

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 15. Wonder Woman.

The book of Judges describes the leaders of Israel from the time of the elders who outlived Joshua until the time of the monarchy. Without a godly leader the people quickly lapsed into idolatry, intermingling with the remnant of Canaanites who had not been forced from the land, resulting in the judgement of God in the form of defeat by their enemies. When the people cried to God for rescue, He would raise up a godly judge who would lead the nation back to God-worship and supremacy – until next time! This happened so often and so regularly that it is only worthwhile to look at 2 of these judges, both outstanding in their personal life and their God-given victories.

Why didn't God just give up on this faithless and selfish nation? For the same reason that He doesn't give up on us.

We start with the story of Deborah as found in Judges chapters 4 and 5 - a story of great significance in the establishment of Israel as a nation. Israel was insecure and economically unstable at this time; basic communication and travel were disrupted, commerce was impossible. Travellers would take back paths to avoid robbers who commandeered the main roads, while villagers would flee to walled towns for protection.

Deborah's name means "bee"; she is the only judge said to have been a prophetess. Within a male-oriented society there was still appreciation of and respect for women; in the power vacuum, where there were no male leaders, she took the initiative and so rose to prominence. This was in no way against God's scheme of things; He blessed her for her faith and courage. The extent of her influence is striking; she lived in southern Ephraim but exercised influence as far north as Naphtali and Zebulun. The question she faced was whether Israel could exist as a nation split in 2 by a central, powerful Canaanite force.

Canaan in the Bronze Age consisted of small city-states, each with its own king. Under the current punishment from God, Israel suffered the cruel oppression of Jabin, a king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor, a major Canaanite stronghold. His army commander, Sisera, had 900 iron chariots and his reign of terror lasted for 20 years. When Israel cried to the Lord for help, it was Deborah who rose to the occasion. A wife and mother, she still found time to adjudicate over the disputes of the Israelites. And now she summoned Barak, a major military leader, with a message from God to go into battle. The northern tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun were those most affected by Sisera's tyranny; Barak lived in the Naphtali town of Kedesh, only 6 miles north of Hazor, and he would have been keenly aware of the dangers of conducting a war against the overlord Jabin.

But Deborah swept away his diffidence. In Chapter 4:6,7 she announced, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Take with you 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera ... with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

Barak was still sceptical; those 2 smaller tribes were more likely to fade into insignificance than to win a battle. One look at Deborah told him he could not refuse. "If you go with me, I will go," he challenged, "but if you don't go with me, I won't go." I would love to have seen the look on Deborah's face. "Very well, I will go with you," she agreed, "but because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman."

So Deborah, Barak and 10,000 men from Zebulun and Naphtali marched to Kedesh, and at their bravery 4 other tribes joined them – Issachar, Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. There they

camped on the slopes of Mount Tabor, as God had instructed, where they were safe from chariot attack. However when Sisera heard about this he saw the Israelites as sitting ducks; he could trap them in the Kishon River valley where his 900 chariots would have ample manoeuvring space to attack from any quarter. What he didn't know was that God was fighting for Israel; chapter 5:19-21 tells us that He sent a storm which caused the Kishon River to flood, bogging the heavy chariots and sweeping away the army.

Chapter 4:14-16 shows how the Israelites were spurred on by Deborah and her command to "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. *Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?"* Led by Barak, the army swarmed down the mountainside, pursuing the Canaanites as they tried to flee through the quagmire. The victory from the Lord was complete; not a man was left.

The very weapons that Sisera was to use for Israel's destruction, became his own undoing when God stepped in. Satan's attacks on us just ricochet when we trust God completely to defend us.

Remember that Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, had joined in with the Israelites in their desert journey; his descendants had multiplied and were called Kenites. Heber, one of the Kenites, had moved away from his brothers and was living near Kedesh. While quite neutral in his relations with Israel, he had formed an alliance with king Jabin and it is possible, because he belonged to a clan of metalworkers, that he had profited from helping Sisera with the manufacture of the iron chariots. In any case Sisera, fleeing on foot from the battleground, made his escape to his friend Heber's tent. Chapter 4:17 ff tell the story.

Jael, Heber's wife, apparently did not share her husband's friendly feelings towards Jabin; she may have been an Israelite and loyal to her own nation. As the mud-encrusted, desperate Sisera panted at her door, she gave him a friendly greeting and offered him a drink, opening up a fresh skin of milk for him. Gratefully Sisera sank down on the floor of the tent and fell into an exhausted sleep. Then Jael, not exactly the perfect hostess, took a heavy tent peg and a mallet, softly approached the sleeping man and with one lethal blow, drove the peg right through his temple into the ground. That was the end of Sisera and the fulfillment of Deborah's prophecy that the honour of the victory would go to a woman.

Was it an "honour" that Jael flouted the laws of hospitality and committed murder? We have to measure her treachery against her courage, and admit that the Lord used her for His purposes to destroy an evil man who had wreaked havoc on Israel. God is sovereign and can use whom He chooses to fulfil His sovereign will. Sisera could have taken the opportunity to learn about this God and escape punishment, if he had chosen.

Jael's next visitor was Barak in pursuit of Sisera, and I can imagine – or can I? – the look on Jael's face as she told him, "Come, I will show you the man you are looking for." It's a strange thing that although there were 2 heroines in this story, Hebrews 11:32 mentions only Barak in the honour roll of the faithful. Whoever wrote Hebrews must have been a man. In any case, as chapter 4: 23, 24 emphasises, it was God Who subdued Jabin that day; the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against him until he was destroyed. The land had peace then for the next 40 years and there were no more major Canaanite attacks against Israel. Although they were not completely destroyed until the time of David they would never again dominate the Israelites.

It is interesting to note that because of its strategic position, the plain of Megiddo along the Kishon River has been a frequent battleground from earliest times. In 1468 B.C. Pharaoh Thutmose III defeated a Canaanite coalition there; in 1799 the flooded Kishon River aided Napoleon's victory over a Turkish army; and in 1917 the British General Allenby ended the rule of the Turks in Palestine by

defeating them in the Valley of Jezreel opposite Megiddo. In our story, however, the strategy was God's!

Chapter 5 records the song that Deborah and Barak sang together in commemoration of the victory. It was probably written by Deborah and is universally acclaimed as a very early masterpiece of Hebrew poetry. It is remarkable for its vivid imagery and insight into the rather barbaric life of the 12th century B.C. The theme of godly leadership is important and the willingness of the people to follow. The next logical step is praise to God for His blessing in response to obedience. The climax broadens to include all mankind and ascribing glory to God, as in verse 31 – “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength.”

The Israelites had cried out desperately to God, and He had answered. It is fitting that this story ends with their “thank you” to Him and ascribing to Him all the honour and the glory. A good example for us!