

“Hear, O Kings; Give Ear, O Princes; to the Lord I will sing”

The ninety-sixth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 5:1-31; Revelation 16:1-16

Wherever the people of God witness his mighty power, their hearts are inevitably stirred to sing God’s praises. A number of “songs” composed by the key participants at critical moments in redemptive history are found throughout Scripture in the form of inspired verse. Whenever these “songs” are found in Scripture, it is important to notice that these songs recount the great things God has done for his people. The songs are composed as a form of praise, and they serve as a means of stirring faith in the hearts of his people throughout the subsequent generations. In other words, these songs teach God’s people about God’s faithfulness. In them, we see the heart of God’s people at a given moment in redemptive history, as they give God praise because he has rescued from captivity and/or a crisis. At the same time, the people of God are offering up a song which, in turn, becomes a kind of prayer, as God’s people are seeking his continued deliverance from their enemies. Therefore, these songs tell us a great deal about how God is to be worshiped and they remind us that God is greater than all our enemies—even sin and death. Although God may allow us to be chastened by our foes, he will indeed redeem his people in the end.

We are continuing our series on Judges and we now come to the Song of Deborah and Barak, which is recorded in Judges chapter 5. Before we proceed to work our way through the details of the song, we need to consider two things which will help us understand the details of this particular song. First, while this song is unique in the Book of Judges, such a “song” is not unique in the Old Testament. There are the famous Songs of Moses found in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32. There is the Song of Jonah (in Jonah 2) and the song of Hezekiah’s Son from Isaiah 38. No doubt, the song of Deborah and Barak is ancient. It comes from the time of Deborah, more than a century after the time of Joshua and the Conquest. This song was widely known throughout Israel and it was eventually incorporated into the Book of Judges by the unknown author. That leads to a second important point.

You cannot understand the Song of Deborah and Barak without some knowledge of the events recorded in the previous section of Judges (3:31-4:24). This particular song was composed during that period in Israel’s history when God raised up Deborah as a prophetess, and to serve as “judge” (or deliverer) in Israel when Israel was chastened by God for the fourth time through a neighboring enemy. As we saw last time, it was during the era of Deborah that God revealed his plan to deliver Israel through her, because Israel’s priests (the Levites) had become faithless and had failed to instruct the people of Israel in the ways of the Lord. By speaking through Deborah, God is, in effect, shaming the Levites, and providing his people with the good news of future deliverance from their current oppressor—the king of the Canaanites, Jabin.

In what is now a familiar theme, when Israel returned to the familiar pattern of forgetting YHWH, worshiping Canaanite gods and doing what was right in their own eyes, God then sold Israel into the hands of Jabin, who presided over the Canaanites from Hazor, an important city in the northern part of Canaan. Hazor, and Jabin’s ancestor of the same name, had been wiped out by Joshua, but a century or so later the city of some 40,000 people had been rebuilt and yet another ruler from the line of Jabin had risen to power. Because of Israel’s unfaithfulness, YHWH allowed Jabin and his general Sisera, to use their 900 iron chariots to oppress the people of God for some twenty years.

When the people of Israel finally cried to YHWH for deliverance from Jabin, YHWH revealed his plan to deliver Israel through a prophetess named Deborah. Speaking through Deborah, God commanded Barak (who lived in the northern portion of Israel) to assemble 10,000 Israeli soldiers from the tribe of Zebulun and Naphtali and to go Mount Tabor where they would prepare to take on Jabin's general Sisera and his chariots. This Barak did. But when Sisera got wind that Barak's men were on the move, Sisera mobilized his chariots (which would have been a formidable force) and headed for the Jezreel valley, where Sisera hoped to lure Barak into battle in a location where his chariots would be the most effective. Give the superiority of Sisera's forces, there seems to be no chance that Israel would be victorious.

But since YHWH was Israel's shield and defender, YHWH ensured that Barak's men defeated these 900 chariots in what was a miraculous victory. Sisera was so shocked by the defeat at the hands of Barak, Sisera fled from the battlefield and headed toward Kedesh, where he sought safety in the home of a man named Heber, who was a Kenite (the same family as Moses' wife) and who had made a covenant with Jabin, Israel's sworn enemy. Completely exhausted from battle and his subsequent flight from the field of battle, Sisera encountered Heber's wife, a woman named Jael. When Sisera asked to be hidden from those who would come seeking him, Jael gave him milk, covered him with a rug, and when Sisera had fallen deeply asleep, Jael drove a tent stake through Sisera's temple, killing him, and pinning him to the ground, deader than a doornail (or a tent peg).

This not only fulfilled the prophecy Deborah made to Barak—that Sisera would be sold into the hands of a woman—but once Sisera had been killed and his 900 chariots destroyed, Israel was able to throw-off the oppression of Jabin and destroy the city of Hazor a second time. As we learn in the last verse of chapter five, when Jabin had been defeated and the city of Hazor wiped out, God gave to Israel 40 years (a generation) of peace. And so it was during this period of time that the Song of Deborah and Barak was composed. Clearly, it commemorates God's grace and power in rescuing his people from a cruel and tyrannical leader (Jabin) who served as an Antichrist figure by oppressing Israel. Even at a time of national sin and unfaithfulness, the Israelites worshiped YHWH and refused to worship Jabin. And while Satan raised up Jabin to preside over a powerful Canaanite city and army, God used Jabin to chasten his people and to remind them that while Jabin may have been king of the Canaanites, Jabin was no match for YHWH. When Hazor fell, all Canaan was reminded that YHWH was the almighty LORD. Now, that was something to sing about!

What appears in chapter five of Judges is a triumph song, composed in vivid Hebrew poetry. The song reminds us that while God raised up Deborah to speak his word and Barak to lead Israel's army, it becomes clear that the point of the song is that God has delivered his humiliated people and has therefore manifest himself not only as Israel's Lord, but as Lord of all.

Before we turn to the details of the song, in verse one, we are given our only hint about its origin. "*Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day.*" We can't think of this "song" in contemporary terms. This verse is not telling us that Deborah and Barak got up in front of the people in matching outfits to sing a duet. This verse does tell us that what follows was sung by God's people and that it was probably written (for the most part) by Deborah, since the song is given in the first person, especially in the first half. This also fits with her status as a prophetess who speaks forth the word of the Lord, her fame throughout all of Israel, and with the fact that she is described as a "judge" or deliverer of Israel at a time of great peril. That the song is also attributed to Barak complicates things, but there are hints in verses 12 and 15 of the use of the second and third person (an additional voice). All indications are that this song was composed shortly after Israel's stunning victory and the author of Judges knows

this song, because it has been sung throughout Israel since that time.¹

And so with that, we turn to the particulars of the song itself. The first stanza is found in verses 2-3. *“That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord! “Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing; I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.”* It is fitting that such a song which celebrates God’s giving Israel a victory over a fierce foe would begin with a chorus of praise to YHWH, the LORD, the God of Israel. To “bless the Lord” means to acknowledge the Lord as the source of the victory, indeed the source of all good things which come to God’s people from his hand. To bless God simply means to praise him, to extol his great name.² In order to bless YHWH, Deborah proclaims that she will make a melody—which means that she will sing and make music which recounts the story of the Lord’s deliverance of Israel.

The next stanza comes in verses 4-5. *“Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.”* Having declared her purpose in the first stanza—to bless YHWH—the focus of the song now turns to the object of her praise, YHWH, the true and living God. YHWH has come to his people as a divine warrior to rescue them from their enemies. When YHWH comes to Israel (as he did at Mount Sinai) creation itself convulsed. There was rain, thunder, earthquakes—all signs that the Holy One of Israel was about to act.

As the song unfolds, Deborah now introduces her own presence in the story in the next stanza, verses 6-8. *“In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travelers kept to the byways. The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?”* Clearly, Deborah is awe-struck by the fact that YHWH uses the most unlikely of people to deliver Israel. Shamgar was a Canaanite worshiper of Anath, the Canaanite god of war. Jael, was the wife of a man who made a covenant with Israel’s enemies. Yet YHWH used both of them to spare his people during a time of great trouble. Things were so bad in those days that the people of Israel ceased traveling, and Israel could not raise up an army. But God had raised up Deborah to announce his word in the midst of this great despair.

In verses 9-11, the song calls the people to praise YHWH for his righteous acts. *“My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord. Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way. To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the righteous triumphs of the Lord, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel.”* People throughout Israel are to tell everyone of God’s mighty acts. From those who ride white donkeys (the rich) to those cover their animals with saddle-blankets (carpets) and who walk throughout the land (the poor), the people are to praise their God. Even Israel’s musicians are to offer resounding praise to the Lord through song. *“Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord,”* an image of those who gather together to praise YHWH’s name.

One of the longest stanzas in the song comes next, in verses 12-18. In it, Deborah praises those who took

¹ See the helpful discussion of the issues associated with the historicity of the song in: Block, Judges, Ruth, 211-219.

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 220-221.

up arms to throw off the oppressor, while at the same time chastising those who would not. *“Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, break out in a song! Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam. Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the Lord marched down for me against the mighty. From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen; from Machir marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff; the princes of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death; Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field.”* Israel was in such a sorry state that some of the tribes could not be bothered to come to the nation's defense, while others act heroically, so that their deeds would be recounted to the coming generations.

In verses 19-23, Deborah's song recounts the details of the battle in which Sisera and his chariots were defeated. When YHWH gave Israel the victory over Sisera, the Canaanite peoples were dispirited and Israel once again had peace. *“The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo”* [hold on the name Megiddo, we'll come back to that]; *they got no spoils of silver. From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! `Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds. `Curse Meroz, says the angel of the Lord, curse its inhabitants thoroughly, because they did not come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”*

The reason why I want to highlight the reference to the “waters of Megiddo” here, is because many scholars believe that when the Apostle John refers to the Battle of Armageddon in the New Testament (specifically, Revelation 16:16, and part of our New Testament lesson), this text (Judges 5:19) is in the background. This is one of the few places in the New Testament where we find an echo from the Song of Deborah. In contemporary America, given the associations attached to Armageddon by prophecy pundits, Armageddon refers to the final battle in human history, when the forces of the Antichrist supposedly wage war on the armies of the modern nation of Israel toward the end of the so-called seven-year tribulation period. This battle is supposedly interrupted by Jesus Christ at his return. Not true.

The fact of the matter is when John refers to Armageddon (literally *har megiddo*) in the Book of Revelation, he's actually referring to the “mountain of Meggido.” John is probably alluding to Deborah's description in this song of God's miraculous defeat of Israel's enemies at Megiddo—in this case, Jabin's general Sisera and all his iron chariots. Throughout the Old Testament, the final battle is said to be fought at Jerusalem (Mount Zion), and it is clear that Israel's prophets use place names in figurative and not in a literal sense. For example, there is no “Mountain of Meggido,” anywhere in Israel, much less overlooking the Jezreel Valley.

When John speaks of the “mount of Megiddo” (*har megiddo*), he's referring to any place where the righteous are attacked by the wicked, just as Sisera sought to attack Israel near the waters of Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley, before God intervened and destroyed him. John's point in Revelation 16:16, is that just as God rescued his people in the days of Deborah, so too, he will rescue his people from any and all who oppose them, no matter how great and powerful they seem to be. No king, no fuhrer, no tyrant, no president, no emperor, will ever conquer the people of God. This is what Zechariah is getting at when he foretells of the days when kings will look upon the one they have pierced and they will mourn. Jesus

Christ is king of kings and Lord of Lords. Not Jabin, not Nero, not Hitler, not Stalin. This is what John is telling us in Revelation 16:16, and this is why John alludes to the Song of Deborah when he speaks of the Battle of Armageddon.³ God will preserve his people from the fiercest of foes.

In verses 24-27, Deborah now recounts the surprising way in which God redeemed his people. The Levites were not instructing God's people in the ways of the Lord. Therefore, God raised up Deborah, the prophetess. Even though it was completely unexpected, God used the deceptive (indeed treacherous) wives of Jael to do in Sisera, who had used his superior military technology to cruelly oppress the people of God for some twenty years. *“Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He [Sisera] asked for water and she gave him milk; she brought him curds in a noble's bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.”*

When we think of the lyrics from a biblical song of praise, we probably would not expect the line *“she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.”* Put that to the tune of “He Touched Me” (“She crushed him”) or “I Come to Garden Alone.” Why should God's people praise a murderess who whacked Sisera with a mallet and a tent peg, after she lured her prey into a false sense of security, and then waited until he was sound asleep? Deborah even calls Jael, “the most blessed of women.” The clue as to why is that Jael is described as a woman who lives in a tent—she's not an Israelite, she's a Kenite and she's married to a man (Heber) who made a covenant with Jabin, Israel's sworn enemy. Jael is praised because God used her, a non-Israelite woman to remove Israel's oppressor (Sisera), making the point that when Israel had fallen so far that no faithful male can be found who will step up and lead God's people, God uses the most unlikely of women to do what needed to be done—kill the oppressor of God's people. Not even Israel's unbelief can frustrate God's redemptive purposes.

In verses 28-30, the scene in the song shifts to Sisera's own tent as his mother waits for his return from battle. *“Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice: ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?’ Her wisest princesses answer, indeed, she answers herself, ‘Have they not found and divided the spoil?—A womb or two for every man; spoil of dyed materials for Sisera, spoil of dyed materials embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?’”* While Sisera's mother longs for the stolen possessions taken from those Israelites who dared to oppose her son's chariots on the field of battle (including the raping of Israelite women and the theft of expensive clothing), the reader already knows that Sisera will never return, and that he lay dead in Jael's tent, with a tent peg driven through his temple, nailed to the ground, where he was discovered by Barak, who had bested him on the field of battle (because of YHWH's intervention). Sisera's mother reflects the sinful aspirations of all those who hate YHWH and his people. Their own greed and their ill-will for God's people is exposed and mocked.

And so in verse 31, the song comes to an end with the triumphal declaration, *“So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.”* While we may be most interested in the gory details of Sisera's death, or in the treacherous ways of Jael (who becomes the heroine of the story), or even in the portrayal of Sisera's mother as a woman who lusts for the fine clothes of Israel and the loss of innocence of Israel's maidens, the final line in Deborah's Song reveals to

³ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1136-1137.

us the true meaning of all that transpired. YHWH's enemies will perish in such a way that their own treachery boomerangs around upon them. Indeed, those who do YHWH's will, like the Kenite woman Jael, will be revered because it was through them, that YHWH rescued his people when their disobedience was at its greatest. As a result of all of this, once again we read, "*and the land had rest for forty years.*" God gave the next generation of Israel, rest from war. The people lived in peace—until the cycle repeats itself again, when we turn to the story of Gideon (our subject for next time).

What, then, can we take with by way of application?

The Song of Deborah is a wonderful illustration of how the people of God are to worship him—singing his praises by recounting all of the things he has done to save us from our sins and to deliver us from our enemies. This is why we as Reformed Christians have emphasized the singing of the Psalms, God's own hymnal given to his church. Like the inspired songs of Moses, Deborah, and others, the Psalms recount God's mighty deeds, they record the emotions, fears, laments, and expectations of the people of God. The same holds true for the "songs" recorded in the New Testament, such as Mary's "Magnificat" and Zechariah's "song." That is why we focus upon singing Scripture or hymns with lyrics either taken from or clearly alluding to the biblical text. When we let God tell his story through song, we are protected from the sentimental and sappy "Jesus is my boyfriend" tripe which is so typical of contemporary worship music, which highlights not the great and mighty acts of God, but emotions of the hymn writers.

Lets be clear about one thing—emotion is not a bad thing in worship. How can we not be emotional when we consider the wondrous things God has done? There is a place for joy, exuberance, tears, and even silence in Reformed worship. But such emotions must arise as a response to hearing what God has done, because the stirring of our emotions (and our "experience" during worship), is not an end in itself. We don't come here for a "worship experience," although we may leave here having had one. In the Song of Deborah, we see the kind of song which God himself breathed forth through his servants Deborah and Barak, and which should be sung by the people of God. Worship music should let God tell his story, and as we reflect upon what he has done, we "sing the faith" into our hearts, and through our praise of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are reminded that God is always faithful to his promises.

Finally, in the Song of Deborah, we are reminded that God is great and that all those cruel tyrants who oppress God's people are not. The series of judges God sent to Israel were raised up by God to rescue his people from their oppressors. These were a most unexpected lot, and while God used them to save his people in the most surprising of ways, Israel's judges could never deal with what lies at the root of all of Israel's problems—human sin. Jabin, Sisera, Sisera's mother, and all who come in their wake, are nothing but human faces upon what is in all of our hearts—sin and depravity. When the dragon gives those who oppress God's people their power, and when God allows them to do so, they arise for a time, they afflict us, and they seek to force us to worship them, rather than Christ. In the triumph songs given God's people, we are reminded through song that these tyrants are no match for the power of God.

As we sing God's praises we know that our greatest enemy is not Jabin, Sisera, or any other tyrant. Our greatest enemy is not Satan—indeed it was Luther who reminded us in song that one little word shall fell him. Our greatest enemy is sin and death. Throughout the era of the judges, we see that human judges might rescue Israel from a tyrant, but it will take God in human flesh to defeat sin and death through a cross and an empty tomb. And if God's defeat of Jabin and Sisera gave God's people cause to sing, how then should we respond to the news that Jesus Christ has died for all our sins, and that he was raised for our justification. Therefore, Hear O Kings, Give Ear O Princes, you are not lords. Jesus Christ is Lord

and he has defeated death and the grave. Now that is something to sing about!