

“Heroes of the Faith: Deborah – ‘Taking the Lead’”

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Judges 4:1-15

Deborah

Jdg 4:1 After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD.

Jdg 4:2 So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim.

Jdg 4:3 Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

Jdg 4:4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

Jdg 4:5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.

Jdg 4:6 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 the way to Mount Tabor.

Jdg 4:7 I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’ ”

Jdg 4:8 Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

Jdg 4:9 “Very well,” Deborah said, “I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh,

Jdg 4:10 where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.

Jdg 4:11 Now 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 Zaananim near Kedesh.

Jdg 4:12 When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,

Jdg 4:13 Sisera gathered together his nine hundred iron chariots and all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River.

Jdg 4:14 Then 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, followed by ten thousand men.

Jdg 4:15 At Barak’s advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. [NIV}

Times of crisis demand strong leadership. Thankfully, Israel had such a leader in Deborah. Prophetess, poet, musician, singer, counselor, judge, military advisor, and servant of God, Deborah was just the person God was looking for to deliver his people from trouble. She was strong and fearless and faithful. If you have any doubt, just look at that picture of Deborah on the bulletin – now there is one tough lady!

Given women’s lowly status in that day, it may seem a bit surprising that Deborah should rise to such prominence and become such a strong national leader. But her God-given leadership gifts were undeniable. The people flocked to her for wisdom and counsel as she sat under her palm tree. She helped people settle their disputes and was well-respected for her discernment and good judgment. She may not have possessed a formal title nor was she officially appointed to position of leadership, but she had a powerful influence on people for the good and people naturally followed her. So much of effective leadership is that way – it is informal rather than

formal. That is to say, leadership is not necessarily a function of title or position. Just because you have been appointed a leader doesn't mean you are one. You can be leader and have no one following. No, leadership is earned; you are leader because of your positive influence and because people *want* to follow you. Deborah was just such a leader and God used her in a mighty way.

Of course, God will use anyone, be they young or old, male or female, Jew or Gentile ... to accomplish his purposes. And we have seen that God has used a number of women to do his bidding –Rahab, Ruth, Abigail, Esther – to name a few – each heroes of the faith and each of whom took a lead in solving some problem or dealing with some crisis. Here in Deborah it nice to see another woman – a very strong woman - exercising leadership in a way that makes a difference in the life of the people and truly glorifies God.

This morning let's talk briefly about leadership and the qualities that make leaders effective, using Deborah as a model. But before we do so, let me start out by saying that what I have to say about leadership in these next few moments really applies to everyone, not just to pastors and elders and CEO's and managers and various leaders of organizations. We may not fancy ourselves as the "leader" type – but there are times in life when each of us is called to take the lead and exercise influence over others to get something done or to tackle some problem. Sometimes in a time of need or a crisis, we are called by God to take the lead whether we think of ourselves as a leader or not. So we all can learn from someone like Deborah, who provides a model for good leadership.

What was it that made Deborah such an effective leader? Are there some lessons for us?

Well, for one thing, she was a great listener.

She spent a lot of time quietly listening to God. And she listened to her people as they shared their suffering and their confusion and their sense of abandonment. Times were truly tough. The Israelites faced violence and danger every day because enemy troops were in the streets. No one felt safe or secure. Village life among the Israelites was nearly impossible. In despair, they seemed to have lost the will to defend and fight for their community. The Canaanites would parade their armed soldiers and their 900 iron chariots and the Israelites would lose heart. Sadly, so much of their trouble they brought down upon themselves, for they ignored their God and gave in to the pagan practices of their neighbors. They were losing their identity, which was a source of their strength. Deborah carefully listened to these tales of suffering and woe and her compassion for her people grew.

Under that palm tree, she surely spent many an hour in prayer, trying to discern what God was saying to her and to her people. Deborah had cultivated the spiritual gift of discernment. For you see, Deborah was a prophetess. In those days a prophet or prophetess was not primarily

one who would tell the future; they were not “future-tellers” but “*forth*-tellers.” They would “tell-*forth*” the word of God for that day – proclaiming God’s will in the present. They were so in touch with God that they became in effect, God’s mouthpiece. A prophetess would tell the people what God was about to do, and what they most needed to do. And sometimes, of course, people really didn’t want to hear it – prophets for that reason were not always popular.

It was while she was praying and pondering under her palm tree that the word of God came to Deborah, receiving clear direction from the Lord that Israel was to engage in battle with the Canaanite army.

The most effective leaders are those who listen to God and to people and who take the time to carefully examine the situation and all that is required. Deborah did not act rashly or impulsively; it came out of a process of deep, prayerful discernment. She was an excellent listener. So that when she the direction came, she could hear it, and she was confident that it was from the Lord and she knew what she had to do.

But Deborah was not only a great listener; she was a woman of action. She was willing to get up from under her palm tree and get involved. She found a man by the name of Barak, who had some military skills and told him to gather an army of ten thousand men and to head for the Kishon River. There, she said, God would lead the enemy army into his hands and God would give him the victory.

Barak wasn’t too sure about this grand plan, and said to her, “*If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.*” He wanted the prophetess by his side in battle. He and the troops needed her faith and her confidence – her inspiration.

To her credit, Deborah said she would go. She was willing to get her hands dirty. She would not ask anyone to do something that she herself was not willing to do. So many people who fancy themselves to be leaders tell people what to do, only to sit safely on the sidelines. The best leaders pitch right in and they inspire confidence as they take action. General Stonewall Jackson was just such a leader. (Civil War buff that I am, he came first to mind; He was a devout Presbyterian by the way.) Here was a commander who was not content to remain behind the lines. He rode into the middle of the fray and he inspired such confidence, his men stood like a stone wall before the onslaught of Union soldiers.

Leaders are willing to get their hands dirty – they take action and get involved. They don’t simply command from on high.

There’s a great and true story that comes out of the Revolutionary War. A group of soldiers was trying desperately to move a huge piece of timber. They were struggling and could hardly get it moved. A young corporal standing there with his two stripes shouted, “*One, two, three, heave.*”

One, two, three, heave.” Another man rode up and said to him, *“Help them. They are struggling. They are not going to be able to do it.”* *“I’m a corporal, sir,”* said the young fellow. The stranger got off his horse, went over to the crowd and said, *“Let’s see if we can move this together.”* And together they moved it. The man soon got back on his horse, turned to the corporal, and said, *“Corporal, whenever you have your men trying to move something that difficult, send for the commander in chief.”* In fact, the person who was on the horse was George Washington.

Now there was a leader. Deborah was like that. It’s the exercise of servant leadership. She was willing to get involved and serve with everyone else and her faith and courage and inspired confidence. She had a take charge, “we can do it” attitude. And though the problems seemed overwhelming – the enemy was exceedingly powerful (900 iron chariots to zero!), she knew God would bring victory.

So often God’s people talk all around a problem and talk it to death. They look at the problems and the obstacles and they shrink before the task and never do get around to taking action (we are good at that!). That’s why you and I need leaders like Deborah who will not allow us to remain under the shade of a palm tree. They sound the call to action, they are first to get involved, and they inspire confidence as they do! British General Montgomery defined leadership as *“ the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence.”* By that definition, Deborah was a great leader.

Deborah was a great listener, connected as she was to God and to people; and she was a doer – a woman of action who wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. She inspired confidence.

But most importantly, she desired only to serve and please God. So many leaders are in it for themselves. They seek success, or power, or control or pleasure or fame or money. And if they are not pleasing themselves, then they are only trying to please others at the cost of their own integrity and their own values. In the end, all that matters is pleasing God. He alone is Lord. He alone is Boss. He is the Leader. As Rick Warren put it in his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life – it is not about you.*

You see, Deborah always had this sense that she was only responding to God’s call. She was constantly asking God what she needed to do and where she needed to be. Being faithful to God’s call was the foremost thing in her mind and heart.

The writer George MacDonald has said somewhere that real Christian leaders are people who are moved at *“God’s pace and in God’s time to God’s place, not because they fancy themselves there, but because they are drawn...”*

Genuine leaders operate out of a sense of calling – they are drawn to serve God, not merely to serve themselves or to feed the fires of their own personal ambition.

And if our desire in responding to God's call is to please him and to make him smile, then we will be quick to give him the credit for the successes we enjoy, for he is the source of all good gifts and he makes all things possible.

And Deborah does exactly that. If Israel won, it was only because God gave the victory. God was the true leader of the people and deserved all the praise and glory.

In fact, after Barak leads the people to victory, he and Deborah erupt in song:

*When the princes in Israel take the lead,
When the people willingly offer themselves – praise the Lord!
Hear this, you kings! Listen you rulers!
I, even I, will sing to the Lord;
I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song. [from Judges 5]*

(The song sung by Deborah and Barak takes up the whole of the fifth chapter of the Book of Judges, and it is thought by scholars to be one of the oldest pieces of literature in the Bible – composed shortly the events took place.)

Dear people of God, there will be times when you and I will have a God-given opportunity to serve God in a special way. It will be a job that God wants done. It may be a problem that needs to be solved, a relationship that needs to be repaired, a value that needs to be defended, a cause that needs to be supported, a mission that needs to be undertaken. You and I will be asked to take the lead. What sort of a leader will we prove to be?

We may not be a prophetess like Deborah. We may not have as many talents as she. But God can still use us. Will we be ready when he calls? Are you and I spending adequate time listening to Him? Are we engaging in regular prayer and study? Are we sensitizing ourselves to the needs of people around us? Are we aware of the issues and difficulties people are dealing with so that we can reach out in appropriate ways? Are we willing to heed God's call when the opportunity to serve comes our way and are we willing to take action and get involved? Are we willing to step out in faith and confidence knowing that God is with us? Are you and I desiring to please God and God alone, giving him the praise?

"O Lord, when you ask us to take the lead in some task you want to have done, help us to do it in such a way that you are truly pleased. We want to follow you, as Deborah did. Even more, we want to follow you as Jesus did, who followed you perfectly. Amen."