

A MOTHER IN ISRAEL - JUDGES 4:4,5

STUDIES FROM THE JUDGES #4

If one symbol of freedom were to be chosen in our country to represent all that the United States of America stands for, the Statue of Liberty would likely be that choice. Standing majestically on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, the statue of liberty has welcomed the majority of immigrants who have fled to our nation. The statue itself is remarkable because it is the largest statue ever made. The torch of this beloved lady of freedom rises 305 feet above the base of the pedestal. About 100 tons of copper, hammered into shape around an iron framework, compose this grand lady's form. But it is the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty that speaks the loudest. She is dignified with her loose robe falling in graceful folds. Her extended right hand holds a great torch of freedom and her left arm grasps a tablet bearing the date of the Declaration of Independence. A crown adorns her head with rays like the sun protruding from it, and at her feet is a broken shackle, symbolizing the overthrow of tyranny. Yes, the statue of liberty is one of the most visible symbols of all that our country stands for.

But there is one detail about the construction of the Statue of Liberty that is often overlooked. It was a monumental task, of course, to build this greatest of all statues in France and then ship it to the U.S. And many had a part in its construction. None other than Alexander Gustave Eiffel who designed the Eiffel Tower built the supporting framework. But it was the famous French Sculptor, Fredrick Auguste Bartholdi who designed the Statue of Liberty and

supervised its actual construction. When the design was complete, Bartholdi realized his need for a model whose form and features could be reproduced in the Statue's appearance. There was no shortage of suggestions that were offered to Bartholdi. In fact, just about every famous woman in history was presented as the perfect model for this work of art - from Cleopatra to Joan of Arc. But after careful consideration as to who would supply the grace and dignity necessary for this personification of freedom, Bartholdi realized in the end that there was only one woman whom he could actually use without hesitation. So when he came to the point of making this colossal masterpiece, Bartholdi chose as his model his own mother. And so, you see, the Statue of Liberty not only stands in New York City Harbor as a monument to freedom, but it also stands as a tribute in honoring the institution of motherhood as well.

As we as a nation have a mother as the leading symbol of our freedom and strength, it is appropriate this evening to study the life of Deborah who led the nation of Israel at the turn of the 12th century B.C. For Deborah was a wife and a mother. She was the wife of a man named Lappidoth, and she is called a mother in Israel in Judges 5:7. Deborah is unique as the only female judge during this period of some 340 years that we call the time of the Judges. She certainly must have been a remarkable woman indeed to have so dominated during a time in history when the cultural mandate so favored male leadership. The strength of her leadership is seen in the fact that Barak, the leader of the Israeli army, would not go into battle unless Deborah went with him to inspire and lead the troops. Note with me the significant contribution of Deborah as

we read just a portion of the account of her life.

READ JUDGES 4:1-10.

JDG 4:1 After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD. ² So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. ³ Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

JDG 4:4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.' "

JDG 4:8 Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

JDG 4:9 "Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, ¹⁰ where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.

Now this passage is most interesting for what it does and does not say about Deborah. Conspicuously absent from the Scripture text is any physical description of Deborah. Did you notice that? There is no mention of the color of her eyes or her hair style or what she was wearing. If this story would have been written today in the superficial world in which we are living, physical

appearance probably would have dominated the text. But God doesn't include any of that. No, God rather gets right to the heart of what made this woman such an influential force in the nation of Israel. It was the beauty and strength of Deborah's character which made her such a powerful force in the world in which she lived.

I WOULD INVITE YOU TO SEE 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF DEBORAH WHICH MAKE HER TO BE SUCH A FINE AND EFFECTIVE JUDGE AND LEADER.

1. Deborah was a prophetess which shows the godliness of her character. She is introduced to us in verse 4 as Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth.

Now the role of the prophetess was a very crucial and significant one in these O.T. times. We must remember that God's people who lived in the 13th century B.C. when Deborah lived did not have the written Scriptures as we have today. The only portion of the Bible which they would have had was the section that Moses had written. Moses wrote the Penteteuch - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. So the Israelites had the history of creation and the patriarchs, the law, and the account of the nation's liberation from Egypt. But that was all. They didn't have any more. And the part of the Scriptures that they did have was hand copied on papyrus or parchment. They used either dried papyrus reeds or tanned animal skins rolled up in scrolls to keep the words of God that had been given to them through Moses. We can imagine that there were not many copies of the law in these times. And the few

copies that they would have had would be carefully protected by the Priests. So your average person probably never even saw a copy of the Scriptures during the days when Deborah lived.

But God did not leave his people without a witness to his word and will. God called prophets and prophetesses during these times. Prophets and prophetesses were men and women whom God chose through whom to reveal his word to his people. God would speak directly to the prophetess. It could be through audible conversation, it could be through a dream or a vision, but whatever the means, it was unmistakable to the prophetess that it was God speaking to her. Then it was the prophetess' job to reveal the word of God accurately as He had spoken it. The prophetess was like a living Bible. The words that were spoken by the prophetess originated in the mind of God himself. So it was an awesome job to be a prophetess and it carried a heavy weight of responsibility. The prophetess had to be sensitive to the word of God; she had to walk very closely with the Lord. And then when God spoke, the prophetess had to relay that message in its entirety, without any mistake. The gravity of the responsibility of the prophetess is found in the penalty for a prophetess abusing her calling - for the penalty of a prophet or prophetess prophesying falsely according to the law was immediate death by stoning.

Deborah is introduced to us as a prophetess. This in itself says volumes about her life and character. In a day when the world seemed to be falling apart, Deborah was a woman who was sensitive to God's direction in her life. She was a woman who sought a relationship with God. She was a woman who

listened to the word of God. She was a woman who was willing to serve God.

George Campbell Morgan is remembered as one of the finest pastors to ever come out of England. Even though he didn't have a great deal of academic training, through his disciplined study of the Bible he developed into a fine Bible teacher and preacher. Among the churches that he pastored was the famous Westminster Chapel in London. G. Campbell Morgan had 4 sons who all happened to grow up to be preachers themselves. One day, when the whole family was at a social gathering, one of the guests trying to make the party more interesting by stirring up some controversy asked the Morgan clan standing together who the best preacher in the whole family was. The guest no doubt was surprised when all of the sons in unison answered immediately, saying "Our mother".

Now Mrs. Morgan was not a preachy type of wife. But she walked with the Lord and she did her best to guide her children in the paths of godliness. And that message came through loud and clear to each one of her children.

In every generation, God is looking for godly women. For while I do not believe that the special gift of prophetess that Deborah had is exercised today because we now have the completed canon of the Scriptures, there is a general sense in which every mother is a prophetess to her children. For every mother represents God to her family. And when young lives are being formed, mom's word is divine. Her word to her children is like a word from God. How fortunate children are to have a godly mother who speaks to them words of truth from God from the days when they can first begin to communicate. And

then to have a mother who consistently models godly living as they are growing up - this is a most precious treasure indeed.

2. But also notice with me that Deborah was leading Israel at that time which shows her leadership ability.

Now we have to remember that the days in which Deborah was living were difficult and trying. Listen to the description that Deborah gives of her times in part of the song that she wrote that is recorded in chapter 5:6-8.

*In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned, travelers took to the winding paths (5:6) - it wasn't safe to go out on the main roads. People had to sneak down back roads because the crime was so great.

*Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel (5:7) - public life was paralyzed by fear. Normal patterns of life had stopped because of the chaos and unrest.

*When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates, and not a shield or spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel (5:8) - the nation was defenseless against the aggressor. Whereas Sisera the general of the Canaanites had 900 iron chariots, the Israelite army didn't even have any iron shields or spears. So dominant was the oppression that the Canaanites had an absolute monopoly on the military weapons.

Just as an aside, this poetic song which Deborah wrote which comprises the 5th chapter of Judges reveals an artistic side of her character as well. R.H Pfeiffer calls this chapter "the finest masterpiece of Hebrew poetry: and further

states that it "deserves a place among the best songs of victory ever written". Certainly, this poem that Deborah wrote reveals her ability to express herself clearly and in the most eloquent literary fashion.

But we must never forget the chaotic time in which Deborah was living. She was living in a state of oppressed anarchy. Village life had ceased to function smoothly. Crime had risen off the graph. Society was mired in decadence and despondency. And God had called her to be a leader in this mess. The fact that Deborah was able to lead God's people out of this confusion of chaos into a deliverance shows the remarkable leadership skills that she had.

Now it is true that God does not call most mothers to serve their country as Deborah did. In fact, Deborah is unique in that she is the only female that God called to exercise civil authority over the nation of Israel in the entire O.T. – at least the only one that is recorded. Now there were certainly many women in positions of leadership. There were Jewish women who even ruled over world empires - Esther was the queen over the Persian Empire. And there were women who took civil authority over the Jewish nation for a period of time - you remember Queen Athaliah who usurped the throne of Judah and tried to wipe out David's line. So there are many examples of female leadership in the O.T. , some good and some evil. But Deborah is a unique person in that she is the only woman who was called and appointed by God to exercise civil authority over the nation of Israel. So in one sense, we could say that Deborah was unique, an exception to the rule.

But at the same time we must recognize that in another sense, every mother is a leader. She has children to lead in her family. God has given to every mother the position of guiding and directing young, impressionable lives. This is a leadership position. What a privilege it is to take a young life that is born into a world of vacillating, relativistic values, and to build into that young life a firm sense of who the child is so that the child has a healthy view of himself or herself, and then upon that foundation of self-esteem to build the structure of Biblical values so that the child knows God and what God expects of him so that the child can go out into a world that has been built upon shifting sand with confidence and assurance to be a shining light of God's grace and a source of strength and stability to others. That is leadership. And every mother has that kind of opportunity in her home with her children. God has called every mother to be a leader.

3. But finally, note with me that Deborah was not only a godly woman and a leader but she also demonstrated great wisdom and discernment in her character. Deborah held court as a judge which shows her wisdom and discernment. READ JUDGES 4:4,5

JDG 4:4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.

People respected Deborah's opinions. She had proven the ability to think through problems and come to wise conclusions. So when two citizens had a

dispute, they would come to Deborah, confident in the fact that she would be fair and just and also would present to them the most satisfactory solution.

We all need to have wisdom in this day, but it seems that mothers today need to have special wisdom, don't they? Children seem to have a natural ability to come up with difficult situations. When they are toddlers, they come asking who should play with the favorite toy because both claim to having the toy first - my playmate doesn't understand or like me. When they grow to elementary age, they have disputes at school - my teacher just doesn't understand me or like me. When they reach those years of puberty, they have many conflicts within - I just don't seem to be able to understand or like myself. When they grow into the older teenage years, there come many interpersonal problems - my boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't seem to understand or like me. And very often, mom is the first person that the child comes to. The child comes to mom because he or she knows that the mother has compassion and cares. What a blessing it is when the mother can give words of wisdom from years of experience to guide in settling the disputes.

Henry Heinz distinguished himself in the world of business as just a very small percentage of people do. He started a company and built that company to the place where it was a major player in the world of grocery retail. Even today, the Heinz 57 Variety label is a common sight in the grocery store. We can imagine the interest when Henry Heinz's will was brought out to be read before his family and friends. Here was a vast financial empire that was going to be divided up, and each participant was very interested to know the part that

he or she would be given. But as the executor opened the sealed envelope and began reading the will, a hush fell over all those who were listening, for very suddenly all that was really important in life was suddenly put in perspective. Listen to the first paragraph of the will of Henry J. Heinz.

"Looking forward to the time when my earthly career will end, I desire to set forth at the very beginning of this will, as the most important item in it, a confession of my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior. I also desire to bear witness to the fact that throughout my life, in which there were unusual joys and sorrows, I have been wonderfully sustained by my faith in God through Jesus Christ. This legacy was left by my consecrated mother, a woman of strong faith, and to it I attribute any success I have attained."

A godly mother who set forth a wise direction for his life - that was what Henry Heinz saw as his most valuable possession near the end of his life. It wasn't the billions of dollars in his estate. It wasn't the internationally renowned company that he had built from nothing. It was his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which had been the major legacy left to him by his godly mother that mattered to him the most.

Deborah was a godly woman. She was a fearless leader. She was a wise and discerning judge. And she made a difference in her world, helping to free the Israelites from the bondage of their oppression.

God is looking for such women today. And make no mistake about it - Godly women who lead with wisdom will make a major impact in this world.