead, then why, at a point of crisis when great leadership is needed, would God raise up and speak through a woman?

And in a minute, we'll see Barak show great faith and leadership. Barak is actually listed in the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 11, among the Old Testament heroes of faith, it says Barak became mighty in war. So he's at least one godly guy living in Deborah's time.

And if you read the rest of the Old Testament, you'll see that Israel is a male oriented society, yet despite less opportunity for women, there are women like Miriam, who lived with Moses and Aaron yet served as a prophet and leader among God's people. Or Huldah, who lived during the time of Jeremiah, yet God spoke through her as a prophet and Israel's king and priests consulted with Huldah about the Scriptures.

And if you read Deborah's whole story, she is portrayed positively the whole time, unlike some male judges. So the way I see this section is to thank God for gifting Barak with a strong woman of faith to encourage him in his moment of weakness.

Of course none of us should ever hesitate to carry out God's commands and purposes for us, He is Lord, and trustworthy, and able to accomplish anything. But when we hesitate, thank God that He can still accomplish His purposes, and that He gifts us with brothers and sisters in Jesus to help us. How good it is for Barak, and us, to have a faith-filled woman like Deborah encouraging us on.

III. The battle (4:10-16)

A. Deborah and Barak's faith displayed

Deborah and Barak travel 70 miles north, where Barak gathers an army from the northern tribes of Israel. Verse 10 says:

¹⁰There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him. ¹¹Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh. ¹²When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,

As Barak gathers the army, Sisera's ally, Heber, watches. Traditionally the Kenites were allies of Israel, but Heber's group broke off from their clan and become enemies of Israel. So Heber tells Sisera about the Israelite army, and Sisera responds in verse 13, which says:

¹³Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

Sisera brings his large army down by the Kishon River, a flat area good for his mighty chariots, which are the tanks of that day. It looks like a superior army moving into a strategic battle location to crush the Israelites. But remember God's promise back in verse 7, that God will lead Sisera's army to the Kishon River and give them into Israel's hands. With eyes of faith, as Deborah sees Sisera's army now at the Kishon, verse 14 says:

¹⁴Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him.

The Israelites are up on the large plateau on top of Mount Tabor, and from there, by faith, Barak leads his smaller, ill equipped forces, rushing 1,300 feet down into the valley to fight Sisera's iron chariots. This is the faith Hebrews chapter 11 honors, Barak bravely leading even though he knows the credit for the victory is going to a woman.

B. The Lord wins the battle

Verse 15 tells us that:

¹⁵At Barak's advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left.

Here in Judges 4 we aren't told how God routed Sisera's forces, but chapter 5 says that God sent a huge rain, flooding the river, so the chariots struggled in the swampy terrain.

The Canaanites worshiped the false god Baal, who they thought was lord of the storm. Pictures of Baal sometimes have him holding a club in one hand and a spear in the other to symbolize his power over thunder and lightning. But here God unleashes a storm, bringing judgment and showing who is the true Lord of the storm. As the Canaanites retreat, Barak and his army defeat the Canaanites. But what of their general?

IV. God judges and delivers (4:17-24)

A. Sisera is killed

Verse 17 answers:

¹⁷ Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.

Sisera does not fight with his men. As his army retreats west, Sisera flees northeast, seeking refuge with Heber, that ally from verse 11. Heber's not there, but we meet his wife in verse 18, which says:

¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. ¹⁹ "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. ²⁰ "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"

It's ironic that Sisera, defeated because God brought too much rain, now is begging for a bit of water. But, with Jael's help, it looks like Sisera lives to fight another day. Verse 21 says:

²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted.

Sisera, exhausted from battle, receiving his dairy and a blanket in verse 19, lays down. And we feel the dramatic tension as Jael quietly picks up a tent peg and hammer and approaches.

Back in verse 9, Deborah said that God would deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman since Barak was willing to obey God only if Deborah joined him. At that point one might have thought Deborah wanted credit for the victory, but here at the end of verse 21 we learn she was actually speaking prophetically about Jael. As the end of verse 21 says:

She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Sisera, who had done so much violence to women, dies violently at a woman's hands.

B. God delivers His people then and now

Here comes Barak in verse 22.

²² Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead. ²³ On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. ²⁴ And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

Sisera and Jabin judged by God. Now the text does not state Jael's motives in killing Sisera, and as believers in Jesus we don't engage in holy war or celebrate revenge killings, so I get how those aspects of the story can be hard.

But we understand a people oppressed for 20 years thanking God for removing their oppressors. And in the end, even today, all who continue oppressing people and opposing God will eventually face judgment.

And the good news is that Jesus came in love to take that judgment for us. Jesus, like Sisera, was nailed through by a hammer. Not because Jesus deserved judgment, but rather so He could save us from the judgment we deserve for our sin. Jesus winning against the violence of our world by bearing its violence for us, what a Savior!

Jesus paid this incredible cost not only to heal our estranged relationship with God, but our estranged relationships as men and women that go all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. Back in the beginning, before mankind sinned, God created male and female in His image and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the animals."

Conclusion:

A. Men, partner with and learn from godly women

Men and women together called to build God's kingdom as His representatives there in Genesis chapter 1. This included the home life, the being fruitful and multiplying. But it also included work in the world, the tilling the earth and subduing it and ruling over the animals. Jesus died to bring us back in to healthy relationships with God and each other so we can work together for His kingdom. And the world notices as we brothers and sisters really love and build each other up and partner to impact our world.

So as we think about “next steps” this morning, guys, let’s partner together with the ladies to make a godly impact. Deborahs and Baraks, serving together in relationship, helping everyone take next steps with Jesus. If you’re involved with our Children’s Ministry, you know we’re much better off with Pam Jenness helping lead than if I was leading it alone.

But I didn’t really realize the importance of godly women early in my walk with Jesus. Early on, I honestly wasn’t that interested in learning from godly women, but now I see the tremendous benefits. Obviously my wife Stephanie has made the greatest spiritual impact on me, but God doesn’t want a married man to only be blessed by his wife and a single man not to be blessed by any godly women, that’s not what Jesus died for.

I’m thankful I’m impacted by the godly women on the church staff as we serve together, and by many women I’ve been in care groups with over the years, and by the ways you ladies use your gifts to build me and the church up.

I didn’t understand this years ago, but I now see God designed things where I cannot achieve His intentions for my life only with the help of godly men, that I need godly women too.

And think of the incredible impact that Deborah’s faith and gifts made on her entire generation, and on Barak. The greatness within Barak emerges as he becomes willing to depend on God in faith and face his greatest challenge. God using Deborah’s faith to inspire Barak’s. Think of Barak and his volunteer army up on Mount Tabor, having spent 20 years cowering under oppression, now charging into the valley to attack Sisera’s vastly superior forces.

I love how a commentary I read on Judges 4 described this transformation, saying, “The difference made by a living faith in a living God is nothing less than sensational.”²

B. Women, we need your godly impact

Thank God that we have godly women of impact in our church family, women with a living faith in a living God, women like Sandee Walden.

Many of you know Sandee and her husband Chappy Dave, who lead a missions organization called MOTE, which stands for Missions on the Edge. MOTE ministers in prisons in five countries. Some years ago, the Dominican Republic heard of the great impact MOTE was making in Mexican prisons, so they invited Dave and Sandee to live in their country and help bring prison reform.

² *Judges and Ruth* by Cundall from the original Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series.

Dave and Sandee move to the Dominican Republic and connect with local churches and pray for the prisons and gather some ministry partners. The challenges they face are huge. Prisoners living in filth, malnourished, sick. There the inmates must pay for everything, so many resort to violence, drugs, and prostitution to support themselves.

In these dark places, Dave and Sandee begin a program of Christ-centered reform. And they start to see the Lord work, but before the reform program is really established, crime syndicates in the area start warring with each other. And so MOTE's board of directors tell Dave and Sandee, "it's become too dangerous, come back to America."

The prison reform isn't well established yet, so Sandee says to Dave, "We need to stay. If we leave now, then evil wins."

So they stay amid the danger and continue to serve. Through prayer and providing for prisoners' basic needs and evangelism and Bible studies and character development programs, and job skill development, God shows up in power and amazing, Jesus centered reform happens in these prisons!

The prisoners start ministering the gospel to other inmates, and the love of Jesus spreads. Now years later some of these prisoners are released and carry the gospel outside the prison walls, the godly impact spreading thanks to the faith of a godly woman of impact.

Local MOTE ministry partners continue the work that Dave and Sandee started, and the reason why I can't have Sandee up here sharing her story is because she and Dave are ministering in those Dominican Republic prisons today.

As in the days of Deborah, so it is today that the "The difference made by [a woman with] a living faith in a living God is nothing less than sensational." Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.