

The Book of Judges

Lesson 8 - Chapter 5

We began Judges chapter 5 last week; a section of Scripture called the Song of Deborah and we're going to carefully dissect this song today as scholars have long recognized its importance. It is a victory song, an anthem of freedom and liberation because it was written to commemorate a great moment in Israel's history. It's also a strong summation of what gets God's people into trouble and what they must do to be delivered.

Yet despite the admiration shown for some throughout the song, and the heroic actions by certain central characters in that battle at the Kishon River that even God is depicted as applauding and blessing them, it must all be taken with a grain of salt and within the context of a "relative" good and not a "pure" good. That is in this era of the Judges the various Israelite tribes had wandered so far from YHWH that for some of them to do something that at least resembled godliness seemed so very pure when compared to the abject wickedness that had become their typical way of life. Contrast this with Joshua and the first generation of Israelites to crossover the Jordan and take the Promised Land; although they had a few individual failures and missteps, they were firmly rooted in the ways of the Torah and strived dutifully to be obedient to God in every way. As usual as it was for Israel to ignore God's laws during the era of the Shophetim, it was as equally unusual for them to terribly misbehave during the conquest era of Joshua. What existed during Joshua's time of leadership was not necessarily the absolute, heavenly ideal of good leadership and service to the Lord, but it was closer than any group had attained since the time of Adam and Eve. It was close enough to be held up as a very good example for all future leaders of Israel to follow and won't even be imitated until Yeshua returns to set up His Kingdom. Thus even when the doing of so-called "good" occurred during the era of the Judges, it seemed to usually be tainted by sin in some way or another.

It's been awhile, but quite some time ago I talked with you about the various kinds of literature that forms the Bible. There is narrative, prose, accounting records, poetry, legal language, and song to name a few. And it is key to understand which kind of literature we're looking at if we're to take it in the proper context. Historical narrative (for instance) ought to be taken the most literally as it is meant to impart information and facts to us. Poetry was used to help more easily remember and transmit an event or a principle to future generations, and some liberties were taken with words so that the proper rhythm and rhyme could be achieved.

Song is usually employed to commemorate an especially important event and it is designed so it can be recited (sung) simultaneously by many as a communal celebration. But song also tends to be that form of biblical literature where the most liberties with the realities of its subject are taken; exaggeration is the norm and primarily the more emotion-packed or aggrandizing details are included; it is anything but a balanced view that is offered. But the

nature of a song is also that it is more sensitive and relative to a specific time or era than most other forms of literature. By sensitive and relative I mean that songs tend to capture and reflect the specific mood of a certain rather small slice of history.

By way of example: during the first half of the 1940's songs in the US (and in most nations) captured a mood that totally revolved around WWII. The mood ranged from hope, to grave concern for family, to political themes of unity and sacrifice, to sad songs remembering loved ones that were far away or lost in the conflict. The meaning and impact of certain words and phrases of the 40's songs can only be understood in relation to WWII. During the 50's era the songs also captured the mood of our nation and it was a different mood than the 40's because we were at relative peace; now it was a "happy days" mood of relief, and frivolousness, and innocence, and of enjoying the simple life. The songs of the late 60's and early 70's reflected a mood of rebellion against authority and traditions and a mistrust of institutions, a free-for-all lifestyle, the new drug oriented culture of self-pleasure and the resulting darkness and depression of the human soul. The point is that the songs from every era have their own sense to them, and one will not understand it unless one understands the realities of that particular time. I wonder how someone 500 years from now might attempt to interpret Rap? It will be utterly nonsensical without a thorough understanding of the times. The same goes in spades for the Song of Deborah.

Scholars have had a very difficult time in making sense out of the 5th chapter of Judges just because it is a song, it reflects a short slice of Israelite history, and so it takes many liberties with words and phrases. Thus when The Song of Deborah is examined stanza-by-stanza by taking the usual fully literal high road of Scriptural study or exegesis we will instead find ourselves lost in the woods. Some of the lines of this song are so difficult to unravel that there is nothing even approaching a majority or consensus view of it's meaning. And I think that indeed this problem is primarily owed to ignoring the era, ignoring the changing and evolving Hebrew culture, and simply trying instead to translate words as though history was static and the context of events didn't matter.

I will remind you that I am teaching this entire book of Judges based on my confident belief that we are reliving the time of the Judges. The circumstances are so eerily similar that it ought to send shivers up our spines. We are in a time when enormous segments of both Judaism and Christianity have so embraced a pagan world that those of us who are determined to stick to the unchanging truths of the word of God are seen as ignorant and even haters of peace and humanity. Our religions are as fractured as were the tribes of Israel; we have thousands upon thousands of denominations that spend more time denouncing and ridiculing one another than praying for and loving one another. And what we need is for those who love God to cry out and ask Him to send us a deliverer (just like in the time of the Judges). The era of the Judges ended with the setting up of a united Israelite Kingdom under one king: David. The era we are in today will end with the setting up of a united ideal Israelite Kingdom that the bible calls The Kingdom of God; and it too will be under one king, Yeshua, the descendant of David.

Since we read all of Judges 5 last week, lets take it in bite-sized chunks today.

RE-READ JUDGES 5:1 – 5

The first verse speaks of Deborah and Barak singing this song; this does not mean that Barak helped to compose it. Rather it is only that Barak was a nearly equal partner with Deborah in this victory so he gets nearly equal billing; other verses make it abundantly clear that Deborah wrote this song. In fact Barak is often included as a Judge, right along with Deborah.

Immediately in verse 2 we get some strange words that are usually translated into what amounts to little more than a good guess at what it means. This is because where in most bibles we typically find the words, **“and the leaders in Israel dedicate themselves”** in fact literally it says, “When men let grow their hair in Israel”. In Hebrew the phrase is ***biphroa peraoth***. I’m not so sure that “leaders” is what is intended here and neither are many of the Hebrew sages. This phrase definitely has something to do with hair, but exactly what it’s getting at is difficult to discern; it doesn’t fit any standard or understood Hebrew idiom. This strange phrase is representative of the reason for my lengthy preface this morning about how it is key to recognize that the meaning of a song is singularly dependent on the narrow slice of time in which it was created. Obviously hair was carrying some kind of commonly understood meaning among the northern Israelite tribes at the time of its composition.

Hair has always been a symbol of strength and purity among the Hebrews; we see this especially demonstrated in the vows of the Nazarite who must not cut his/her hair during the entire period of their vow. And then when the vow has ended they closely cropped their hair and offered it as part of a purification sacrifice at the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Temple (that was still traditional in Yeshua’s day and continued until the Temple’s destruction in 70 A.D. as we find St. Paul participating in this exact kind of ritual in the book of Acts). I think it is no coincidence that it won’t be long (in the book of Judges) before we read of the Shofet Samson and his mystical hair during this general era; hair on men was apparently still carrying some type of heightened spiritual or religious meaning among the northern tribes. We also know that the Canaanite men tended at that time to keep short hair, and trimmed beards (even braided) and so it would have been logical that Israel ought to pretty much do the opposite so as to maintain a distinct and separate visual identity; unfortunately just as Believers today tend to be outwardly indistinguishable from non-Believers, so it was that the Hebrews in the era of the ***Shophetim*** sought to look and behave like their Canaanite neighbors.

I personally see this matter of the hair as a reference by Deborah to extolling the virtues of the northern Israelite tribes who showed up to do battle by adopting a Nazarite-like dedication (uniquely Torah oriented) to renewed Holy War, and to shunning the appearance of the Canaanites that Israelite society in general had adopted, and thus moving back towards God and away from the Canaanites in the so doing. Since such a vow is completely voluntary, I think the association between the hair and a Nazarite orientation also fits with the next phrase that speaks of the people volunteering, or better, offering themselves willingly (which again is precisely a Nazarite-like trait).

And what I just offered as my take on verse 2 also seems to fit well with the final words of that same verse, “you should all bless YHWH”. In other words some courageous Hebrew men

have seen the problem with Israelite society and realized that by behaving in such a wicked manner God would leave them to their troubles. So they repented, took on more pious ways (akin to Nazarites), and volunteered and rose up in religious fervor to go against the tide; and in the so doing they led the way to reviving God's favor with Israel (and then the Lord responded by leading them to victory over their Canaanite oppressors). Therefore Deborah's conclusion is that the general population of Israel should bless the Lord for setting all of this into motion and bringing about victory for Israel.

But the word that is often translated as "bless" (where it says "you should all bless YHWH") is misleading; really it more means to kneel in praise and adoration than to "bless" is the way we moderns think about the term "bless". So Israel should submit with bowed heads before God in praise for what He has done. Interestingly what we actually have here is a play on words because this is a song; the Hebrew word chosen to explain what Israel's logical response to their deliverance should be is **baraq** (similar to the name of the Israelite military leader, Barak). There is a minor spelling difference in that Barak the man is spelled bet-reysh-koof, while **barak** that means to praise is spelled bet-reysh-chaf. When spoken they are nearly indistinguishable. Here is the bottom line: Devorah is rightly giving God all the credit for their deliverance from Yavin King of Hatzor, and Sisera military leader of the Canaanite allied forces.

In verse 3 Deborah turns her attention to the gentiles. The kings and princes mentioned were certainly gentiles because Israel had no royalty at this time. Essentially Devorah is telling her audience that while gentile kings and princes give praises to their false gods and deities, and were likely to be wondering which of the Mystery Babylon gods sided with Israel in their victory, that she as the main leadership figure of Israel was appropriately praising Yehoveh, the one-god of Israel with the implication that the gentiles ought to learn from this and do the same.

Next Deborah sings of YHWH going out from Seir in Edom. Now there has always been this interesting connection between God and the area of Mt. Seir in Edom. Edom of course was the territory of Jacob's twin brother Esau. And the connection is that often Mt. Sinai is said to be located in the direction of Seir.

CJB Deuteronomy 33:2 "ADONAI came from Sinai; from Se'ir he dawned on his people, shone forth from Mount Pa'ran; and with him were myriads of holy ones; at his right hand was a fiery law for them.

I bring this up once again as yet another probable nail in the coffin of Mt. Sinai supposedly being located on the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, marked by St. Katherine's Monastery, as is Christian tradition since about 350 A.D. Rather all archeological and biblical evidence is that Mt. Sinai is actually somewhere on the western end of the Arabian Peninsula. And Seir (and Edom) is on the northwestern-most portion of the Arabian Peninsula.

In any case here in around the 12th century BC (which is about the time of Deborah and Barak) we have this clearly stated connection with Mt. Sinai being in the general direction of Edom.

The image created by verses 4 and 5 is of God as a divine warrior who so powerfully comes out to fight for His people Israel that the earth quakes and the sky shakes. While the earth quaking and sky shaking is probably mostly poetic hyperbole, it is in reference to the ancient mindset of just WHY the clouds poured down torrents of rain. The heavy rain was certainly NOT fanciful, it was actually this unexpected cloudburst that swayed the battle in Barak's favor and was the Canaanites and Sisera's undoing. Speaking of that, what reality there actually is to the earth quaking and sky shaking may well have been that it was from a violent thunderstorm directly overhead. This battle at the Kishon River probably took place in the summer, when the River was dry or only barely flowing and the only rain to fall in Israel is from the occasional thunderstorm; but it is also when you can get deadly and amazingly powerful flashfloods as a result. Those of us who live in Florida have experienced the earth quaking and sky shaking awe of lightening and the canon-like thunder of a severe thunderstorm where 4 or 5 inches of rain can fall in less than an hour.

I was in Israel 3 or 4 years ago when an enormous flashflood suddenly wiped out a substantial bridge and about 100 yards of the main highway that routed along the Dead Sea. Boulders the size of trucks were rolled down what had been up to that moment a wadi, a dry river bed, from the mountains where they ran fell that were a couple of miles away. Two hikers were also killed in that event. It appears this is what happened to Sisra and his army near the base of Mt. Tabor.

Let's read some more of Chapter 5:

RE-READ JUDGES 5:6 - 11

Verse 6 describes not only the dire situation in the land before the battle but also draws a contrast between the awesome glory and power of the holiness of God that Israel experienced at Mt. Sinai, versus the darkness, degradation and disgrace (punctuated by idolatry) into which Israel had sunk before the ministry of Deborah.

Reference is made to Shamgar the Shophet who was used by God to liberate some of the southern Israelite tribes from the rule of the Philistines (even though it lasted only for about 1 generation). Shamgar probably predated Deborah by only a few years. The mention of Yael, the Kenite woman who killed Sisra, is meant to operate in conjunction with the mention of Shamgar to show that a) the oppression of Yavin King of Hatzor was not new but had been ongoing for several years, b) that since Yael was contemporary to the song that the conditions of the Canaanite subjugation only officially ended upon Yael's assassination of Sisra, and c) it shows us that conditions were quite different between the northern and southern Israelite tribes. While Shamgar was liberating the south against the Philistines, the northern Israelite tribes were suffering a different kind of oppression from a different group of Canaanites. Since we know that the oppression of the Israelites was a direct result of God allowing or causing the tribes to be oppressed as a punishment for their idolatry and disobedience; we can readily see that no tribe (north or south) was living according to Torah nor were any exempt from God's disdain.

The precarious position of the northern tribes is that they couldn't even use the main roads to

operate their trade caravans for fear of attack by the enemy; thus they had to use the byways (paths located off the beaten track and that made travel difficult at best). The leaders of Israel shrunk back in fear and either simply capitulated to the Canaanites or became invisible and inactive. Either way Israel had no real leaders to help them because the tribal leaders had only self-preservation at any cost in mind.

Then (says verse 7) Deborah arose as a “mother” in Israel. This is one of those Middle Eastern colloquialisms. Recall that the Patriarchs of Israel were called “the fathers” of Israel. Well, no men would stand up and lead so God raised up a female leader, Deborah, and thus she was the “mother” of Israel. She would shepherd Israel, put herself at risk for her children’s sake, dare to defy the Canaanites, and be bold to assert to Israel that they had gone terribly astray when nobody wanted to hear it. Good leaders don’t concern themselves with popularity as much as doing what is right and good for their charges.

Verse 8 explains that faced with these daunting circumstances Israel’s reaction was NOT to turn back to the God who redeemed them from Egypt, gave them the Torah, and then gave them a land of their own, but to choose OTHER gods. This meant two things: 1) some chose the gods of their oppressors; that is they simply appeased the Canaanites by giving in and essentially becoming Canaanites by their worshipping their oppressors’ gods. 2) Others appealed to gods who weren’t necessarily the gods of their oppressors, (but were nonetheless Mystery Babylon gods) in hopes that these gods would show them favor and somehow liberate them from Yavin. Inherent in this choice is abandoning YHWH. Saying that there was not a spear or a shield among the northern tribes does NOT mean that they had no weapons; rather it means that they had no courage or the fortitude to fight for their own liberty. They refused to rise up in civil disobedience because they weren’t prepared for the risk and the sacrifice.

And says verse 8, Deborah gives much of the credit for Israel’s turn-round and subsequent victory to what the CJB calls “Israel’s leaders” for standing up and doing what was right in the face of great danger because their brave and pious actions roused many others to accept their call to arms. These leaders are not to be confused with the ancestral Tribal chieftains and elders of Israel although likely many of them came forward. Rather this is a reference back to verse 2 and those men who “grew their hair”; those who offered themselves for service to God (like a Nazarite would) in the form of offering-up themselves to try and lead their people back to the ways of Torah and towards actively fighting their captors instead of just becoming as one of them.

OK, now for a brief sermon-ette. I am praying that the wheels are turning in your minds and that the Lord is stirring your hearts as you hear the story of the Judges because I will not cease from saying that we are currently reliving that era. Passivity and tolerance and discouragement was the lot of Israel BECAUSE a) their leaders stopped leading except to fulfill personal agendas, and b) the people rationalized their falling away from God by merely denying it or blaming it on circumstances beyond their control. And the Song of Deborah especially makes that point.

Politics has always been the human way to lead (even before the term “politics” was invented). Even among despots they usually arrive in power because of alliances they have

created or because they deceive the people they now rule through false promises. The want of personal power, control, and wealth is generally the motive of a political style of leadership whether it is a monarchy, a dictatorship, or a democracy. They try to determine what appeals to the people and then give them enough of it to at least get into power, and sometimes to hang on to that power a little longer. What, precisely, it is that appeals to the people doesn't really matter as long as it isn't something that curtails the political leaders' aspirations indefinitely. Passivity of the masses is the goal of the political leader, because passivity means the people are not resisting that leader's philosophies and agenda. Intolerance is the mode of the leadership, while tolerance is the leadership's requirement set down for the people.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Shepherding, on the other hand, is the godly description of how to lead. Shepherding in no way means mild, meek, or powerless leadership that depends on the goodness of the masses. Rather (from a biblical perspective) it means that the leadership's goal is first to obey the Lord and His commands, and second to do all for the welfare of the people. A godly leader understands that by their personal obedience to God the people's best interests WILL automatically be attained. But by definition that means that the leader will give up his will to serve the Lord's will; he will suffer the most, will not always be popular, nor is he or she likely to amass personal wealth. The agendas for the nation are set by the divine not the human mind. Action among the people is always needed, as the leader is only there to administer God's justice, guidance, and wisdom.

As we approach the election of 2008, the lament of many in America is, "where is the leadership?" Congress is paralyzed because no matter what they choose it opens them up for criticism, so they do what is easy and popular. Those who want to be in power have become marketers who search for slogans that connect with the most voters, and change their views to meet whatever the majority of voters seems to agree with for the moment.

Where is the leadership in our churches and synagogues? Who will stand up and say the things that are politically incorrect, but are the principles of God? Who will hold God's laws above our contrived humanitarian concerns? Who will stand and say that Islam is a false religion of death that must be dealt with; and that Israel is God's chosen people and the land belongs exclusively to them? Who will risk being called a hater by saying that homosexuality is wrong and an abomination before the Lord in every circumstance? But even riskier, what Christian leader will tell his followers that some of our Christian leadership of the past were anti-Semitic, and thus some of the doctrines we hold as inviolable have no scriptural basis and were created out of a desire to rid the church of its Hebrew heritage?

Folks, we are on the one hand called by Yeshua to be obedient to our human governments; we are to pay our taxes, obey our traffic laws, honor our contracts, and pay back our legal debts. On the other hand when government requires us to disobey the Word of God then we have to go against the tide as those "who grew their hair" did in Deborah's day. When government says we MUST accept all religions as equal, we cannot. When our leadership says that abortion is a good thing and gay marriage is a wonderful thing, we cannot agree with it by being silent.

When our politicians, and synagogue and church leaders tell us that it is only fair and even handed that Israel be divided up and given over to their enemies for the sake of love and world peace we must not shrink to the background.

When ANY man says that he is here to deliver us from the troubles of the world, we must shout out that there is ONLY one deliverer and His name is Yeshua and accept whatever the consequences for our stance. That is what the Lord expects from us, His followers.

Verse 10 talks about 3 different classes of people who are to pay attention to what has happened and to pay heed. The idea is not to limit this to 3 classes only but to make them representative of all the classes of people from the greatest to the least.

Those who ride on white donkeys represent the first class. Do you remember anything about the donkey that Jesus rode into Jerusalem upon? It was a **white** donkey wasn't it? White was greatly prized because it was rare among donkeys and horses; thus only royalty rode on white beasts of burden. Jesus riding on that white donkey infuriated the Romans and the Jewish elite because everyone understood that He was indicating His own royalty.

Those sitting on soft saddle blankets represent the second class. Such things were luxuries that only the wealthy and the aristocracy could afford. When a person was seen riding any color of animal but sitting atop a nice cushiony saddle blanket it was a visible sign of his status as wealthy and elite.

Those who walked on the road represent the third class. Walking was the way that the poor and common folk traveled. So we see that ALL classes are being indicated by the choice of these 3.

Verse 11 is another of those problematic sections of the Song of Deborah. Our CJB says, "**Louder than the sound of archers at the watering-holes**", while other versions like the KJV will explain that the archers are not at the watering place but are held away from the water holes. Even more the Hebrew word **chatsats** that is being translated into archers is a very obscure Hebrew word that has been used for many things. For instance some have translated it as musicians, and I must say that is perhaps the least accepted. Part of the problem is that in what has been handed down there is no verb in the used in the first part of the sentence so it can be challenging on how to reconstruct it all.

My study indicates to me that the CJB has done a good job in essentially translating it to mean that after the battle is over and won, the archers will go to get water and like soldiers at a bar recounting their war stories, they'll swap tales of their own experiences, show each other their battle scars, and so on. However (as the end of the verse explains) they will also give God all the glory. They will retell the righteous acts of YHWH, their ultimate divine warrior leader, and they'll also give credit to those "men who grew hair" who led them into battle.

This stanza of the song ends with the words: "Then YHWH's people marched down to the gates". The gates specifically refer to city gates, but in this context it means that they left the relative safety of their villages to go to war. This is important because before Deborah

Lesson 8 - Judges 5

encouraged the people to rise up, and until she enlisted Barak as the military leader, the people of Israel were content to cower (as unnoticed as possible) behind those metaphorical city gates.

I'll let you ponder that for a while as a fitting ending to today's lesson.