

Women in Ministry (Part 1)

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, friend. I'm going to share something with you today that some people, well, they might just consider it a bit controversial. With some people, I'm going to be rubbing the cat's fur the wrong way. What I always say is, if I'm rubbing the cat's fur the wrong way, then let the cat turn around. If you love the Bible, you are going to love this message because that's where we're going to take it from. Get ready! We're going to get into the Word together.

I am really glad that you have chosen to join me right now. As I said a few moments ago, what I'm going to be talking about, to some people, is really controversial. Some people, unless they love the Bible, because of the posture they have taken regarding this, will not like the message. But you know what? I've just come to grips with the fact that God is smarter than I am. As King David said so many centuries ago in Psalm 119, "I consider all of your precepts concerning all things to be right." What we're going to be talking about is women in ministry. Here's the question, does God ever anoint women to assume roles of leadership among His people?

Well, we need to look to the divine record and see what examples, if any, are there in the Scriptures. Today we're going to be looking at a couple of women, and we're going to begin in the Old Testament. The first lady that I want to talk to you about is Miriam. She's the elder sister of Moses. The Bible says in Micah 6:4 NKJV, this is God speaking, He says,

⁴ "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."

Miriam was sent by God, just like Moses was sent by God, and just like Aaron was sent by God, her two brothers. And God not only said that He sent her to the children of Israel, but He said, "I sent before you." She stood before the people as Moses and as Aaron did. After Pharaoh and his army were drowned in the Red Sea, that amazing miracle took place. And the Israelites passed through the sea, and they looked on all the corpses there of the Egyptians, and they began to sing and rejoice. You find the story in Exodus 15, this beautiful song that they sang. It says this in Exodus 15:20-21 NKJV,

²⁰ Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. ²¹ And Miriam answered them: "Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!"

She's called a prophetess. That is one who speaks on God's behalf to the people. We know that God did speak through her at times to the people because she actually got prideful about that later on and got in trouble. She and Aaron got together and said, "Who does Moses think he is?" The root cause of that, it tells us, is because Moses married an Ethiopian woman, and Miriam and Aaron were not happy with that. They said, "Well, has God only spoken through Moses? Has he not also spoken through us?" God burst forth on the scene and says, "Hey, how is it you aren't afraid to speak against my servant, Moses?" Anyway, Miriam got in trouble, but she knew

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that God had used her and had spoken through her. Here it calls her a prophetess, one who speaks on God's behalf to the people.

Here, as we read, she's being used in a spectacular way to help weave this beautiful anthem of God's victory into the consciousness of the people. She was respected and recognized among the Israelites, and she was an anointed vessel of God. Some would argue, "Yes, but she was only used to minister to the women," says here, "Because she was singing and the women were answering her." Well, I would say that's doubtful. In fact, we're going to look at another woman in a moment that had a lot to do not just with women but with men. Her name was Deborah.

This is during the time of the judges. Just a bit of background, this appeared in Israel's history before they had a king. They were what was referred to as a theocracy. God was their king, and occasionally, judges would rule in the land, and they would be the highest governing person in Israel under God. Israel went through this cycle for many hundreds of years during this period of the judges. It basically went like this. Israel would have a season, a time of rest and blessing, and sometimes it would last for a decade, sometimes for 30 years, or 40 years.

Then they would forget God, forget about Him, and they would sin and turn to idol worship. Their enemies would come in and conquer them and harass them for a period of time. They would subjugate Israel, and finally, the people of God would repent, and they would cry out to God for mercy. God would respond by raising up a deliverer or a judge who would bring victory to the people. Who would lead them in conquering their oppressors, and they would experience, again, this period or season of rest. It might be for a shorter time or a longer period of time, and judges, that deliverer, would rule during that time. I want to pick the story up in Judges 4, about one of Israel's Judges named Ehud. This is at the end of a period of 40 years of rest that they had from their enemies. It says this in Judges 4:1-5 NKJV,

¹ When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord.

² So the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth Hagoyim. ³ And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel. ⁴ Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Now, the only woman to ever achieve the position of judge was Deborah. She was the only one ever placed there by God and by the common consent of the people. From a historical point of view, she would be in the category of a Joan of Ark, who, some 27th centuries later, would lead the French to victory and ride in front of them. Deborah, the name means honeybee, and it's a really fitting name because she was very busy. Busy gathering honey for her friends, and she had a fatal sting for her enemies, as the Canaanites came to experience.

We read in verse four that she was the wife of a man named Lapidoth. Jewish history tells us that he was a candle maker for the temple. That very well may be true, for his name in Hebrew means torch. It's interesting. Nothing else is said or known about him. Whatever his role was, it was not prominent like the role of his wife, Deborah. He had to adjust to a lifestyle that was very different from that of most men. He was married to a famous woman who was called into leadership, called into ministry if you would. That would take a lot of adjusting, and he would need to be supportive of what God called her to do.

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Now, that doesn't mean that he wasn't the head of his home. It doesn't mean that she wore the pants in the relationship, so to speak. But I will guarantee you, if Lappidoth was male at all, he would've really had to do some dealing with his own ego. In my lifetime, I have seen situations like this where the woman was the one that had the gift of God on her, and the husband was a Christian but not gifted or called into a leadership role. I've seen it work very well in some cases, but I've also seen the opposite, where it didn't work very well.

I just want to tell you, if you are marrying someone that is called into ministry, you just need to get all that out on the table. If you are a woman and you feel like God has a call on your life, or if you're a man, you feel that there's ministry in your future, then you just need to get all the cards out on the table before you get married. Because I'm telling you, the life of a minister, the life of a leader among God's people, is not an easy one. There are challenges that you will face that you do not face in any other vocation or calling. Some things are similar, but some things are not.

Now, apparently, it was working for Lappidoth and Deborah because her ministry was extremely fruitful. But the truth is, it's really hard to have a fruitful ministry when you've got a miserable marriage. Again, we read in verses 4 and 5, it said she was a prophetess and said she was judging Israel. It said in verse 5, "She would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Rama and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." She sat under the palm tree, so she was obviously very wise as they would come to her for judgment and for counsel. She was obviously very well respected by the people.

This word, judgment, it says, "They came to her for judgment," it literally means "a verdict or a judicial sentence, a formal decree." Deborah's word was law. She was the highest authority in the nation under God. Now, I know some are probably swallowing pretty hard right now, but it's the truth. I didn't make this up. This is in your Bible, my friend. Deborah was the judge of Israel at this time. She was the highest authority in the nation under God. Another interesting thought. Why did she sit out under the palm tree out in the open? Well, Jewish history tells us it's because she refused to allow herself to be alone with a man in her home.

I think we can gather from this that she was a very virtuous woman who was not going to give opportunity to the flesh. How many leaders do we know that have fallen into the temptation of sexual immorality because they allow themselves to get into compromising situations? The Scripture says, "Avoid the very scenes of temptation." I have had many a friend, not a few. I've had many a friend. I've been connected with ministers around the world. I have met hundreds of pastors. I've had the privilege to be friends with people in ministry around the globe. I have watched many of them, friends and acquaintances, get tangled up in sexual immorality and crash and burn when it came to ministry. Some of them lost their marriages; some lost their families. All of them that did such things lost credibility, and so much of the time, it just could have been avoided.

I remember I was speaking at a large conference once, and another friend of mine was there. He's got a couple of people with him from the ministry. It's great. Most of the time, I always travel with someone. I think it's a good thing to do. When I can, I'll take a young man with me to travel and help mentor him, but I do it just for accountability reasons as well. It depends on where I'm going, what the situation is. But he's there at this conference and, he has a secretary with him, not his wife, his secretary. I talked to him. I said, "What's up with this?" He said, "Oh, well, my wife didn't want to come on this trip." And granted, you need to understand this was before the days of mobile phones. We didn't have the internet, so you couldn't work and do

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everything in a mobile fashion. That just didn't exist at the time. We were still using typewriters, and any computer was just a ginormous thing.

He says, "Well, I needed such and such work, and she's here to do this work, and I just needed her to be here because I'm involved in A, B, and C." There's a semi-legitimate reason for it, but I pulled him aside. I said, "Listen, you're an idiot." I said, "You're a handsome guy." And he was, he was a handsome guy. I said, "Your wife isn't here." I said, "She's staying in a room right in the same hall as you." He says, "Yes, she's got the room next door in the hotel." I said, "You're a double idiot."

I said, "She's an attractive young girl who looks up to you not just because you're a handsome guy but you've got this leadership role in the Kingdom. I can already tell by the way she looks at you that she really admires you. You're just setting yourself up for failure." He sputtered and said, "Well, no, no, no." I said, "Stop." I said, "I've seen it happen too many times. I'm just telling you, you're an idiot. You need to fix this thing. You should never do this again. Never travel with a young woman like that again." To his credit, he took my advice, and to my knowledge, he never did that again. You know what? I've had other friends. In fact, I was on a trip just after that in—Actually, I happened to be in the same nation. It was just a different conference, and there was another guy who was a speaker at the conference. He didn't have his PA with him; he had two. He had two attractive girls that worked in his office with him, and he needed them for support and for work. In between meetings, he's taking them out to the mall and shopping.

He was an acquaintance of mine, I didn't feel like I could really speak to him about it, but I talked to some of the other guys that were close with him. I said, "You need to say something about this. You need to talk to him. This is just wrong. It looks wrong. It is wrong. It's just dumb." Well, anyway, they talked to him, and he just brushed them off. But within a year, he had ended up in bed with one of those girls and had lost his marriage. Turned out that the girl he got in bed with also happened to be—she worked for him, but she was the wife of one of his good friends. He didn't just ruin his marriage; he ruined somebody else's marriage.

We read about Deborah, and she only sits out in the open under the palm tree, where people come to her and where she renders judgment. She knew that all it would take is one mess up to destroy much. She knew that the stakes were high. My friend, they're always high. Listen, if you're listening to me right now and you are in ministry, or maybe you're just a Christian business leader, and maybe you're spending long hours in your office, you've got to get stuff done, and your secretary is there, or your PA is there or whatever, you just got a girl around you, and she sees you in ways that maybe your wife at home doesn't see you.

She sees you when you're maligned, and you take it like a man, and she admires that. She sees you when you're attacked unjustly, and she sees that you deal with that in a Godly way. She listens to you preach or whatever it is that you do. She sees you in that leadership role, and there's something attractive about that. You're there, and you're tired, and she's—All it takes is for her or for you to just put a comforting hand on someone's shoulder, and one thing leads to another. You might be thinking, "Oh, no, no, no. Come on, Bayless, never." Listen, it's happened to better men than you. It's happened to better women than you. You need to be wise and not allow yourself to get into a compromising situation because if you mess up, it won't just affect you. It'll affect your family. It'll affect your children. It'll affect those that look up to you. It'll affect other Christians. In some cases, the devil uses that as a wedge to drive between some people and God.

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I remember I was—and I didn't plan on saying all this, but I just honestly feel led by the Holy Spirit, because there's somebody listening to me. You need to hear this. I had finished ministering at the end of a service, finished my message anyway, and I was giving what we call an altar call for people to give their lives to Christ, to repent of their sin, and to put their trust in Him as Savior. I began talking to the prodigal sons and the prodigal daughters in the house. Those that had known the sweet embrace of the Father, those that had been close to the Lord, but for whatever reason, they were miles away spiritually. They may still be attending church and going through some of the motions, but they knew their hearts were as cold as ice.

And I just felt led to talk about it. I said, "There's someone here," I said, "a minister that you really looked up to—in fact, it might even be the guy that married you, and that mentored you—he messed up, messed up morally. Somehow you got angry and bitter over that, and it became a wedge between you and God, an excuse for you to just walk away from God." And I had a couple come up to me after church. I think it was the first time they'd ever been there. Guy said, "I can hardly believe this." He said, "We weren't going to come here today, but we came." He said, "I used to be in ministry. I was assistant pastor, and I was a younger man. And the gentleman that had mentored me, that had taught me about ministry, that had taught me about ethics, that had taught the Word of God to me," he got involved with, I think, a number of women and just messed up big time.

He said, "I was so disappointed and so angry at him and angry at God. I watched how it affected so many people. From that moment," he says, "I began to drift. I just realized today that was the wedge that the devil used to drive between me and God. It became my excuse. I left the ministry. I haven't been close with God in years." He's crying. His wife is there. They're both very tender. We prayed, and he rededicated his life to Jesus. But he was just some of the fallout of—didn't mean it was right for him to respond that way—but it was some of the fallout of this guy's mistake. Listen to me, leader. There is a whole lot at stake. We need to not just bring a right message, we need to live right lives. It's so, so important.

All right, let's carry on, and let's talk a little bit more about Deborah. It says that she was a prophetess. She had insight into the purpose and plan of God. She communicated the mind of God to God's people. To be a prophetess, she would have had to operate in some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; the gift of prophecy, the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom. In verses 6-7, we see her prophetic gift go into action. In that same chapter, Judges 4:6-7 NKJV says,

⁶ Then she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, 'Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun; ⁷ and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand'?"

She told Barak what God wanted done and even told him how the enemy, General Sisera, would respond. The next verse, verse 8,

⁸ And 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!"

Due to a long period of slavery and repeated failures, Barak lacked the trust in God that he should have had. He was hesitant. He was unsure, but she helped him, and she inspired him to go. We read in the next verse, verse 9,

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⁹ So she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

Again, that's her prophetic gift in operation. She says, "You're not going to get the glory. God's going to give the glory to a woman." Sure enough, we read the story, and Sisera flees from the battle. He's exhausted. He runs away and comes into some little village and asks a woman there for sanctuary. He goes into her tent, into her home. She gives him something to drink. He's tired, and he lays down to get a little bit of sleep. He's so weary from running and from the battle. While he's asleep, she sneaks up on him and drives a tent peg through his temple. Barak didn't get the glory for it. God used a woman to defeat the general. Here's the deal, Deborah prophesied that by the Spirit of God before it ever happened. Then we come to verses 13-15. These are just intriguing verses.

¹³ So Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon. ¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. ¹⁵ And 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.

We already told you what happened. Here's Deborah. She's saying, "Up! This is the day. Let's go!" A woman in charge, inspiring and motivating a hesitant leader and a nation that has known nothing but slavery and oppression for the last 20 years. Listen, she's not operating in some usurped authority. She's operating in a God-given authority that had been acknowledged both by God and by the people. She wasn't being bossy, she wasn't being pushy, but she was merely responding to the role God had called her to fill. Thank God for women like that. Women, where they're not trying to be a man, they're not trying to dominate men, they're not trying to prove that they're as good as a man, but feminine in every respect.

As a woman, she's leading, and I just want to encourage you, ladies, as a woman be responsive to the call of God on your life but be feminine. God made you a woman. He didn't make you a man. You don't have to act like a man. You don't have to talk like a man. You can be feminine through and through and be used as a leader. Now, Deborah could not only prophesy, inspire, and rule, but she could also write. Chapter 5 in Judges is called that, the song of Deborah is attributed to her authorship. Begins in verses 1-2 NKJV and says,

¹ Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: ² "When leaders lead in Israel, when the people willingly offer themselves, bless the Lord!

It certainly was a day when leaders were leading, and she was one of them. Goes on. It's very interesting. Down to verse 7, Deborah writes,

⁷ Village life ceased, it ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel.

What an interesting statement, "A mother in Israel." People were in fear because of the enemy behind closed doors, behind city walls, until this woman arose as a mother in Israel. Now, she had no children by natural birth, at least that we're told of, yet she was a mother

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spiritually. Mothers teach. They encourage. They inspire. They help direct their children. Deborah did this with many in Israel. We need some mothers in the church today. Paul said, "You may have 10,000 instructors in Christ, but not many fathers." I think the principle is true with mothers as well.

I've had some dear old saints when I got saved. One older woman in particular, she just blessed me, and she prayed for me, and she encouraged me, and she taught me some things that she knew. She helped me. Her goal, like Deborah's goal, was not to foster dependence upon her but it was to turn people toward the Lord and foster a dependence upon Him. Anyway, I wish we had more time. I think I'm going to pick this up next time because I've got a lot more to say about this. Thank God for Deborah. Thank God for His Word. Thank God for this woman who was a leader among God's people. I pray that God will bless you richly wherever you are. Whoever you are, you're known by God, and you are loved by God.

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