

The Book of Judges

Lesson 10 - Chapters 5 and 6

We'll finish up Judges chapter 5, the Song of Deborah and begin chapter 6 today. And I'll warn you ahead of time that we'll be spending about as long in chapter 6 as we have with the Song of Deborah in chapter 5.

Last week we looked at verses 12 – 22 that centered on what I call the roll call of the tribes. And sadly we saw that 6 ½ of the 12 tribes refused to answer the Lord's call to arms to liberate the northern tribes of Israel from Canaanite oppression, and to restart the march towards a proper establishment of a Kingdom of God in the Promised Land.

The Trans-Jordanian tribes of Manasseh (called Makhir in this episode), Reuben, and Gad (called Gilead), along with Asher, Dan, Judah and Simeon for various reasons did not want to get involved in this renewed Holy War. Their reasons ranged from simple passivity, to lack of commitment to historical promises, to outright selfishness and a larger desire to maintain profitable relationships with pagans than to help protect their own brethren and be obedient to God.

We ended up with a summation of the war in verses 19-22 that has a supernaturally ordered thunderstorm cause a flash flood of the normally semi-dry Kishon River, thus swinging the battle led by Barak in favor of the Israelites as the river's banks overflowed and inundated the battlefield thus immobilizing the main armament of the Canaanite forces, iron chariots, in a sea of mud.

Let's read more of this song.

READ JUDGES 5: 23 – 27

The 23rd verse again faces us with a couple of interesting challenges: who or what is Meroz, and who or what is being referred to here as the "Angel of the Lord"? It's interesting that at about this point in the book of Judges that we're going to see the Angel of the Lord front and center quite a bit.

There is no other mention of a "Meroz" in Scripture, but the general consensus is that it is an Israelite town or village that failed to do its duty. The level of anger expressed against this town indicates that they must have had every reason to join the fight but yet they would not. Perhaps they too had political alliances with some Canaanite kings, or they were too self-absorbed to care much about their brethren or God's command to serve Him in this capacity.

What is more challenging, though, is that this curse of Meroz is said to come from the Angel of the Lord. We've discussed the concept of the Angel of the Lord before so we won't delve

deeply into today (and we'll look at it a little more in the next couple of weeks) but I will summarize it.

The Hebrew that is translated as Angel of the Lord is **malach Yehoveh**. Malach does not literally mean angel, rather is a generic word, meaning messenger. Yehoveh is of course God's formal name. Now a **malach** can be anyone who brings a message; in fact it doesn't even have to involve a divine message. Often in the bible a **malach** is merely a human being going about a strictly human task. However when the term is used in a supernatural context, or when it is attached to the formal name of God it usually has the sense of this being a special heavenly being or even a manifestation of God Himself. It is more the norm that we'll find this **malach YHWH** speaking in the first person, identifying himself as God or at least carrying God's authority. A typical **malach** (whether human or angelic) refutes all human attempts to worship him, but a **malach YHWH** accepts the worship.

The Rabbis and Christian commentators disagree about the Messenger of the Lord in many cases. For whatever reason the Rabbis tend to view almost every instance of this **malach YHWH** as but a human messenger. Thus we might commonly call that messenger a prophet, because bringing a message from God is exactly what a prophet does. So some Rabbis say that this use in verse 23 of the Angel of the Lord is referring to Deborah, who it has already been established is a prophetess. Others say it is referring to Barak (which frankly defies logic to my way of thinking). In other words the statement that forms verse 23 is, according to most Rabbis, either Deborah or Barak who is being quoted.

I see it otherwise. Rabbis tend to put some bible characters high on a pedestal, the way the Catholic Church anoints some of their own as Saints. They are put on a higher spiritual plane, above normal human beings, and even has them at times having direct conversation with the Lord. For some reason there is a tendency in Judaism to take what is (in plain language) some mysterious account that seems to be of a spiritual nature and humanize it (Christians are equally as guilty as taking some very literal bible passages and spiritualizing them so that they mean something else entirely).

Since God as the divine and supreme warrior leader of Israel is woven so visibly into the Song of Deborah, it is hard not to take this mention of **malach YHWH** as God speaking. First, it is a standalone statement. It comes immediately after a summation of the battle at the Kishon River, and immediately before the praise that is heaped upon Ya'el who killed the Canaanite army general, Sisra.

Second we have a curse being issued; and even though 6 ½ of the other tribes failed to show up for the battle, only the town of Meroz is given such a harsh rebuke. Unless the "curse" is only rhetorical, if this is Deborah speaking we have her issuing the curse apparently by her own authority. When other prophets issue a curse typically it is that they preface it with the words: "the Lord says...", making it a pronouncement of God and not of their own righteous anger.

Third, nowhere else in Judges can we make a case for a Shophet being given the lofty label of a messenger of YHWH (or Angel of the Lord). It just doesn't fit.

Fourth, I think it well fits with the metaphor used in verse 20 of the stars in heaven fighting against Sisera. Deborah has spent much of her song giving all glory and credit to God for fighting against the Canaanites on Israel's behalf.

The most plausible explanation is that this is a divine manifestation of God that we find in a number of places in the OT; a manifestation called the Angel of the Lord who invariably speaks in the 1st person ("I").

In verse 24 praise-upon-praise is heaped upon the brave wife of Hever the Kenite. Saying that "Ya'el will be blessed more than all women" is not a continuation of verse 23 nor is it being uttered by the *malach YHWH*. Rather it is effusive adoration by Deborah upon this female assassin who came to Israel's aid even though her own husband was allied with Yavin King of Hatzor. That is this statement is not a statement of divine fact that we take word for word; Ya'el is not being elevated by the Lord above all other women. It's just a rather Middle Eastern way of speaking. Kind of like when, several years ago, we heard Saddam Hussein warn that if the USA attacked Iraq it would set off "the mother of all wars". It's culturally based exaggeration.

Further it is key for us to recognize that Ya'el was a gentile, not an Israelite. As quickly as we can forget that the entire Bible, OT and New, is Hebrew literature based entirely on an Israelite culture, so we find many accounts of gentiles operating on Israel's behalf and having praise and blessing heaped upon them. Ya'el went against the tide, went against her own husband and clan, and put herself and her family in jeopardy to help a people to which she had no familial or genealogical attachment. There is only one reason to do this: she knew that YHWH was preeminent and that to NOT help His people when the opportunity literally fell into her lap was more dangerous than standing by idly or assisting His people's enemies. While I don't recommend murder, I do recommend adopting Ya'el's recognition that with God, there is no such thing as neutrality. You are either for Him and His people, or against. NOT acting on their behalf makes one guilty by association of siding with His enemies.

The next few verses recount the story of Ya'el killing Sisera as told in Judges chapter 4. In a nutshell: Sisera was running away from his defeat at the Kishon, heading back to his headquarters near Hatzor. It was not by accident that he arrived at the tent encampment of Kenites as he fled; he would have known exactly where they were, he didn't just accidentally stumble across them. He intentionally went there for temporary refuge because Hever the clan chief had created some kind of friendly alliance or relationship with the Canaanites.

Ya'el knew who Sisera was, and treated him with utmost respect. She offered him some type of milk product that was highly prized, and presented it to him in a royal sized bowl. Once he felt safe, had his appetite satisfied, and relaxed in Ya'el's tent, Ya'el grabbed a hardened wood tent peg and a large workman's hammer, and in a couple of swift blows drove it through Sisera's head all the way into the earthen floor of the tent.

I mentioned in a couple of earlier lessons concerning this assassination that we need to be cautious on how to view it. Christians especially tend to point out the deception, seduction, lying, and then cold-blooded murder that occurred here. And that we should essentially see

this as barbaric and wrong. But we must temper that with understanding that this was a time of war. There is nothing scripturally that prohibits deception, ambush, spying, or killing the enemy leadership at times of war. That this was a rather gruesome way to go is merely indicative of the way war was fought and people were killed in biblical times. Today we have cleaner and neater ways such as bullets fired at long range, or bombs dropped where the only eyewitnesses are the dead. We've kind of sanitized the whole process of war, and when the American or European public gets an occasional glimpse of the actual horror of it on our TVs, it pulls back in revulsion and wants to indict the military for doing its job.

While we don't see God, per se, giving His direct approval to Ya'el's actions neither is there any indication that the Lord saw this as negative.

Let's finish this chapter now.

READ JUDGES 5:28 – end

If there is any section of this song that is perhaps a bit questionable in its character, for me it is here because we have Deborah mocking the pain and anguish of Sisra's mother who is anxiously waiting for him to return from the battle.

In a kind of dark poetry Deborah sings of Sisra's mother looking expectantly out of her window waiting for her victorious son to arrive leading his men in a victory parade. Why, she wonders, is his chariot so long in coming? Where are all the horses and their riders? I imagine she, like Sisera, reckoned that the battle hardened Canaanite troops with their fearsome chariots would make short work of the lightly armed Israelite militia.

Because she is the mother of the military general, she was part of the elite. She had servants and ladies-in-waiting to surround her. And when they see that she is terribly concerned her ladies attempted to cheer her up by saying that the only possible answer is that Sisra's men captured so much booty that it is taking an especially long time to divide it up.

Where it says in our CJB's, "a girl, two girls for every warrior", this is a very cleaned up version of the more graphic and frank reality that it literally says. For in Hebrew the words are, "a womb, two wombs for every warrior". In that era women were part of the war booty; the victorious soldiers used them as objects of sexual gratification and it was quite typical to bring some girls home to be used as long-term sex slaves. The Law of Moses prohibited the Israelite soldiers from behaving in such a degrading manner.

This song ends with two petitions addressed to YHWH. The first is that God would have all of His (and consequently Israel's) enemies be destroyed as thoroughly as what happened at the Kishon River. And second that for those who love God be seen as glorious as the rays of the sun as it sets. Deborah prays for vindication and victory on behalf of YHWH's followers, those who will set aside convenience, comfort, and safety when called by the Lord to be His Holy Warriors.

The final words are typical in the book of Judges each time the story of a certain Shophet is finished: "and the land had rest". In this case after the tremendous victory of Barak over Sisra at the base of Mt. Tabor the tribes of Israel had peace for one full generation (40 years). But let's be clear that the reason for the generation of peace wasn't so much the present lack of enemies as it was the backtracking of Israel from they're idolatry and sin, and the new determination of these Israelite tribes to be obedient to the will of Yehoveh.

Let's also be clear that the reference to the 40 years of rest in the land was in this case referring to the northern areas, generally, because it was the northern part of Canaan and the tribes who lived there that are the context of the story of Deborah and Barak.

Let's move on to Judges Chapter 6.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 6 all

Scholars tend to see the judgeship of Gideon as the beginning of the 2nd half of the period of the Judges. Although it was only 3 short chapters ago that we had recounted for us the story of Othniel the first Judge of Israel, around 2 centuries have passed since that time as we begin Judges chapter 6. Conditions in Israel changed greatly over that time. Various Canaanite kings have come and gone. Israelite territories had expanded and contracted. The Priesthood of Israel was moving steadily towards irrelevance. Simeon's absorption into Judah was underway. Dan was on the move north in the process of abandoning their God-given territory on the Mediterranean for an easier life up near Lebanon and Syria. The 2 ½ Israelite tribes who had chosen a life on the east side of the Jordan were slowly but surely disassociating themselves from the rest of their Hebrew brethren.

Gideon represents the 5th cycle of rebellion, apostasy, oppression by a foreign nation as a divine punishment, then Israel crying out for salvation and God responding by sending them a Deliverer, a Mashiah (a Messiah), who would lead them to victory. After defeating their oppressors Israel would (for a short time) step back from their idolatry, worship YHWH with sincerity and fidelity, and obey Torah.

Yet in no time backsliding would begin and the cycle would start all over again. The damage had been done; Israel had allowed the Canaanites to remain and thrive all over the Promised Land. Without their even realizing it Israel had embraced many of the philosophies and standard cultural practices of the Canaanites; therefore it was tempting and easy for the Israelites to compromise and reintroduce those pagan ways back into their worship and lifestyles.

There is a saying in the South that I have always enjoyed and I think it is some of the better folk wisdom that we ought to remember at all times: **when you're up to your rear-end in alligators, sometimes its easy to forget that the original idea was to drain the swamp.**

That was Israel's condition. God instructed Joshua to completely drain the swamp of Canaanites and they set about doing it. The problem is that as they engaged the enemy and

time passed, they found several good reasons to allow many of those alligators to remain rather than staying true to the goal of total eradication. The unintended consequence was that the remaining alligators gained confidence, thrived, and became a bigger pest than before the Holy War process had begun under Joshua.

Over the next 3 chapters we're going to see the history of Gideon and then later his family fully discussed because the amazing acting out of God's grace and His holy righteousness and justice was so obviously on display all during this time; but also because it contains a rich treasure of instruction and warning for the church and the reborn modern state of Israel. It seems as though no matter how many cycles of foolhardy efforts that Israel makes to attempt peace with the world, or for the church to compromise God's truth so that we might fill vacant pews and starving church bank accounts with the succor of seekers and those who want only a mirage of godliness to soothe the emptiness of their souls, we'll try again and again charging that the earlier generations who failed did so because they didn't try hard enough.

Thus every one of the 4 cycles of apostasy related to us up to this point in the book of Judges ends with the words: Then the land had rest for (usually) 40 years. But the next cycle begins with the words: but the people of Israel did what was evil in God's eyes. The cycle of Gideon was the same. The cycle of the people of God in modern times is running on parallel tracks. Do we have eyes to see and ears to listen?

Verse one begins with those ominous words that Israel had enjoyed faithfulness to the Lord and the fruits of divine blessings that resulted, but soon gave it all away so that they could do what was right in their own eyes. Yes, it definitely does NOT say literally that Israel did "what was right in their own eyes"; rather it says they did what was evil in God's. I say to you with full confidence that doing what is right in our own eyes IS evil in God's eyes.

Evil is more deceptive than overt. Evil almost always looks beautiful before it turns ugly. Evil seems right in our humanness before it all goes wrong. Are we to think in these cycles of the Judges that the people of God awoke one morning and said: let's offend our God? That the leaders of Israel got together and made a pact to be wicked? I guarantee you that they would have protested greatly if accused of sin and idolatry; and they would have denied it and been aroused to anger at the indictment. And I can make that guarantee because we read of it not only here but in the Prophets as well. The Prophets that God chose to warn His people were not anxious to deliver the message because they knew full well it would be rejected and they would suffer for their efforts. The leaders and the citizens at large were incredulous that someone would point a finger at them and say that they were behaving as heathens before the Lord.

Nevertheless that is what Israel in the era of the Judges did, and that is what is happening today. And because God never changes the pattern never changes; and because the pattern never changes the consequences never change. God turned Israel over to their enemies to be oppressed; in this case the enemy was Midian. Yes, the same Midian where Moses fled from Egypt, found a wife, lived as a simple shepherd for 40 years, and then was summoned to the burning bush on a hilltop and collapsed at the sound of Yehoveh's voice and unbearable weight of His presence.

Midian was the name of a semi-nomadic tribe that shared a blood kinship with Israel because it was descended from Keturah, Abraham's concubine. Territories were named after the dominating tribe that lived there. By now Midian had grown in size and various clans that formed the tribe claimed territories ranging from the northwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula to the border with Edom on the northernmost part of the Sinai. Recall that in the story of Deborah, that the gentile woman Ya'el who pinned Sisra's skull to the tent floor with a hammer and peg was part of the tribe of Midian. She was of the Kenite clan; a small breakaway clan of the Midianite tribe that moved into the northern part of Canaan and formed a friendship with the King of Hatzor.

Israel would suffer at the hand of Midian and some other foreigners for 7 years before God acted. The oppression was unusually severe; so severe that many of the Hebrews took to living in caves and hiding up in the mountains of Canaan. Part of the problem was that (as it says in verse 3), the Midianites teamed up with the dreaded Amalekites and in addition some number of smaller unnamed hordes simply called "the children of the east". Together they would descend like locust upon several of the Israelite tribes at harvest time.

Apparently they were not interested in conquest, rather simply in stealing Israel's food supply. This is a characteristic of nomads of both ancient and modern times that is often misunderstood. By definition nomads had no interest in holding land; they merely wanted the fruit of the land. Nomads had no interest in empire; they only wanted to take what others toiled to produce. Much of the reason that the Middle East and eastern Asia continue today as backward so-called 3rd world nations is that even now they live the lifestyle of nomads, even though they are more settled. Islamic law is a law of nomads, a law of predators.

As Jews began to return to their ancient homeland in the 1800's, they returned to a land populated primarily by Arab nomads. The land was deserts and swamps because nomads have no understanding of farming, husbandry, or producing goods or services, or building. The land was used up, and left for dead. Shepherds moved their flocks and herds from pasture to pasture on land they did not own; they stayed until there was nothing left and then wandered to another pasture that could be used. Marauding nomads plundered passing caravans whether they were family or foreigners.

Verse 4 begins the story of a particular time (apparently in the 8th year since the seasonal invasions had started) that finally led Israel to cry out to God for help. The nomads attacked starting in the north-central part of Canaan and worked their way even to the south, near Gaza. They came in countless numbers we're told and boldly set up tent camps as they determined to extract every last morsel of food that Israel had produced over the past agricultural season; and they did just that. When they left there was no fruit, no grain, and no animals whether they be food animals or beasts of burden that remained for Israel.

It should be noted that it says that these invaders came on camels. Camels became the weapons platform of the descendants of Ishmael who mostly dwelled upon the desert sands, while the Canaanites and those nations coming from the direction of Mesopotamia preferred horses. While not as formidable as chariots camels were a fearsome weapon; camels gave the Midianites the military advantage of a speedy, long-range fighting force of large animals that

certainly must have struck fear into the hearts of Israel.

That it took Israel 7 straight years of these human locusts descending upon them before they sought the Lord for His help ought to be familiar to us. Not just because that was the general pattern as seen in the era of the Judges, but because to this very day God's people (whether Jews or gentile Christians) seem to seek God only after matters have become extreme and as a last resort. Israel was brought very low; they existed in the most primitive ways cowering in fear, eating disgusting things to survive, and living in crevices in the rocks for shelter.

How often I have pleaded to fill up our prayer list with petitions to God; this is because for some reason our evil inclinations continue to reign over us such that we see turning to God as something to do only when all of our human efforts have been exhausted. This **MUST** be one of the lessons that Yehoveh was teaching Israel; that to obey Him at all times is the best course; but when we wander off or bad things happen to us, our **FIRST** and best action ought to be to repent, confess, seek mercy and to lay it at His feet.

Israel was in a bad way. Whatever the Midianites and Amalekites couldn't carry away with them, they destroyed. Starvation was a distinct possibility for God's people. When Israel finally called out to their God, He answered through an unnamed prophet. Because of the way the Bible is translated we can miss the impact of God's response of love and mercy through His prophet for as it says in the original Hebrew: **"YHWH the elohim of Israel says, 'I brought you up from the land of Egypt'"**. Sadly this generation really didn't know God very well, and God was acutely aware of this fact. God reminded them that He, Yehoveh, was their God.....NOT Ba'al. It was He, YHWH, who brought them out of Egypt, NOT some other god. It was YHWH who redeemed them from slavery, drove the Canaanites out from before Joshua, and gave Israel the very land that is now under invasion. Now, once again, Israel's God would deliver them from a predicament of their own making.

The people well understood that when a prophet was sent from God that it was invariably a message of warning or rebuke; this one was no different. The Lord wanted His people to think long and hard about why they were oppressed; that in fact the Lord had **PROMISED** this oppression and that it was He who **CAUSED** it. Because He wanted them to understand that this oppression of eastern nomads wasn't some kind of a test, it was a judgment against them for their idolatry and rebellion. It was repentance that the Lord wanted, accompanied with real change.

Father God also threw in a bit of zinger when He reminds them in verse 10 that He told His people in the past that they were **NOT** to be afraid of the gods of the Emori in the land they were now living.

Let's end with examining that statement for a moment. The Lord is saying that at the core of their problem is fear. They were fearful of the gods of their enemies so they capitulated to them. Israel, as with all the other known people of the ancient world, accepted as self evident that it was the gods of any particular nation that provided that nation with whatever power it had so it was the gods that they feared primarily and only the army of that people secondarily. Appease the gods and chances were that you would be spared. That is what fear usually does;

it causes us to compromise and appease. And what that compromise amounted to was that Israel openly worshipped the other gods in hopes that their enemies would not be so harsh; or that perhaps their enemies' gods DID have power and thus ought to be acknowledged.

Yet in no way did Israel think they were abandoning Yehoveh in favor of other gods; rather, they were simply giving in to their fears and hedging their bets.

It's been a long time since fear has gripped the world as it has today at the rise of Islam. Secular nations especially, like all of Europe, have no hope other than their government bodies. Since they have long ago abandoned the Lord, they have taken up the way of compromise and appeasement to deal with potent enemies. Leaders scramble to find nice things to say about Islam; Prime Ministers and Presidents work hard to rationalize that Islam is actually a good religion of peace and love because they are so fearful of their violence. That all that is necessary is to show tolerance to Muslims and respect for Allah, is to give them some of what they claim to want, and it will be better for all concerned.

Many in the church from the Archbishop of Canterbury to hundreds of denominational leaders have decided in our day that declaring Islam and their god as on par with the God of Israel and the bible is the correct course of action. Some of the Jewish leadership of Israel has determined basically the same thing. This is because despite their denials they are acting out of fear. Fear is so much more than an emotion of fight or flight; it is a vehicle of Satan designed to pull us away from the Lord. And in verse 10 the Lord is telling Israel that trust in Him for those who love Him is the antidote for fear; but they wouldn't believe Him and this is the result.

We'll continue with Judges 6 next week.