Deborah, a mother in Israel

Judge 5:1-31

“Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose,

arose a mother in Israel."

(5:7)

Judges 5 is a joyful song. According to verse 1, Deborah and Barak sang this song, immediately after Israel defeated Sisera with his 900 iron chariots. (Chapter 4) Do you still remember how it happened? Barak and 10 000 Israelites stood at the top of Mount Tabor. At the bottom of the mountain, in the plain near the Kishon River, stood king Jabin’s cruel commander, Sisera with his army and 900 indestructible iron chariots. They were waiting to slaughter the inferior Israelites once they reached the plain. Humanly speaking, Barak and his men stood absolutely no chance to win the battle. However, at Barak’s advance down the mountain, the Lord did something awesome. Even though it was not rainy season at all, and the Kishon River was not in flood, God suddenly caused such a great downpour of rain that the Kishon River burst its banks and swept an unexpected Sisera and his 900 iron chariots away. (5:21) On that day, Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. Only to be killed by a woman, called Jael who drilled a tent peg through his temple in his skull. Moreover, all the troops of Sisera fell by the sword, not a man was left (4:16) On that day, God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until the Israelites finally destroyed him. (4:23-24) This is why, after the battle and 20 long years of cruel oppression (4:3), Deborah and Barak burst into joyful song. They sang to the Lord. They made music to the God of Israel. (5:3)

Now, there are some commentators who claim that Deborah’s song is like a priceless jewel in Jewish literature. It is rich with Jewish symbolism, imagery and poetic devices; all things that make the song a bit difficult to understand. Fortunately, the song is also filled with many spiritual treasures that (with God’s help) we can discover and accept into our hearts. However, since the song is a bit long and therefore covers a variety of things, in today’s passage we will focus mainly on verses 1-9, with specific emphasis on the key verse (7).

Let us look at verses 1-2. On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song: “When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves— praise the LORD! Deborah and Barak, fittingly began their song by praising the Lord. They however, did not praise God just in general. No! They praised God for something very specific. Look again at verse 2. They praised God, because the princes in Israel took the lead. In other words, the leaders in Israel took up their responsibility to lead God’s people. Don’t think it is a bit strange, to praise God for something like this? One would expect that the leaders in Israel will lead their people. Why did Deborah and Barak praise God for this? Also, why did they praise God for the people who willingly offer[ed] themselves as they followed their leaders into battle? Was this not something that the people in any case would have done? Why praise God for this?

Look at verse 6. (Read) According to the map of Judges (slide 1) Shamgar son of Anath, lived in the northern part of Naphtali, near Kedesh. (Where Barak came from) Jael, as we know from chapter 4:11 lived in Zaanannim, in the southern part of Naphtali, next to Zebulun and on the northern border of Issachar. So when the author says in verse 6: “In the days of Shamgar” and “in the days of Jael,” he is referring to the whole region of Northern Israel. In this region the Canaanites became so strong and cruel that the Israelites feared to go out on the roads. (Roads were abandoned) Instead, they traveled on the back roads (winding paths) in order not to be harassed and attacked by the oppressive Canaanites.

That is not all. Look at verse 7a. It reads: Village life in Israel ceased. Now the Israelites had manyvillages on hilltops. They were quite small, with not more than 400 people in a village. These villages were unwalled, and therefore easy targets for the Canaanites. Now the Israelite planted grain, lentils, beans and barley all around their villages. But because of the Canaanite threat, peasant farmers could no longer raise or sell crops. They were too afraid the Canaanites would plunder their crops. Also, they were too afraid the Canaanites would attack their villages, burn down their houses and take their wives and daughters as prisoners. So village life ceased in Israel, as people went to live in **walled towns and cities in their regions**. But even there they were not safe from the Canaanites. Look at verse 8. W*ar came to the city gates*, yet the Israelites were either too afraid to fight back or unable to do so because not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.

Wow! The Israelites lived daily in great fear of the Canaanites. They could not travel freely on their roads nor could they stay safely in their villages. If this was the situation BEFORE Israel conquered Canaan, then we could perhaps understand why this happened. But, this was the situation AFTER Joshua and the Israelites conquered large areas in Canaan; including Northern Canaan. (Slide 2) So based on this map, we can see that the Canaanites were never supposed to conquer the Israelites. Rather, the Israelites were supposed to conquer and drive out the Canaanites from their land. But that was exactly the problem. After initially conquering Canaan, instead of driving out the Canaanites, they lived among them. Until, they forsook God and adopted the Canaanite’s god. So then, in love, God allowed the Canaanites to conquer and oppress His people. To turn their hearts back to him. Yet sadly, instead of returning to God, the Israelites drifted further and further away from Him. Until, after 20 years of cruel oppression, the leaders in Israel were too scared to lead God’s people in God’s ways. They were scared of being crushed by the Canaanites. At, the same time they were scared of being ridiculed by their own people. Because, in those oppressive circumstances, the people felt it was too difficult to obey God and follow Him. So the leaders simply did not want to lead and the people did not want to willingly follow.

**It is within this context that we can understand why Deborah and Caleb praised God so much for Israel’s leaders and willing followers. For the preceding 20 years, the leaders in Israel simply did not want to lead and the people simply did not want to follow. This helps us to understand, why** Israel’s victory over the Canaanites in Chapter 4, was such a big deal. It seems that out of the blue there came a sudden uprising amongst God’s people. A sudden willingness among the leaders to lead and the people to follow. But the question is, in their spiritually collapsed and paralyzed condition, how did this happen? What caused this spiritual revival among the people? What caused the leaders and the people to, after 20 years of spiritual paralyses and unwillingness, to suddenly rise up and conquer the mighty Canaanites?

Look again at verse 7. Can we please read today’s key verse together? Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel. The spiritual revival in Israel was caused by **Deborah, a mother in Israel! ………………..Let that sink in for a while, ,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,because when we first think about it, it does not make sense. In that male dominated society along with the spiritually passive times of the day, how could a single woman caused the leaders to lead God‘s people and the people to willingly follow them? Did they not rather need a strong military commander like Joshua? Or a powerful bible teacher, like Moses? Men of strong will and character to rebuke and chastise the unwilling Israelites. Absolutely not! If that was indeed required, we can be certain that God would have risen up a man like that. Yet, he did not. Instead, God raised up Deborah, a mother in Israel, to bring about a spiritual revival and ultimately liberation of God’s people in Canaan.**

To understand the significance of this, we need to for a moment consider the meaning of being a mother. As a man and a husband without children, I cannot claim to know exactly what a mother is to her children. Also, having left my mother’s care many years ago, it is not easy to remember exactly the details of how my mother raised and cared for me. However, when I think of a mother (or my mother) I think of someone **who unconditionally loves her children**. In times of crisis children run to their mothers, and she silently consoles them. A mother hugs, she kisses the hurt, dries the tears, bandages the scratch or cut. When children are discouraged, it’s mother who inspires and encourages them. When they are disobedient, it’s mother who corrects them. When doubtful, it’s a mother who says, “*You can do it*.” Mothers always understand, are always concerned and are always ready to help and support her children. Because, mothers love their children unconditionally.

Deborah was exactly like this towards the unwilling and faithless people in Israel. When she, as the leader in Israel, held court under the Palm of Deborah (4:5), she daily cared for the Israelites like a loving mother cares for her children. Though they were unwilling to follow God. Though they stubbornly refused to turn back to Him, Deborah did not reject or condemn them. But instead, she welcomed the Israelites tenderly like a mother welcomes her children. Then, she listened to them, advised them, taught them God’s words and gently corrected them. She even travelled with Barak, a respected commander in Israel, to help him obey God’s call to lead the Israelites into battle against Sisera and his 900 iron chariots. Deborah helped Barak, like a mother would help her son. And when the time arrived for Barak to fight, Deborah was right there with him. Telling him calmly yet confidently: Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. (4:14) Then, at Barak’s advance with his 10 000 followers, God gave them great success. He swept Sisera and his 900 iron chariots away. He subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king and liberated the Israelites from his oppressive rule. **Yet none of it would have been possible, if it was not for Deborah, a mother in Israel. Because of her motherly love, Barak could stand up as a leader. Because of her motherly care, the people could once again willingly offer themselves to God. Because of Deborah, God could liberate Israel from their enemies.**

Actually, Deborah’s motherly love was a physical manifestation of God’s warm love for His people Israel. Despite their sin. Despite their unwillingness to follow and obey Him, God deeply loved them like a mother would love her children. More amazingly, through Deborah God stood right there with His unbelieving people, sharing in their pains and sufferings, and ready to help them up and restore their broken lives. This is who God truly is. This is what He is actually like. So many times God is portrayed as an unreasonably strict God, who demands so much yet punishes his children for the slightest imperfection or mistake. But this is simply not true. Those who portray God as such an angry, cold and distant God simply do not know Him. Because, in truth, God is like the warmest, the most caring and loving mother in the world! He always loves. He always understands. He always welcomes. He always forgives. And He always….always restores!

But why is it that people do not know this about God? It is because, there are very few Deborahs in the world. Spiritual leaders who, with God’s love, so sincerely and lovingly take care of God’s people; like a mother takes care of her children. **Actually, this motherly love is exactly what you and I and all the young people on this campus needs. These days, it is not that easy to live out our faith as believers in this world. Like the Israelites had to hide from the Canaanites, so we are forced to hide ourselves from the world in fear of being ridiculed for our faith. Also, like the Israelites who abandoned their villages in fear of their crops being stolen, so we have abandoned sowing the seeds of God’s word in people’s hearts in fear that people will either reject us or our attempts will be in vain. So we too, simply play it safe by blending in with crowds, just as the Israelites blended in with the Canaanites in their cities. Yet, like the Israelites in the cities, we will never have peace nor can we ever be happy while we live in a state of spiritual paralyses. The truth is, God has called us to be spiritual leaders in this generation. Leaders that can lead students in the way of obedience to God. Followers who willingly offer themselves to God. Only when we take up our rightful positions before God, and actively and willing serve and follow the way of the Lord will we be truly liberated from our sins and sing songs of victory, like Deborah and Barak. But for you and me to be truly activated before God. For the spiritual revival to continue among us and the students on campus, there has to be at least one Deborah.**

**Personally, it would have been very convenient if I can look at anyone of you and say: you must be our Deborah. But I unexpectedly find myself in the position of leadership in our ministry. And I cannot but pray, that God may raise me as a Deborah to take care of you, as a mother takes care of her children. Humanly speaking, this is impossible for me to do. Yet, by faith I am willing to follow God’s leading, and in prayer and humility, do my best to ensure that God’s love for you, and all the students on this campus, is manifested in the way that I share God’s word with you, spend time with you, listen to your struggles, pray with you, share in your disappointments, encourage and correct where necessary. Though I myself am still just a sheep, by faith I willing to be raised by God as a Deborah, a mother-like leader in our generation. And not only me, but hopefully each and everyone of you. Let us all pray, to be raised as a Deborah in this generation.** Just imagine what would happen, if we have 50 Deborahs roaming around on our campus, taking care of students like a mother takes care of her children! Eventually, we will see a massive spiritual revival, just as in the days of Deborah. Where young people will be willing to become spiritual leaders and shepherds of God’s flock. Where students will willingly follow these leaders to fight God’s spiritual battles on our campus, our city, country, continent and the world. Amen!

In conclusion: God’s heart is just like a mother’s heart towards her children. Despite our many sins, despite our shortcomings, unbelief and unwillingness to serve and follow – God stand here with us. He shares in our pains and sufferings, and is absolutely ready to help us up and restore our broken lives. More specifically, God is eager to bring about a spiritual revival – not only in your heart but among the thousands of believers on this campus, our country and the world. So that those who were called to lead, may take up their responsibility to lead. And for those who are called to follow, to take up their responsibility to follow willingly and actively. By God’s grace, we are all very fortunate to have had shepherd Jacob and Rebekah as our Deborahs for the last 10 years. Through their motherly love and care, this ministry was raised up. So that we have several leaders who are willing to lead and many followers who are willing to follow. So now, let us continue to pray for God to raise myself, shepherdess Sarah, shepherd Lesedi, Desmond, Khomo and Donald as Deborahs who can serve and take care of you, as a mother takes care of her children. Please, pray sincerely for us! So that God may really create a good spiritual environment through us for all of you to grow spiritually, take up your positions as spiritual leaders on this campus and willingly follow and support God’s direction for our ministry. Then God will surely use and bless this ministry. And we will experience one victory after the other as we collectively fight God’s battles on this campus. And we will sing many songs of victories, just like this song in Chapter 5. Amen.