



AN INCREDIBLE WOMAN

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Judges 4:1-24
Fifth Message
John Hanneman
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The Women's Movement has been with us for 20 years or so, and all would agree that women have made dramatic advances during that span in every sphere of life. According to Naomi Wolf, the author of the new book, *The Beauty Myth*, however, women still feel they are judged primarily on their appearance. Studies indicate that women's self-esteem is still closely connected to how they look. Ms. Wolf writes: "More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition that we have ever had before, but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers."

In our study in Judges today, we will encounter Deborah, a wonderful woman of God. Obviously, her view of herself was not shaped by Hollywood. She had a clear understanding on how valuable she was in the sight of God, and she had a biblical perspective of how God wanted to use her to do marvelous things. Deborah, therefore, is a great model for us today in a world where, despite all the advances made by women, many are still confused about their role.

Our study is in chapter 4 of Judges, the narrative of Deborah and Barak, and the problems they faced in Israel. Next week, we will look at chapter 5, a poem written by Deborah, recounting this story in verse form.

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. (4:1-3, NASB)

Once again, we note the cycle of sin in Israel. As we have already seen, the first stage is apostasy. The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot God and served the Baals. This phrase, "The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD," is our transition, our bookmark phrase, and this is the fourth time we have encountered it in our studies. It seems Israel had not learned anything from their previous lessons. The next stage of this cycle is servitude: The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin ("enlightened one"), the king of Canaan. He was headquartered at Hazor, a large city and the capital of the northern Canaanite confederacy, in what was northern Israel. It's interesting to note that Joshua had defeated Jabin's grandfather and burned Hazor to the ground 100 years earlier. But Israel had let their enemies live in the land, and these people had rebuilt the city and grown strong once again.

Jabin's commander was Sisera, and his strength is de-

scribed as having 900 iron chariots. This man probably was a Philistine who had come from Greece. He was a commander at Harosheth-hagoyim, meaning "smiths of the Gentiles." The Philistines had learned how to work with iron, and they maintained a monopoly in this field. Whenever anyone wanted anything made out of iron, they had to go to Harosheth-hagoyim to get it. Israelites who wanted to buy an iron tool, or even to have farm implements sharpened, had to travel to Harosheth-hagoyim. This was how the Canaanites kept the nation enslaved. Thus Jabin and Sisera oppressed Israel for 20 years.

Chapter 5 describes this oppression and gives a picture of how bad things were in Israel.

**In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,
In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted,
And travelers went by roundabout ways.
The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel,
Until I, Deborah arose,
Until I arose, a mother in Israel.
New gods were chosen;
Then war was in the gates.
Not a shield or a spear was seen
Among forty thousand in Israel. (5:6-8)**

The highways were deserted, there was no communication, no travel. The peasantry had disappeared, which meant there was nothing produced on the land. Everybody from the country had moved to the cities for safety. There was no loyalty to Yahweh. New gods were chosen in hopes that they might deliver Israel from this oppression. There was no safety; there was war in the gates. There was no defense; no spear was seen among 40,000 Israelites. The two names mentioned, Shamgar and Jael, were not even Israelites. There was no leadership in the nation until Deborah arose. Life was fruitless, barren and bankrupt. Jesus said that everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin, and this was what Israel was experiencing—slavery under the hand of Jabin and Sisera.

After 20 years of oppression, the nation cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up a judge. Verse 4:

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. 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. (4:4-5)

Appropriately, the name Deborah means "honey bee," implying that Deborah was a sweet presence in a society that was barren, godless, immoral and decaying. Her way was committed and devoted to the Lord, and the life of God filled her and directed her path. Deborah's role in Israel was both as a prophetess and judge. There are other

prophetesses mentioned in the scriptures. Huldah and Miriam are spoken of in the OT, while Anna and the four daughters of Philip are mentioned in the NT. Deborah sat under a palm tree between Bethel and Ramah. This was the same tree under which Rebekah's nurse, who was also named Deborah, was buried. Now in order to get from the north, where all the trouble was centered, to where Deborah sat under this palm tree, one would have to pass through Shiloh, the spiritual center of leadership in the nation, where the ark of the covenant was located. One would think that in times of oppression and trouble, people would go to Shiloh to receive wisdom and insight, but they obviously bypassed Shiloh and came to this woman of God who sat under a palm tree in order to hear the voice of God.

Now when Israel cries out to God, Deborah has a plan. Verse 6.

Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and said to him, "Behold, the LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded, 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. And 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.'" Then Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "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." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him. (4:6-10)

Deborah sends for Barak and confronts him with a decision he must make. What she says to him here is really not a statement, it's a question. "Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you to go up to Mount Tabor and the Lord will give this enemy into your hands?" she asks. In other words, Barak already knew what he was supposed to do. He lived in the very heart of the area under oppression. He had already received a responsibility from God, and now Deborah calls on him to make a decision, to take action, to do what God commanded him to do. She had a clear understanding of her role. Perhaps she wanted to pick up the sword herself and lead the nation of Israel into battle, but she knew that that was not her place. She realized that God wanted a man in leadership against the Canaanites, and this was why she called Barak and was willing to give him her support.

Notice Barak's reluctance. He says to Deborah, "If you will go with me, then I will go. But if you won't go with me, I won't go." Barak was like Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah. He was low in faith. The gas gauge was on empty and he needed the help of another. He did not think he had the resources required for what God wanted him to do. And notice that Deborah does not chastise him, reject him, put him down or rebuke him. She encourages him and tells him, "I will go with you." She says that there will be one limitation or provision, however: "The honor will not be yours on the journey you are about to take. The honor will be with a woman, but I will go with you, Barak,

and I will support you and be by your side." Barak calls Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh and they gather together 10,000 men. The stage is set. "Honey Bee" and "Lightning" are going up against "Enlightened One" with his 900 chariots, for the heavyweight championship of the world! This would be like Cupertino High playing Notre Dame in football!

Verse 11:

Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.

Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said 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." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. 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. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.

Now Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid." And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him. And he said to her, "Stand in the doorway of the tent, and it shall be if anyone comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there anyone here?' that you shall say, 'No.'" But Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died. And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." And he entered with her, and behold Sisera was lying dead with the tent peg in his temple.

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. (4:11-24)

Deborah and Barak go to Mount Tabor, located at the end of the Megiddo Valley—Armageddon, in other words, the place where great battles have been fought throughout history. Alexander the Great fought there. So did Napoleon, and General Allenby. Other important battles will be waged there also. At the end of the valley, Mount Tabor rises about 1800 feet above the valley floor. You would think that this might be an advantageous position, a van-

tage point where an army could command the valley floor. But, Israel had become sitting ducks. This was ludicrous. Sisera could bring his 900 chariots, surround Mount Tabor, cut off all Israel's supply lines, and simply wait and starve them out. What an absurd battle plan! Sisera got wind of this rebellion and set out through the valley with his 900 chariots, probably anticipating a great victory.

But suddenly, something amazing happens. In order to understand this we have to turn to chapter 5, verse 19:

**The kings came and fought;
Then fought the kings of Canaan
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
O my soul, march on with strength. (5:19-21)**

As Sisera and his 900 chariots were coming through the valley floor, suddenly the heavens opened. God sent a torrential downpour of rain down on the valley. The River Kishon was a dried up riverbed, but suddenly it sprang to life and water flooded the valley so that the whole area became a sea of mud and water. At this point Deborah tells Barak, "Charge! The Lord has given Sisera into your hands!" So the 10,000 Israelites charged down off the mountaintop. The 900 chariots become bogged down in the mud, and the Canaanites had to abandon them and run for safety. The Israelites followed them as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and there they destroyed them completely. The chariots were neutralized, and Israel had a great victory. The text says that it was the Lord who did this; faith was what was required of Israel.

In a fitting epilogue, Sisera tries to escape, and he arrives at the tent of Heber, the Kenite. There's peace between Jabin and Heber, so he thinks he's safe. Jael meets him and says, "Come on in and take a little nap." She gives him milk to drink and deceives him through her hospitality. When he falls asleep, we learn that Jael is very adept with a hammer and peg. Deborah's word is fulfilled. The honor did not go to Barak, but to a woman named Jael: "So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan." At the end of chapter 5, the text says that the land was undisturbed for 40 years.

As we have already seen, the book of Judges is rich in spiritual truth. I want to talk about two areas of application today. First, with regard to our enemies. God is able to defeat very powerful enemies in our life, even those that are fortified with iron chariots. There are certain enemies we're willing to take on because we think we can defeat them, but there are others that are so strong we don't even bother because they are fortified with 900 iron chariots. Sitting here this morning are people who are oppressed with enemies. Perhaps the enemy is the pain of a divorce. Perhaps it is the pressure of being a single parent. Perhaps it's the anguish and the hurt of being abused or molested as a child. Perhaps it's loneliness or rejection. Perhaps it's a troubled marriage. But there's a tremendous message of hope in this passage. God can defeat powerful enemies in your life! To do so, he is able to unleash all the forces of creation if necessary. The stars fight from heaven for the cause of our living God. "The LORD," says our text, "has given Sisera into your hands. Behold, the LORD has gone

out before you. On that day, God subdued Jabin and all the Canaanites." Notice that the text is not about what man does. The focus is on what God does when his children step out in faith. Paul says, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph." He says also in 2 Corinthians, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor 10:3-4).

God can do amazing things! The question we have to ask ourselves is, "How big is our God?" When we face powerful enemies, the root of our problem is usually not physical, but spiritual. What we need is not an iron smelter, but a living faith in God. Just like Barak, at times we are reluctant to step out in faith. Just like Barak, we do not believe that God can deliver us. But we learn from our text that when we go against our enemies, God sends an encourager, a comforter, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who can lead us and direct us through these battles.

Last week, I heard a young woman share about the journey God had taken her on. She talked about the darkness and the oppression that she had been through her entire childhood, through her teenage years and into her twenties. She shared about how desperately she had tried to be released from this oppression, but that the harder she tried, the more desperate she became. Then she told us how last week, finally, she had given everything over to God. She came to the conclusion that she could not defeat these enemies, so she gave the whole situation over to God. And she told us, through tears of joy, that last week God had broken the chains of her oppression. For the first time in her life she felt freedom from oppression and a closeness to God. The iron chariots can be neutralized! God can defeat enemies that seem invincible.

Our text gives us another area of application, and this has to do with the ministry of men and women. We live in confusing times with respect to the roles of men and women, but God has designed each to have a very valuable ministry, as we have learned from our text. God called Barak to be a leader. Scripture is very clear that God has called men to be leaders in the home, to be leaders in the body of Christ. But oftentimes we are reluctant to do this, as was the case with Barak. Like Barak, men at times lack the spiritual sensitivity and the faith that is required. And some women who are rich in faith will gladly pick up the reins of leadership, if men will allow them to do so. But men: God has called you to be leaders. It's no great honor, it's a responsibility. It's the way God has designed you to function. Now this does not mean you are to be dictators or tyrants. Yours is a high calling—to be shepherds and caretakers in the home and in the church. You are designed to be Christlike in your leadership. You're called to sacrifice, to give up your own wishes in order to take on this responsibility that God has given you. Paul instructs men in 1 Timothy, "I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Tim 2:8). This does not come naturally, but it is something that God has called men to do, through his grace.

In addition to the ministry of Barak, our text gives a marvelous, rich picture of Deborah, this woman of God. She models perfectly the text of Proverbs 31—a gifted, talented, capable woman with a deep faith in God. She's a prophetess and a judge, an extremely valuable ministry,

yet she understands that she was not to be the leader in Israel. God had called Barak to that role, and she was content with that. Deborah wanted a man to act on the basis of Scripture and on the basis of faith; she saw her job as being a helper to a man who was reluctant to be a man. She describes herself as a mother in Israel, a nurturer, an encourager, a supporter who could build up the faith in a man.

Even though Deborah and Barak were not married, I think this is a great word for marriage. Marriage is one of the saddest areas of struggle and pain today. Even our own congregation is not immune. Now the root of this problem can often be traced to a lack of leadership and tension over that lack in the home. Men are reluctant to lead, and women really don't want to, but they feel they are forced to. A pattern soon develops. A wife can grow resentful and she begins to nag and criticize. She sees her role as pointing out all the failures in her husband's life. She tells him all the ways he blows it, and he feels pressure to perform. He feels like a failure, so he withdraws and abdicates even more of his leadership. There is nothing more harmful to marriage than this type of behavior. It's absolutely devastating. But this wasn't how Deborah functioned. She saw herself as an encourager, a supporter. She knew there was no limit to the good a woman could do for a man when she saw her role as one of support for his faith and his leadership.

Now we need to deal with this in a godly way, and the way we can begin is to admit that tension over the issue of leadership is a problem. Genesis tells us that, following the fall of Adam and Eve, it's going to be a problem. We need to acknowledge this. Then we need to decide to encourage one another in the roles and ministries that God has given to us, and to regard them as valuable and essential in the sight of God. We need to serve one another, to build up one another so that both men and women will profit from who God designed us to be. We need to work together for the common good. It's interesting that in Hebrews 11, the hall of fame of faith, Barak's name is mentioned and Deborah's is not, although she succeeded in making him a man of faith. So to the men, I say: God has called you to be leaders. It's going to be difficult, but that's your calling. To the women, I say: God has called you to support and encourage the leadership of men, even when there's failure, even when there's disappointment. Do not become negative, but continue to build up and encourage.

Several women in my life have been a great encouragement to me. My grandmother prayed that I would become a Christian. After I came to Christ, I read her Bible and found a list of people she had prayed for. By the time she

died, every one of those people had become believers in Jesus Christ. Shortly after I became a believer I visited the home where she spent her last days. When I entered her little room in the back of the house, I felt the presence of God very powerfully. I knew then that the prayers of this godly woman must have had a great influence on me.

The first Bible study I ever taught came about through the encouragement of a woman I worked with. I was a brand new Christian, and she was much older in the faith than me. One day, she said to me, "Let's start a Bible study." I said, "That's great. Who do you think ought to lead it?" She replied, "I think you should." She supported, encouraged and prayed for me, one who had very little faith.

Another time when I was working as an engineer, the people I worked with developed a very negative attitude towards the project on which we were working. I was so concerned that I wrote a letter to my co-workers to help change the attitude and tell them why work was so frustrating. The letter was very spiritual in nature, as I referred to the curse in the garden after Adam and Eve had sinned. One of the women who was working with me was a Christian. When I showed her the letter, she typed it and passed it around to everybody. I would never have done that; I didn't have that kind of faith. The letter had a very favorable response, but it was all through the ministry of a woman who had faith.

But the woman I owe the most to is my wife of 17 years. She is my best critic. I can't hide anything from her. I'm not the world's greatest leader, but when she supports me and affirms me, the effect on me is unbelievable. There are things I have done that I never could have done without her support and encouragement. I feel there is nothing I could not do if she is for me. Rather than putting me down for something I've failed at, if she supports me and builds me up, it puts wind in my sails and I feel free and rich in God. My wife has a simple faith, but it's a very deep faith, a reservoir I have drawn upon continually over the years.

What a great story, this saga of Deborah and Barak! It is a story of hope and encouragement. Here we see that we have reason to hope although we face strong and fortified enemies. Through the power and grace of God we can defeat enemies in our life that we would not otherwise even think of facing. Further, this story encourages us as men and women to accept the ways God as designed for us to function, both in the home and in the church. May God grant us the insight to see how valuable these ministries are, and the faith to trust him for his design.

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