

LESSONS 7: Song of Deborah (Part 2 & 3) JUDGES 5

RECAP: General observations about the song:

- **It is written in archaic Hebrew.** Even Jewish scholars have had difficulty in translating it, which is why there is a great deal of variation in translations.
- **The song differs from the narrative.** It has some **additional information** not included in the narrative.
- **It is written in first person.** You are meant to identify with the speaker as if you are speaking.
- **It is poetic literature,** which means the text will incorporate figurative language such as metaphors, similes, hyperbole, personification, and symbolism.
- **The song is structured around three sets of comparisons.**
 - **Part 1 (Judges 5:2-11a)** compares a powerful God to a powerless people serving other gods.
 - **Part 2 (Judges 5:11b-23)** compares battle details: Israel's warriors to the Canaanite
 - **Part 3 (Judges 5:24-31)** compares two women: Jael and Sisera's mother.

Recap of Part 1: The highway vs. the byway (some final thoughts)

Israel left the *orach* – the highway which represents God's way of life – and took the byway. This is how the byways play out:

When we depend on a power other than God's and turn to doing what is right in our own eyes, oppression will take us. **Oppression** leads to **fear** and **despair** and feelings of **powerlessness**.

The reaction to feeling powerless may either be:

- a) **Destructive anger: Take the power back by force of will or violence.** This pitches us into warfare we were never meant to fight. Constant fighting becomes wearying and oppressive.
- b) **Silence: Succumb and withdraw.** We hunker down into defensive positions, hide behind walls, withdraw into fortified positions. We become isolated and fractured as a community. This is the path that Israel chose.

All oppressions begin with a person doing what is right in their own eyes and walking away from God to pursue another master.

All oppressions end with the person returning to God.

The enemy never puts up a fight when God's children are getting off the path. The battles begin only when Israel decides to return to God's straight highway. The *mecillah* (a different kind of "highway" from the *orach*) is where the battle rages. There are stumbling blocks in the *mecillah* that can prevent a return to God and these need to be addressed when helping one another in the battle.

1. **Failing to rest in God's power – seeking comfort in transient things** (Isaiah 40:1-26)
2. **Rejecting God's love/despair & self-pity** (Isaiah 49:14–51:3)

3. **Embracing a wrong perspective and pursuit of earthly wealth** (Isaiah 54:11–55:5) (pursuing Baals and Ashtoreths)
4. **Feeling fearful** (Isaiah 51:12–52:12)
5. **Feeling shame and humiliation** (Isaiah 54:1–10)
6. **Letting our dark side overcome us** and losing sight of the kingdom of light/being children of light (Isaiah 60:1–22)
7. **Remaining silent** and/or acting with **destructive anger** (responses to powerlessness) Isaiah 61:10–63:9 (The purpose of the watchmen of Ezekiel 33:1-11)

Questions for Reflection:

This is the path the byway leads us down:

Idolatry . . . oppression . . . fear . . . despair and powerlessness . . . destructive anger or silence.

- When you look at our country, where are we on this path as a nation?
- Do you, personally, feel yourself on this path somewhere with some personal oppressor you are dealing with?
- If so, where have you stumbled? (if you are feeling fear, despair, shame, destructive anger or silent withdrawal into isolation, then you have stumbled over one of the stumbling stones.)
- Regardless of the direction the country goes, do you personally have to stay on this path?
- How do you get back to the highway? (Preview of what God models with Gideon.)
 - Begin with the man. Get the man right with God. Address the stumbling blocks that are keeping him from getting back on the highway.
 - Have the man put his house in order and on the right path.
 - Begin to deal with the greater community/nation/world.

Part of our feelings of powerlessness come from trying to tackle the greater issue first instead of dealing with the man first. Just focus on the man— yourself first, then your brother. Stand where you are, do what you can with what you have, and it will be enough in God's eyes.

PART 2 (Judges 5:12-23) Comparison of Israel vs. the Canaanite kings

Read Judges 5:11-23.

The narrative segues from the grand overview in Part 1 to a focus on the battle in Part 2. The text follows the narrative flow with “then” statements in verses 11, 13, 19b, and 22:

“Then the people of the LORD shall go down to the gates.” (v11b, NKJV)

“Then” marks the **calling of Deborah and Barak**.

“Then the survivors came down, the people against the nobles; The LORD came down for me against the mighty.” (v13)

“Then” marks the **calling of Israel**.

“. . . Then the kings of Canaan fought . . .” (19b)

“Then” marks the **battle**.

“Then the horses’ hooves pounded . . .” (22)

“Then” marks the **retreat**.

Judges 5:13 and 23 create bookends within the battle sequence by a repetition of phrases:

“. . . The LORD came down for me against the mighty.” (13b)

“Because they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.” (23b)

These bookends establish the LORD as the deliverer. Though the rest were participants, the battle belonged to the LORD. He was the one who called Barak to gather Israel, and He was the one who called Sisera to battle through an undisclosed means. He was the one who deployed Sisera’s army and delivered it to Barak. There is no single human deliverer named in this narrative. The LORD alone stands as the deliverer of His people.

While there is a general mention of the battle in Part 2, the focus is more on the participants than on relating the battle details.

- Verses 13-18 establish who of Israel did and did not participate. Deborah’s words give an assessment of each tribes’ participation.
- Verses 19-23 give us a view of the Canaanite kings in battle with earthly and heavenly forces.
- Part 2 ends with the Angel of the LORD rendering judgment against a certain faction (Meroz) for failing to help.

Part 2 parallels the structure of Judges 1. There is the call to retake the land and an assessment of their accomplishment and failure. This is followed by the judgment of the Angel of the LORD against those who failed, much like the judgment of Bochim.

The Calling of Israel (v13-18)

10. Knowing what we know of the battle, who are the survivors or remnant (*sariyd*) in verse 13?

If we are following the flow of the narrative, then the remnant are those who have come through the oppression and have called upon the LORD to be saved.

The LORD used the oppression as the testing ground for His people to see which among them would return to Him. Only a remnant survived, and it is this remnant that He now exerts Himself to deliver.

11. Who participated? (v14-15a, 18)

- **Ephraim** “whose roots are in Amalek” – it is unclear whether Amalek is used as a proper name or a common phrase meaning “dweller of the valley”
- **Benjamin**
- **Machir** (West Manasseh as opposed to Gilead or East Manasseh)
- **Zebulun** “those who bear the recruiter’s staff.” (NKJV) Again, this phrase is a difficult translation. The Hebrew phrase is *b’shevet sofer*.

shevet: a stick (for punishing, writing, fighting, ruling, walking, etc.)

sofer: (noun) muster-officer, secretary, scribe (verb) to count, recount, relate

It can be translated either in military terms as those who bear the staff of command and marshal a number of people, or those who are called to give a written account such as a scribe (as the KJV translates it).

- **Issachar**
- **Naphtali** (Zebulun and Naphtali are the only ones Barak called specifically according to Chapter 4, and they are given the highest honor here in the Song of Deborah for having jeopardized their lives to the point of death, v18)

12. Who did not participate and why not?

- **Reuben** had great resolves of heart
- **Gilead** (Gad/East Manasseh): stayed away
- **Dan** remained on his ships
- **Asher** stayed at the sea shore and kept out of the fight

Reuben and Gilead: The tribes east of the Jordan had been commissioned by Moses and Joshua to help their brothers claim their inheritance, but once that obligation was finished, it would seem that these tribes returned to their side of the Jordan and stayed there.

The tribe of Reuben was geographically farthest from the fight. The text says that they had “great resolves of heart” and yet not enough to get involved with the fight, apparently. They commiserated, empathized, agreed that the oppression was just awful, but didn’t offer help.

They are asked: “*Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings [sherukah] for the flocks?*” (v16) **Sherukah** means to whistle in a sense of calling with a pipe or whistle (as a

shepherd calls for his sheep, or to whistle in a sense of hissing and derision. The piping for the flock – the call of the shepherd. Their call to battle does not come from Barak. It is the LORD's battle, and He is the Great Shepherd calling His flock to battle. The tribe of Reuben ignores the Great Shepherd's whistling for them because they are too busy tending their own flocks to come. The call of their obligations at home was louder than God's call.

God gives this warning to those who do not answer the call: *“Because My people have forgotten Me, they have burned incense to worthless idols. And they have caused themselves to stumble in their ways, from the ancient paths, to walk in pathways and not on a highway, to make their land desolate and a perpetual hissing [sherukah]; Everyone who passes by it will be astonished and shake his head.”*- Jeremiah 18:15-16

Dan and Asher: Dan remained on his ships (*oniya*), that is, his merchant ships. Dan had business to attend to and could not come.

Asher stayed by the seashore. The battle was right on their home front, and yet they remained on the seaside, which perhaps indicates something of where their loyalties lay. The sea is symbolic of the Gentile nations, and Asher remained on the sea's side.

The same could be said of Dan, who put off entering battle for the gain to be made by sea-faring pursuits.

Battling the Canaanite kings

13. Where does the battle take place (Is this an earthly or heavenly battle)?

“. . . then the kings of Canaan fought in Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo . . .” Physically, the war is fought in the Jezreel Valley. Taanach and Megiddo are major cities in the valley, and Kishon is a literal river. The battle is fought between Israel and the Canaanite kings in a physical sense, but the battle really is the LORD's.

“They fought from the heavens; The stars from their courses fought against Sisera.” The imagery invokes the picture of a heavenly, spiritual battle as much as a physical one. Israel is personified as stars (Deut 1:10, 10:22 – “the LORD your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude”).

“The torrent of Kishon swept them away, that ancient torrent . . .” The highly figurative language ties back to the opening picture of the LORD striding into battle with the forces of creation at His call: *“. . . the heavens poured, the mountains gushed . . .”* (Judges 5:4-5)

14. The Hebrew word for “courses” in verse 20 is *mecillah*. How is that Hebrew word translated in other Scripture verses?

Literal definition: Highway, raised road, public road (a different highway than *orach*).

In **2 Chronicles 9:11**, the *mecillah* are the grand, terraced staircases leading to the Temple and king's palace. The “highway” is like a grand concourse of gigantic proportions.

Figuratively:

The *mecillah* is the **path of a star** through the heavens, or the **grand causeway** in which the battle rages like the Jezreel Valley (Judges 5:20). In keeping with the picture of the grand staircase leading to the Temple, the highway is figurative of **the way of the upright** who depart from evil (Proverbs 16:17) and the **way of return to God** (Isaiah 40:3, 62:10). When you hear the

word *mecillah*, it ought to prompt a remembrance of the Isaiah commands to prepare the way and remove the stumbling stones.

The picture of the *mecillah* and its connection to the commands in Isaiah to prepare the way and remove the stumbling stones reinforces the theme of helping one another in the battle. Part 2 ends with a judgment and curse against those who did not help, delivered by the Angel of the LORD

14. Who is Meroz (v23)?

Meroz is an unidentified people – perhaps Israel, the nations, or both. The name means “refuge” yet in practice they offer no help or refuge.

For whatever reason, they did not join the battle. It is not that they didn’t help their brethren. It says that they did not come to the help of the LORD, and judgment is rendered on them by the Angel of the LORD.

Questions for Reflection:

The Song of Deborah emphasizes the theme of helping one another in battling oppression. Deborah does it for Barak. Heber and Jael play their parts. Deborah and the Angel of the LORD rebuke those who don’t help.

- How do we respond to the Shepherd’s call when commanded to help those battling in the *mecillah*?
 - What are some of the reasons we do not join the battle?
 - How can we fall into Reuben’s model? **Read James 2:14-17.**
 - How can we fall into Dan and Asher’s model?
- How does Meroz describe us? **Read Matt 25:31-46.**

PART 3 (Judges 5:24-30) Comparison of Jael vs. Sisera’s Mother

Sisera’s fall is epic, made further ignoble by having died at the hand of a woman—a disgraceful death for Sisera and also a blow to Barak’s honor. Jael receives the *barachu* (blessing) that Barak should have had.

Jael is a person who seems out of place. God brings her to this place in her life for a purpose. Like Shamgar, she shines as a heroic example of a simple woman who stood where she was and did what she could with what she had at hand, and it was enough. After this narrative, she is never heard from again.

15. Compare Jael and Sisera’s mother. What do we know about each?

Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite:

- 1) a Gentile,
- 2) a woman in a tent: transient, nomadic, without permanence,
- 3) she waits alone to hear the outcome of the battle,
- 4) she acts with wisdom, and
- 5) her focus is on doing what is right in the Lord’s eyes

Sisera's mother (unnamed):

- 1) a Gentile,
- 2) a woman in a lordly house: solid, established, of nobility in her world (was her place any less transient in this life than Jael's?)
- 3) she waits with her noble women [*saraot* – princesses] to hear the outcome of the battle,
- 4) her women are described as wise, yet clearly without understanding, and
- 5) their focus is on the spoil – the fine embroidered and dyed garments

16. After the oppression, how many years does the land have rest? 40

Questions for Reflection:

If you aren't struggling, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be in the battle.

17. How are Deborah and Jael models for us in dealing with believers like Barak?
18. How do you motivate a Barak to deal with the oppressor?
19. What weapons or tools do we need to be effective in helping a person deal with oppression?