DEBORAH, A MOTHER IN ISRAEL

Judges 4:1-5:31

key verse Judges 5:7

In the previous lessons, we have seen Israel’s sin cycles. After Israel cried out to God due to their sins causing oppression from their enemies, the LORD God raised three judges of Israel: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar to deliver them from the enemies. In today’s passage, Israel’s judges Deborah and Barak appear. Especially Deborah was a woman of faith and heart who God used to deliver Israel from the Canaanite. I pray that we may learn from their example and become men and women of God like Deborah and Barak that God wants to use.

Part I. Deborah and Barak, Israel’s deliverers (4:1-24)

What is the background in which Deborah and Barak appeared? Let’s look at verses 1-2.1 After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD. 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. 3Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

After the death of Ehud, the judge who saved Israel from Moab, Israel again did evil before God. They left the God who saved them and again served Canaanite idols and followed the evil customs of Canaan. God sold them into the hands of Jabin, king of Canaan, who ruled over Hazor at the time. Here the words ‘God sold them’ means that Israel went from God’s possession to king Jabin’s servants. After 20 years of brutal oppression by Sisera, the commander of his armies, they cried to the LORD for help.

Look at verse 4-5. 4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. Deborah was introduced first as a prophetess and then as the wife of Lappidoth. She served as the judge of Israel when there were no judges in Israel at that time. She held courts at the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel and judged various cases of the Israelites. She worked diligently in this triple duty. However, she was not able to deliver Israel from the oppression of Sisera and turn Israel to God. For the salvation of Israel, God reveals in his Word what Deborah must do.

What tasks did God give Deborah to do? First, delivering and planting the word of God to Barak(6-7). Look at verses 6-7. 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. 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.' " Deborah was a woman of God who listens to God in the dark time of idolatry and lack of the knowledge of God. And, she not only delivered God’s message transparently, but also helped Barak to accept and obey it.

Indeed, the Word of God reveals to us what to do in hopeless and helpless situations. Today, we live in an age in which all types of data pour like a waterfall, and in which money and pleasure practically dominate. In the overflowing flood of ungodliness, the knowledge of God and the experience of God are getting weaker and weaker. The only way for us to be spiritually awake is God’s word, the Holy Scriptures. Despite of busy life, we must strive to be close to God’s word. I pray that each one may become a man and woman who loves and listens to the word of God. Not only do so, but we may also become men and women of God’s word who clearly preach it.

Second, raising one person Barak (8-10). God intended to appoint Barak as a spiritual general and deliverer of Israel through Deborah. By the way, it is really difficult to raise Barak as a man of God and then gather ten thousand men at the time. It seems even more impossible for them to battle against Sisera's iron chariot. Nevertheless, Deborah obeyed God's word and delivered God's message to Barak by faith. Look at verses 8-10. 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." 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, 10 where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.  Barak was indeed God's chosen man of faith. He tried to obey God's calling. He had faith, but it was not enough to fully obey God's command. If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go, he said. His answer can be interpreted positively as that he believes in Deborah as a servant of God, but negatively as that he does not fully believe in his own God. What choice did Deborah make? Look at verse 9 again. By deciding to go with Barak, she tried to make up for Barak's lack of faith with her own. However, she prophesied that a woman will later take some of the glory of victory. Here we learn about Deborah, who planted the word of God in Barak by faith and tried somehow to fulfill God's work of salvation.

Imagine Deborah standing with Barak on the battleground where only men participate. She must be no ordinary woman. Amazing things happened due to Barak's obedience to God and Deborah's cooperation in faith. Barak gathered ten thousand men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Those who had trembled in fear in front of the iron chariots now gathered one by one at Mount Tabor. This was also a victory of faith.

How does God respond to their obedience of faith? Look at verses 11-13. 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 Zaanannim near Kedesh. 12 When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13Sisera gathered together his nine hundred iron chariots and all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River. Heber, the Kenite, then living in Zaanannim close to Kadesh, had very friendly relations with King Jabin and Sisera. So the people of Heber leaked to Sisera that Barak was encamped at Mount Tabor. In response, Sisera gathered 900 iron chariots and the entire army to the Kishon River as God said exactly. Here we learn that human wisdom and power are of no use before God's plan. We also see Sisera, full of arrogance and pride, trusting only in all his iron chariots, foolishly trapping himself.

Look at verse 14. 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. When Deborah saw Sisera's iron chariots and troops coming out to the Kishon River, she was not overwhelmed by Sisera's iron chariots and armies. Rather, as God said, she saw that God was fighting ahead of them. So she said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” Deborah planted again the faith in Barak, the faith that God is ahead and fights for Israel. Please see the second half of verse 14. Here we can see Barak's change. Fully trusting God's Word, he goes down in front of all the men. Ten thousand soldiers followed him boldly. At this time, another amazing sight unfolds. Look at verses 15-16. 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. 16 But Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left. According to Chapter 5, God poured down rain and caused the iron chariots to sink into the mud. Iron chariots became a great hindrance to fighting. Barak and ten thousand men defeated the Sisera army without leaving one. Israel won a great victory on that day.

Let us think about the nature of our fight. Our fight is spiritual. We as children of God fight a spiritual battle against the power of sin, death, and idols. This fight is a spiritual fight against fear and unbelief with faith in God's Word.

The Bible says that the battle belongs to the Lord. The Lord fights for us. We just join in His battle by faith. We do not depend on the number of people or the physical weapons or our ability, but on the Word of God.

Verses 17-22 describe how the notorious Sisera is killed by a woman, named Jael, the wife of Heber. As he fled from the battlefield alone, Jael let Sisera in her tent to have a deep sleep, then killed him with a tent peg and hammer. The word of God given through Deborah was fulfilled by a woman Jael. 17 Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. 18Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my Lord , come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him. 19"I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. 20"Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.' " 21 But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. 22 Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple-dead.

Let’s look at verses 23-24. 23 On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. 24 And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him. God gradually strengthened Israel. Eventually, Israel overpowered and destroyed King Jabin of Canaan. Even though Israel repeatedly sinned in the sin cycle, God saved them from the oppression of the enemy and made them His possession again.

Part II. Song of Deborah and Barak (5:1-31)

Chapter 5 is a song by Deborah and Barak. Why do they praise the God of Israel?

First, Deborah praised God because of the willing volunteers of Israel. Let’s look at 5:1-3 and 9-18. 5:1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song: 2 "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves- praise the LORD ! 3 "Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the LORD, I will sing; I will make music to the LORD, the God of Israel. Here ‘princes’ refers to ‘officials’.

Look at verses 9-18. 9 My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the LORD! 10 "You who ride on white donkeys, sitting on your saddle blankets, and you who walk along the road, consider 11 the voice of the singers at the watering places. They recite the righteous acts of the LORD , the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel. "Then the people of the LORD went down to the city gates. 12 'Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, O Barak! Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.' 13 "Then the men who were left came down to the nobles; the people of the LORD came to me with the mighty. 14 Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek; Benjamin was with the people who followed you. From Makir captains came down, from Zebulun those who bear a commander's staff. 15 The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, rushing after him into the valley. 16 Why did you stay among the campfires to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. 17Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves. 18 The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field.

Not only the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, but also some volunteers from the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar participated in God's battle. In chapters 4-5, the words ‘lead/leading’ and ‘willing/willingly’ appear often. First of all, Deborah set a good example of leading and willingness for Israel. In times of oppression, no one among men in Israel but Deborah stood up to take on the role of the judge voluntarily. Deborah willingly offered herself to God to raise one man Barak as the deliverer and to strengthen His faith to the end. And now Deborah was greatly comforted and strengthened by the people of Israel who had gathered to fight with their willingness in each of their tribes. But For this reason, she praised and thanked God. In addition, Deborah and Barak blessed and encouraged those who voluntarily dedicated themselves to God.

Here we learn an important spiritual lesson. God is pleased to receive the heart of willing volunteers and to use the person for his salvation work. Deborah was a good example along with Ruth who followed her mother-in-law Naomi and King David who challenged Goliath who blasphemed God and God's people. We pray that obedience to God's Word as well as willingly volunteering to God may harmonize in our lives. I pray that God may raise many young people who willingly volunteer to serve God in the university of Toronto and for world mission.

Second, Deborah and Barak praised what God has done. See verses 4-7. 4 "O LORD , when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. 5 The mountains quaked before the LORD , the One of Sinai, before the LORD , the God of Israel. 6 "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths. 7 Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel. 8 When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates, and not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.

Look at verses 19-21. 19"Kings came, they fought; the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo, but they carried off no silver, no plunder. 20 From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. 21 The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon. March on, my soul; be strong! 22 Then thundered the horses' hoofsgalloping, galloping go his mighty steeds. 23 'Curse Meroz,' said the angel of the LORD . 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the LORD , to help the LORD against the mighty.'

Chapter 5 describes how God fought against the enemy of Israel. The Bible declares that war belongs to the Lord. God Himself fights before us against His enemies.

Third, Deborah and Barak praised God for the blessed woman Jael. See verses 24-27. 24 "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women. 25 He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk. 26 Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. 27 At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell-dead. Her husband was close to Jabin and Sisera, but Jael made a different choice with them. Why is she the most blessed woman? Because she chose a friendly relationship with God.

Look at verses 31. 31 "So may all your enemies perish, O LORD ! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength." Then the land had peace forty years. Deborah and Barak's praising song ends with prayer. Their prayer is God-centered and universal. It is a prayer, but also a prophecy. The enemies of God will eventually be perished, while those who love God will rise like the sun. Even in ungodly times when the love for God is cold, I pray that those who love God like Deborah and Barak may wake up and rise.

In conclusion, through today's passage, we have seen that God raised Deborah, Barak, and even countless volunteers to lead the spiritual war to victory. We were able to see the spiritual mother of Israel in Deborah. Because Deborah loved God, she listened to the Word of God, helped Barak become a spiritual leader, and encouraged and blessed those who volunteered willingly for God. I pray that each of us may become willing volunteers for God’s salvation work as Deborah and Barak did.