



## Mothers on the Warpath

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Almost 30 years ago Dr. James Dobson wrote a groundbreaking book called, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women*. In that book he shared his observation, which was based on thousands of hours counseling and talking with women, that the majority of adult women experience depression as a recurring fact of life. He wanted to know why, so he did a survey to identify their sources of depression. The survey revealed that the overwhelming reason women are depressed is what he called low self-esteem. He discovered that a lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness have become a way of life, or too often, a way of despair for millions of American women. He went on to identify some of the sources of low self-esteem for women. Many women feel dumb in a society that exalts intelligence; others feel ugly in a society that exalts a certain unattainable image of physical beauty; still others feel the worth of their traditional role of raising children and maintaining a home has been ridiculed.

In our study in Judges today, we will encounter Deborah, a wonderful woman of God. In many ways, she breaks the mold that was set for women in her day. But it's also interesting because in chapter 5 she calls herself "a mother in Israel." We don't know anything about what she looked like or what her IQ was; we don't even know anything about the accomplishments of her kids; but she seems to relish this role of mother. She seems to have a clear understanding of how valuable she is in the sight of God and how God wanted to use her to do great things. Deborah, therefore, is a great model for us today. Her story is told in Judges 4-5. In chapter 4 we see the narrative story and in chapter 5 we see the story recounted in song.

### I. Story: Mothers on the Warpath

The story begins in Judges 4.

**"Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. The sons of Israel cried to the LORD; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years"** (vv.1-3).

Once again, the downward cycle continues. The first stage is sin. They did evil in the sight of the Lord. It seems Israel hadn't learned anything from their previous lessons. The next stage of this cycle is slavery. The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin, the king of Canaan; headquartered at Hazor a large city in what was northern

Israel. Joshua had defeated Jabin's grandfather and burned Hazor to the ground years earlier. But Israel had let their enemies live in the land, and these people had rebuilt the city and grown strong again.

Jabin's commander was Sisera, and he's described as having 900 iron chariots. Sisera will play a much larger role in this story than Jabin. He may have been a Philistine. The Philistines had learned how to work with iron, and they had a monopoly in this. Whenever anyone wanted anything made out of iron, they had to go to his town to get it. This was how they kept Israel enslaved. It says Sisera "severely oppressed" Israel for 20 years.

Chapter 5, which records the song of Deborah, describes this oppression and gives a picture of how bad things were in Israel until Deborah arose.

**"In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, And travelers went by roundabout ways. The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, Until I, Deborah, arose, Until I arose, a mother in Israel. New gods were chosen; Then war was in the gates. Not a shield or a spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel"** (Judges 5:6-8).

The highways were deserted, there was no communication, no travel. The peasantry had disappeared, which meant there was nothing produced on the land. Everybody from the country had moved to the cities for safety. There was no loyalty to the true God. New gods were chosen in hopes that they might deliver Israel. There was no safety; there was war in the gates. There was no defense; no spear was seen among 40,000 Israelites. There was no leadership in the nation. Life was fruitless, barren and bankrupt. Finally, after 20 years of this, the Lord raised up a judge.

**"Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment"** (Judges 4:4-5).

Deborah was married, although we don't know anything about her husband. More important to our story, she was a prophetess. She spoke for God. Although it was unusual for women to play this role in Israel, she wasn't the first woman to do this. Miriam was a prophetess and so was Huldah. Deborah's spiritual wisdom and authority was recognized all over Israel. She lived in Palm Springs...not really! But she sat under a famous palm tree in the southern part of Israel. People knew that place and they knew her reputation and came from all over to hear

her judgments. She knew all about what Sisera was doing in the north and she had a plan. Look at vv. 6-7.

**“Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and said to him, ‘Behold, the LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded, “Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.””**”

Deborah sends for Barak, who lives in the north, and is well acquainted with the oppression. She confronts him with a directive from God. Notice that Deborah seems to understand her role. It wasn't her place to lead Israel in battle. She realized that God wanted a man to lead the charge, so she called Barak to summon 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and march to Mt. Tabor. This many Israelites on the warpath would surely draw out Sisera with his chariots and troops. The idea seems to be if Barak did his part, God would take care of the rest; somehow he would lead Sisera into the trap.

It was decision time for Barak. There is no question that what he was being called to do required faith. From a human standpoint, it was suicide. His response is found in v. 8: **“Then Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”**” My first response to that is, “What a wimp! Be a man!” Or at least, “Where is your faith?” But maybe this is an expression of faith. He's willing to go, but he also felt that as a recognized spiritual authority, he would need Deborah's visible presence and support, especially as he tried to rally 10,000 men to go and fight in what seemed like an impossible task.

Her response seems to confirm this in v. 9: **“She said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.’ Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.”** She doesn't chastise him or put him down. She tells him, “I'll surely go with you, but there will be just one proviso: The honor of killing Sisera will not be yours. The honor will be with a woman.” This is not a rebuke, it's a statement of fact. It sounds like she is saying the honor will be hers, Deborah's, but later we'll discover she's talking about someone else—another woman. This is why the writer adds this parenthetical note in v. 11: **“Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.”** This information seems to come out of the blue. The Kenites were friends with Israel because of their ancient ties with Moses. But, as we'll see in a minute, a Kenite woman will play an important role in Israel's victory and the writer is preparing us for that.

So Barak calls Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh and they gather together 10,000 men who march up to Mt. Tabor, which is located at the end of the Megiddo Valley, commonly called Armageddon. Sisera hears about it, gathers up his 900 iron chariots, and heads out for battle, ready for a rout. The stage is set. Up on Mt. Tabor, Deborah senses the moment has come.

**“Deborah said to Barak, ‘Arise! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the LORD has gone out before you.’ So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. The LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left”** (Judges 4:14-16).

She encourages Barak by reminding him that “the Lord has given Sisera into your hands...the LORD has gone ahead of you.” The Lord's role is even clearer in v.15: **“The Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots.”** The idea behind the word “rout” is that he threw Sisera's army into confusion. We wonder, “What happened? How did they do it? What about all those chariots?” In order to understand this we have to turn to Deborah's song in chapter 5. In v. 5 she sings, **“The earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water.”** And then over in v. 21 she says, **“The torrent of Kishon swept them away.”** As Sisera and his 900 chariots were coming through the valley floor, suddenly the heavens opened. God sent a torrential downpour of rain down on the valley. The River Kishon was a dried up riverbed, but suddenly it sprang to life and water flooded the valley so that the whole area became a sea of mud and water. This is when Deborah tells Barak, “Charge!” When the 10,000 Israelites charge down off the mountain, the 900 chariots become bogged down in the mud, and the Canaanites had to abandon them and run for safety. The Israelites followed them and destroyed them completely.

One of the things we can learn from this story, and we see this throughout Judges, is that *God is able to defeat our most powerful enemies*. There are certain enemies we're willing to take on because we think we can defeat them, but there are others that are so strong we don't even bother because they're fortified with iron chariots. Some of you are dealing with enemies like that; you're oppressed. Perhaps it's the pain and stigma of a divorce. Perhaps it's the overwhelming pressure of being a single parent. Perhaps it's the anguish and the hurt of having been being abused as a child. Perhaps it's a crippling addiction or a troubled marriage. There's a message of hope in this passage. God can defeat the most powerful enemies in your life! He's able to unleash all the forces of creation if necessary. “The Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Behold, the Lord has gone out before you.” This story is not about what you can do; it's about

what God can do. God can do amazing things! The question we have to ask ourselves is, "How big is our God?" When we face powerful enemies, the answer is not physical, but spiritual. What we need is not an iron chariot, but a living faith in God.

Just like Deborah and Barak, *we have to be willing to step out in faith and obedience*. At times we're reluctant to do that. Perhaps we've grown complacent. We need to be roused. In v. 12 of the song, we hear these words, **"Awake, awake, Deborah...Arise, Barak and take away your captives"** (5:12). Just like Deborah and Barak, we need to wake up and rise up because we're fed up. We hang back and play it safe. It's interesting, in Deborah's poem, some of the tribes are praised because they were willing to step up and join the fight, but others were rebuked. Look at what she says to the tribe of Reuban, Gilead, Dan and Asher.

**"Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, To hear the piping for the flocks? Among the divisions of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead remained across the Jordan; And why did Dan stay in ships? Asher sat at the seashore, And remained by its landings"** (Judges 5:16-17).

Reuban thought about it. They may have even prayed about it. But then they just said, "Nah, that really isn't our battle. Things aren't that bad." But God calls us to act. Faith always translates into actions. So you are oppressed by the iron chariot of pornography. It's not enough just to say, "God, I really feel bad about this." You have to step out in faith and obedience. Usually that means you tell someone that you can trust. You get into a group where you can talk about it and encourage each other. Or your marriage is a mess. What do you do? Do you just live with it? No. You step out in faith. You talk to your spouse. You take responsibility for your own stuff. You get some help. You don't have to say, "Gee, I wonder if God wants me to do anything about that?" Trust me, he does. There are some things you just know you should do. Don't let past failure or even the backlash of friends and family deter you.

But let's finish the story. In a fitting epilogue, Sisera tries to escape. He ends up in the tent of none other than Heber, the Kenite. He thinks this is his lucky day; the gods must be smiling on him because the Kenites were friends of Jabin. But it's not Heber he meets up with, it's his wife.

**"Now Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, 'Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid.' And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. He said to her, 'Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.' So she opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him. He said to her, 'Stand in the doorway of the tent, and it shall be if anyone comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there anyone here?'' that you shall say, 'No.'" But Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through**

**into the ground; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died. And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him and said to him, 'Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.' And he entered with her, and behold Sisera was lying dead with the tent peg in his temple"** (Judges 4:17-22).

So Deborah's prophecy comes true. It wasn't the woman we thought it would be. It wasn't Deborah. But nonetheless Sisera falls at the hand of a woman, and she gets the honor. At the end of the song, she writes as only a woman could, of the mother of Sisera waiting for her son to come home from battle.

**"Out of the window she looked and lamented, The mother of Sisera through the lattice, 'Why does his chariot delay in coming? Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots tarry?' Her wise princesses would answer her, Indeed she repeats her words to herself, 'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A maiden, two maidens for every warrior; To Sisera a spoil of dyed work, A spoil of dyed work embroidered, Dyed work of double embroidery on the neck of the spoiler?'"** (Judges 5:28-30).

## II. Principles

You can see why I've called this sermon Mothers on the Warpath. I mean, we have a lot of women and mothers in the story. Not only is there Deborah, but there is Jael, and here even the mother of Sisera gets in on the act. These are strong women.

It reminds me of a story about a mother who was tucking her little boy into bed during a violent thunderstorm. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?" The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug and said, "I can't, dear, I have to sleep with your daddy." The boy was silent for a minute and at last said, "The big sissy!"

But on a more serious note, I started by talking about women. And it is Mother's Day, so I want to spend the rest of our time talking about what we learn from this story about that. There are two great women in this story, and through these women we learn *how God uses women/mothers in strategic ways to accomplish victory*. Let's look first at Deborah. As we saw, Deborah calls herself a "mother in Israel." As I thought about that, it struck me that Deborah was NOT doing a man's job, but she was doing exactly what a woman and a mother is supposed to do. She's a prophetess and a judge, with an extremely valuable ministry, yet she understands that she was not to be the leader in battle. God had called Barak to that role, and she was content with that. Deborah saw her job as being a helper to a man who was reluctant to be a man. As a mother in Israel, she was a nurturer, an encourager, a supporter who could build up the faith in a man.

Even though Deborah and Barak weren't married, this is a great model for marriage. The root of the problem in many marriages is a lack of leadership. Many women complain about that. It creates a lot of tension in the home. Men are reluctant to lead, and women really don't want to, but they feel they're forced to. "If you won't take initiative to have our family pray together I guess I will." A pattern soon develops. A wife can grow resentful and she begins to nag and criticize. She takes on the job of the Holy Spirit and begins pointing out all the failures in her husband's life. She tells him all the ways he messes up, and he feels pressure to perform. He feels like a failure, so he withdraws in silent resentment, which fuels more criticism. There is nothing more harmful to marriage than this type of behavior. It's absolutely devastating. But this wasn't how Deborah functioned. She saw herself as an encourager, a supporter. She knew there was no limit to the good a woman could do for a man when she saw her role as one of support for his faith and his leadership.

I think of several women in my own life. My great-grandmother was an Italian-American who barely spoke English and had little formal education. When she was 17 she got married by arrangement. But when I was 20 years old and trying to decide whether or not to get married myself, and scared to death of failure by the way, she was the one who said to me, "You can do it, You gotta do it." With her encouragement, I did it.

My own mother was not a believer. When I chose to enter full time ministry it was difficult for her to understand. But once she saw how determined I was, she became my greatest supporter. She never saw me preach a sermon, but I always felt she was there for me.

But the woman who has been my greatest support is my wife of 26 years. She knows everything about me. She knows my greatest weaknesses. She knows that I'm not the greatest leader, but when she supports me and affirms me, the effect on me is unbelievable. I never could have graduated from seminary or pastored a church without her support and encouragement. When I know that she's for me, there is nothing I can't tackle. Rather than putting me down for something I've failed at, if she supports me and builds me up, I can get back up and conquer the world. Her faith is often as simple and forthright as Deborah's. "Go and march out to Mt. Tabor and the Lord will give them into your hands." It's a simple faith but it's a deep faith, and I've drawn on it many times over the years. You wives and mothers have tremendous power in the lives of your husbands and sons; the question is, how will you use that power? Will you use it to tear down or to encourage?

But I also want to say something about Jael. You might think that this is one woman we shouldn't imitate. I mean, talk about a headache! But in Deborah's song she says in v. 24, **"Most blessed of woman is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite."** Notice how it was specifically Jael's role as wife and mother that were used to defeat the enemy. First, she welcomes Sisera into her tent. The law of hospitality in those days meant that he would be safe there. Then twice we're told that she covers him with a rug or a blanket. When he asks her for water, she does even better than that and provides him with milk. This was probably a kind of yogurt or curdled milk, a drink still enjoyed in the Arab world, called *leben*. Finally, she agrees to stand in the doorway of the tent and divert any inquirers as to his whereabouts. Even her skill with the hammer and tent peg was part of her normal responsibilities as a woman. This story is not glorifying treachery or murder, but it's showing us that God uses the normal duties and roles of wife and mother to allow us to gain victory over our enemies. Remember what God said when he cursed the serpent? **"I will put enmity between you and the women, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel"** (Gen. 3:15). It was the offspring of a woman that would crush the serpent's head! That's warfare! A woman welcomes someone into her home; she cooks a meal for her family; she tucks a child into bed; she protects her home from those who destroy it. That's not meaningless work. That's the work of God. That's waging war! That's the work that brings victory.

## CONCLUSION

James Dobson writes, "If I could write a prescription for the women of the world, I would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth (taken three times a day until the symptoms disappear). I have no doubt that this is their greatest need. If women felt genuinely respected in their role as wives and mothers, they would not need to abandon it for something better. If they felt *equal* with men in personal worth, they would not need to be equivalent to men in responsibility. If they could only bask in the dignity and status granted them by the Creator, then their femininity would be valued as their greatest asset rather than scorned as an old garment to be discarded. Without question, the future of a nation depends on how it sees its women, and I hope we will teach our little girls to be glad they were chosen by God for the special pleasures of womanhood."

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