

Hooray for the Housewife

Cycles of Sin . . . Stories of Grace – Part III

Judges 4-5

Introduction

Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, gave advice to parents of unruly children. He said to put them in a barrel and feed them through a hole. Then, when they become a teenager, plug up the hole.

This may be tempting, but it is not a suggestion for parenting! It is our nature, however, to react against unruly children or adults; to shun that person who lies or cheats.

As we study the book of Judges, we would expect God to be reaching for a barrel! The barrel would need to be big enough to house all of the Israelites, who constantly lie to Him and fail to follow Him. We would expect God to nail the lid shut and maybe feed them through a hole, because the cycle of sin has begun again!

Turn to Judges chapter 4 and look at verses 1-3. It is almost as if the writer is saying, “Oh brother, they’ve done it *again!*”

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died.

And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim.

The sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.

So Israel was again, because of rebellion, enslaved to a Canaanite. They were out-manned, outgunned, and out-positioned. Humanely speaking, they were in a hopeless situation.

Remember, however, despite external appearances, Israel’s primary problem was not military, but spiritual. Their real need was not chariots and swords, but a vital relationship with the God they had abandoned. If they would trust Him, He would deliver them from even the most impossible situation.

To teach them this, God did a very unusual thing.

He did not put them in a barrel. He did not raise up a great warrior like Shamgar, who could take on six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, as we learned in our last discussion. He did not raise up an Othniel, who came from Caleb’s fighting stock and experience.

Instead, God raised up the exact opposite of the kind of person we would expect to lead people to war. He raised up someone who would teach the nation the lesson that the battle was God’s and it was up to Him to protect them against things like iron chariots. God chose a housewife named Deborah!

Look at Judges 5:7. This is from Deborah’s poem following the victory God gave the army. She describes herself very transparently.

The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel.

We could ask Deborah, “How are you qualified to lead millions of people? How are you qualified to be a judge?”

“Well, God qualifies you. Whether you are a housewife or an attorney, He can choose and use either. I am just a mother in Israel.”

Judges chapters 4 and 5 are really a story of courage; a story of faith on the part of two housewives and an inexperienced general who had had enough of sin and were willing to fight!

Illustrations of Israel’s Condition

Let us begin our study today, by taking a look at Israel’s condition. Turn to Judges 5 and from Deborah’s poem, I will give four illustrations of their condition at this particular juncture.

1. Number one, communication between tribes was virtually non-existent.

We learn this from the last phrase in Judges 5:6.

. . . the highways were deserted, and travelers went by roundabout ways.

The people were so fearful, they did not travel by the open roads. They traveled by night. The mail probably stopped. They were living isolated from one another.

2. Number two, the cities were overcrowded with uprooted and discouraged people.

We are told this in the first phrase of Judges 5:7.

The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, .

..

In other words, there were no more peasants. They had all moved into the cities.

In England, the landscape is dotted with small villages and hamlets that are without the slightest amount of protection. These furnish the strongest possible evidence of the security and peace of that nation.

This was not the case in Israel. The nation was not strong, so the villages were open prey. With no protection, the farmers and herdsmen were forced to leave their roots and move to the already overcrowded city for protection. It is easy to imagine the despair they must have felt.

3. Number three, the cities were under constant threat of war.

Note Judges 5:8a.

New gods were chosen; then war was in the gates. . . .

This is a reference to the fact that at this time, they were being besieged.

4. Number four, combat forces in Israel were small and unequipped.

We get this from the second phrase of Judges 5:8.

. . . Not a shield or a spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.

This tells two things about the army of Israel.

- The army had been reduced in size to only forty thousand.

This may sound like a large number, but the Israelite nation numbered in the millions. The potential number of fighting soldiers was in the hundreds of thousands, yet their warriors numbered only forty thousand.

- The army was without weapons to wage war.

This army had, according to Judges 5:8b, not a shield or a spear among the forty thousand.

Who were they fighting? Jabin the Canaanite and Sisera, who were armed with nine hundred iron chariots. This was, by the way, state of the art battle equipment in that day.

So the Israelites were disunited, discouraged, in despair, and disarmed. Why??!! We read the answer in Judges 5:8a. Look at that again.

New God’s were chosen . . .

These four words sum up the answer. This is the lie of Satan. He says that entering into some kind of sinful activity is “cutting loose”. He says, “Get rid of those moral fetters and go have a great time. Go live it up! That’s freedom.”

No, that is bondage.

I have a friend, who is a believer, that I have wept with and prayed with over his struggle with a twenty year addiction to pornography. He is committed to Christ, but is chained and enslaved by that which he so fiercely battles against. It all began when he was a kid and thought, “I’ll cut a corner and take a little look. I’ll cut loose.”

This sin enslaved his soul, as any sin habit does. The sin of the nation of God’s chosen people, Israel, has caused them to be frightened and terrorized by a man with nine hundred iron chariots.

A Housewife Named Deborah Is Chosen

Now who does God choose in the hopeless situation that Israel is in? A housewife!

We do not know a lot about this interesting lady, Deborah. We are told nothing of her family or her ancestry or even what tribe she was from. Judges 4 gives us the little we know about her. We know the following:

- Judges 4:4 gives her husband's name, Lappidoth, which I will not try to pronounce, but tells nothing about him.
- Judges 4:4 also gives her gift. She is called a prophetess. There are three prophetesses in the Old Testament – Miriam, Huldah, and Deborah – who receive revelation from God.
- Judges 4:5 tells of her insight. Deborah would sit under a palm tree and judge. This is probably the closest to our perception of what a judge is like. This mom, with God-given discernment and insight, would sit and decide cases among the tribes of Israel.

It is interesting that when it comes to war, Deborah herself does not fight. God will raise up a general by the name of Barak, who will lead the forces into battle.

We know even less about Barak. In Judges 4:6, Deborah summons Barak to her. We are told nothing about this summons to Deborah's palm tree. There is no record of the greetings exchanged; no hint of Barak's experience – whether he had taken ROTC in college; no record of his battle plan; nothing! Deborah simply told him, "Go fight Jabin."

General Barak's response is a little embarrassing, however. Look at Judges 4:8.

Then 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."

This does not sound like a warrior – this sounds more like a "wimp"!

Deborah responds, probably patting him on his helmet, in Judges 4:9.

She said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman." . . .

We will not get into this part, but we know this other woman's name is Jael. Sisera flees and comes to her tent. She provides sanctuary for him and he falls asleep. While Sisera is asleep, Jael drives a tent peg through his temple and he dies. This is a rather gruesome way to die, but it is the way Jael handled the situation. (Judges 4:17-22)

Reasons Israel Succeeded

Recorded next, is the story of the success of the Israelites against their foe, Jabin, the Canaanite king, and his brilliant general, Sisera. There are reasons given in Deborah's poem for their success. Let me give three of them.

1. First, the people volunteered without hesitation.

This, by the way, is the same reason any believer succeeds in his spiritual walk. This is also the reason that keeps a church from growing stale and ineffective! This is when you and I, without hesitation, answer God's call by saying, "Here am I. Send me!"

Notice Judges 4:10.

Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him.

In case you missed it, this verse tells us that ten thousand men volunteered on the spot!

The tribes that fought

There are actually three tribes that fought with Barak. Turn to Judges 5 again.

- **The first tribe is the tribe of Issachar.**

Notice Judges 5:15.

And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah; as was Issachar, so was Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels; . . .

Barak is leading the way and this small tribe of men are rushing at his heels, saying, "Let's go get them!"

This is volunteerism, with a capital "V"!

- **The next tribe is a tribe called Zebulun.**

Look at Judges 5:18a.

Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even to death, . . .

This might sound as if they did not care about themselves. However, this is actually an idiomatic use of a Hebrew word that means literally, they were willing to die for their cause.

The members of this tribe were willing to use their bodies as their weaponry because they did not have much to wield. This is like the Japanese pilots in World War II called kamikaze pilots, who used their own planes and their own bodies as weapons. The volunteers from the tribe of Zebulun were saying, “We don’t care if we come back. We’re throwing our entire lives into this battle for the cause of God.”

May God help us to have this spirit today.

- **The third tribe that fought with Barak is the tribe of Naphtali.**

Continue to the last part of Judges 5:18.

. . . and Naphtali also, on the high places of the field.

The phrase “the high places of the field” means that the volunteers from this tribe were asking for the toughest spot in the battle – “Barak, where is the fighting going to be the worst? We want to be there.”

What motivated these tribes to do something like this?

There were no television ads telling them how wonderful life in the army would be. There were no mottos like, “Join Barak’s army and be all that you can be.”

There was the promise, “If you want to go and fight Jabin and his iron chariots, God said He would be with us!”

Deborah tells us what their motive is in Judges 5:31. This should be our overarching motive to serve effectively and diligently, as well.

Thus let all thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might. . . .

What is their motive? After confession, they stood to their feet, their hearts filled with love for a God who would not put them in a barrel, but would give them deliverance. It is their love for God that motivates them to go into battle.

The apostle Paul said, “The love of Christ compels; constrains; almost forces me into doing what I do (II Corinthians 5:14). I love Him so much.”

Jesus said to Peter, after His resurrection, “Peter, do you love Me?”

Peter said, “Yes, Lord . . . kind of.”

Jesus said, “Feed My sheep.” (John 21:15-17 paraphrased)

It is interesting that Jesus did not ask, “Peter, do you know how to feed sheep? Do you have a degree in sheep nutrition? Do you understand the nuances of interpersonal dynamics between shepherds and sheep?”

No. Jesus asked, “Peter, do you love Me? If you do, you are qualified to serve Me.”

I think the reason most of us never get off the launching pad in serving Jesus Christ is because we have a religious affection for God. We come to church on Sunday to feel good about God, but Monday through Saturday, we care little about God.

These tribes loved God.

It is always wonderful to see in the lives of people, the love of God motivating them into service. We recently received a note in the church office from a ninety-nine year old lady in New York. She prays for our church every day – she prays for each member and for me, as the pastor. In fact, she kind of checks up on me every once in awhile, which is rather intimidating! She will soon turn one hundred years old and in her note, she said, “I am almost one hundred years of age and I hope to bring someone to Jesus Christ before my birthday.”

This lady is a shut-in. She is nearly crippled with arthritis. How is she going to serve Jesus in that way?

It does not really matter – all that matters is that she loves God with all her heart! She asks how she can serve Him on the basis of that motive. We so often start with the service and forget the motive – that we love Jesus Christ.

Let us look at a second reason the Israelites succeeded.

2. Secondly, the Israelites trusted God without explanation.

The fighting takes place in the plains of Esdraelon. This incorporates the river bed of Kishon, which is a flat, dry surface in the off season. This is a perfect place for Sisera’s iron chariot force, but the worst possible place for lightly armed Israelite foot soldiers. Yet, God revealed through Deborah to Barak, “This is exactly where you are going to fight.”

So the Israelite soldiers ask, “Okay, Barak, we’re here with ten thousand and we’re ready to go. Where are we going to fight? What’s the strategy?”

“Well, we’re going to get up on the side of this mountain and we’re going to get our sticks, and who has swords? . . . Okay, we’ll spread you out and share. You’re going to come down this mountain and rush into the face of prancing steeds and iron chariots. That’s the plan.”

This would be like asking American forces to take on Iraq’s tank force with squirt guns or to fight Russian MiGs with paper airplanes.

It made no sense; there was no explanation. We do not read of anyone who went home. Ten thousand men said, “Count me in!”

The tribes that would not fight

Now let us briefly look at four tribes who would not fight. One of the saddest ingredients of Deborah’s song is that she reveals the names of the tribes who would not get involved. I have made up names for each of these tribes.

- **Reuben – the January 1st tribe.**

Look at Judges 5:15b-16.

. . . Among the divisions of Reuben there were great resolves of heart. Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, to hear the piping for the flocks? Among the divisions of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.

This tribe heard the news and understood the need for volunteers to go to battle. They had great searchings of heart; they thought about it and even made some resolutions. I am sure the resolutions were wonderful, but they were never translated into actions. While the tribe of Reuben was thinking and meditating and maybe even praying, the battle was going on.

New year resolutions do not necessarily lead to new year actions! There is a constant danger for Christians to be moved emotionally; to have great searchings of heart, but never translate that into action and leave the sheepfold to head for battle.

- **Gilead – the out of sight, out of mind tribe.**

Notice Judges 5:17a.

Gilead remained across the Jordan . . .

This is one sentence, but it speaks volumes.

Gilead is not the name of one tribe, but two. It is a combination of the tribe of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. These tribes, as you may remember from

earlier studies, had chosen to stay outside of Canaan on the other side of the Jordan River.

You also may remember that these tribes were so concerned that there be a link between them and the people of God in the land of Canaan; that there be a permanent bond; that there be a sense of unity; that they not forget each other that they built a huge altar to teach the next generation (Joshua 22). When their children grew up, they would point to the altar and say, “Do you see that altar? That is proof that we are part of those people. We are with them in spirit and in heart and we will help in any way we can.”

What happens a few generations later? One sentence says it all, “Gilead remained across the Jordan . . .”.

They were saying, “Well, that’s their battle. We don’t want to get involved. If we lived closer to the situation, we might help out. We will pray for them and hope it goes well.”

- **Dan – the “I’ve already tried and failed” tribe.**

Deborah continues her song, revealing her anguished question, in the next phrase of Judges 5:17.

. . . and why did Dan stay in ships? . . .

The answer is found in Judges 1, which informs us of Dan’s initial failure to drive the Amorites from their inheritance. As a result, the tribe drifted into the mountains and eventually, lost any hope of gaining the territory that was rightfully theirs.

In this verse, we read that the members of this tribe are in ships. This is classic. It is as if they are packed and ready to set sail, just in case the battle does not go the right way. It is as if they are saying, “We’ve already tried fighting and it didn’t work. So, we’ve got all our stuff packed and we’re in our ships. We’re for you, but let us know if it doesn’t go well and we’ll get out of here as quickly as we can.”

This is like an American soldier leaving for battle and while he is packing, his wife is talking to the funeral director about flower arrangements.

This is not encouraging. And Deborah says, “Why, Dan, did you stay in ships and not help?”

Their answer would probably be, “We tried fighting and it didn’t work. We’re content to sit on the sidelines from now on. We’ll look after our best interest and make sure we have all our bases covered.”

What a pathetic way to live.

- **Asher – the tribe that was busy doing the wrong thing.**

Look at the last part of Judges 5:17.

Asher sat at the seashore, and remained by its landings.

Asher lived on the Phoenician coast and they were focused entirely on their work – their land, their ships, their docks, and their business of trading. They could say, “God gave us this land. God gave us these boats. God gave us this business!”

“He did indeed. But for a moment, He wants you leave it and go fight a battle! Then, come back and pick up where you left off.”

What sounded reasonable was in reality, a lack of vision for God’s work; a lack of the sense of God’s program; a lack of understanding of the mission God wanted to accomplish. The result of this was a lack of volunteers.

It is a tragedy that:

- Asher, except for one brief mention in the life of Gideon, vanished from the scene;
- Dan nosedived into apostasy;
- Gilead was repeatedly overrun and defeated in battles that came their way, until they were overrun into insignificance.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot run from battle. If we refuse to become involved in the work and mission of Christ; if we refuse to show concern for other believers; if we refuse to get involved in the lives of God’s people and the cause of God’s church, we will shrivel up within our own little shell.

The Israelites succeeded however, because:

- they volunteered without hesitation;
- they trusted God without explanation.

Let me give a third reason they succeeded.

3. Thirdly, the Israelites gave God the credit without reservation.

On the day of the victory, Deborah composed a poem that expressed the hearts of all the Israelites who had been freed that day. Judges chapter 5 is the poem, which is actually an expression of joy because the battle was won. Look who Deborah gives the credit to; look who the Israelites believed was responsible for the victory, in verse 3,

Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers! I – to the Lord, I will sing, I will sing praise to the Lord, the God of Israel.

In other words, “The battle is the Lord’s!”

Now the question still remains, “What happened that day in that battle on the plain of Esdraelon in the dry river bed of Kishon?”

We are not told anything in Judges 4, other than what is found in verse 15.

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.

Judges 5:19-21 provides the answer. This is Deborah’s explanation and it is all we have, so look at it carefully.

The kings came and fought; then fought the kings of Canaan at Taanach near the waters of Megiddo; they took no plunder in silver. The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera.

This is a reference to supernatural intervention. The form is told in Judges 5:21.

The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. O my soul, march on with strength.

In other words, Kishon, which was a dry river bed, experienced a sudden storm at just the right moment.

Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived and wrote during the time of Christ, referred to this storm as one including hail, rain, and thunder. This was no ordinary tempest, but a storm of great violence!

That dry river bed that had been perfect for iron chariots, was now the worst possible place for them. It was, however, the perfect place for lightly armed foot soldiers! What had seemed a suicidal battle plan – lightly armed foot soldiers against heavily armed chariots – became a brilliant plan!

Rob Roy writes,

Certain tracts of this plain’s surface are like strong adhesive mud. Now when horses and mules pass over such places, they are often unable to pull out their feet. If a horse’s foot is buried in the mud long enough to allow the clay to close over it from above, he finds it extremely difficult to draw his leg out again, and he instantly changes his gait to a series

of plunges, with rapid, short, and jerky steps, snorting and groaning the while with terror, and panting and steaming in the wildest excitement.

What makes it even more interesting is that the Canaanite god Baal was the god of the storm, yet this storm defeated the Canaanite army! God made it clear that He was in control of the rain.

The storm routed the enemy soldiers and Sisera, the great general, left his chariot and ran for his life. He stumbled into the tent of another housewife, by the name of Jael, and while he slept, she took his life.

The battle was won!

Conclusion

Before we close, I want to go back to a very important passage in Judges chapter 3. I have a question, and it is a question that we all ask, that is addressed in Judges 3:1-2.

The question is, “Why didn’t God just wipe out Jabin and Sisera the moment Israel cried out for help? Why did God require volunteers to step forward to rush down a mountainside into the face of prancing steeds and iron chariot forces? Why didn’t God just get rid of the enemies, instead of requiring a seemingly suicidal attempt to fight them? As soon as He saw the Israelites go to their knees and ask forgiveness for their sins, why didn’t He just touch the dirt and take care of the enemies? Why did He wait until the last minute? Why did He put His people through all the trouble?”

We learn the reason in Judges 3:1-2. In fact, this sets the stage for the entire book of Judges – that God is sovereignly in control.

Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them, (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly).

Do you know why God left the enemies there for the Israelites to fight? Do you know why God leaves the enemies to fight; the troubles to overcome in our lives?

God wants to teach us how to fight.

Do you know why God has given us the armor to fight? Because He wants us, as believers, to fight, not stay in our ship or on the landing or on the other side

of the Jordan. God wants to teach us how to wage spiritual warfare; how to stand!

There is a fundamental principle in this; a timeless truth:

God is more interested in developing His people than in displaying His power.

So God lets us get up on the mountainside and take a good look at iron chariots. Sometimes, He even allows the enemy to overcome our pitiful strength because we have trusted ourselves, and we fall flat on our faces. God wants us to learn that too, because He wants us to learn how to stand up and fight.

Maybe some of you have given up and are saying, “We tried that battle before and we didn’t win it. I’ll put in some time at the church; I’ll try to provide for the family and be a nice guy. But I don’t like the looks of iron chariots; I don’t like this Christian warfare and this life of trusting God, so I’ll just stay in my sailboat.”

Understand that God wants you to learn how to fight and He has the grace available to teach you.

There is a book that I have read and mentioned before that really impacted me. It is entitled, *A View From the Zoo*, and was written by Gary Richmond, a pastoral staff member at First Evangelical Free Church, where Chuck Swindoll pastors. Gary used to work for the Los Angeles Zoo and has written stories of the animals.

One story that fascinated me was of a mother giraffe that was ready to give birth. Gary said it was an experience that he had never seen and all the zoo staff were there to watch. It is an unusual birth because a mother giraffe delivers standing up. This means the baby is going to fall seven or eight feet, which is kind of a shocking experience coming into the world.

The zoo staff watches this birth take place and the baby drops and then, kind of looks around. Giraffe babies, by the way, are capable of standing almost immediately. Everyone is cheering and the baby giraffe is lying there looking around at the big wide world.

All of the sudden, the mother giraffe just kicks that baby! It rolls over and over and over. Gary is thinking, “What in the world is going on? How cruel!”

The keeper in charge, however, said, “No, this is typical. That baby has got to get up on his feet and he

must learn it quickly because in the wild, they are prey.”

That baby giraffe stretches his legs out and gets up on the front and then, the back. He wobbles up to a stand and everyone cheers.

All of a sudden, the mother giraffe kicks it off its feet again! It rolls over and over again. Gary is thinking, “Okay, it’s time to intervene and stop that mother giraffe.”

The keeper said, “No, no, this is typical. The mother wants the baby to remember how it got up.”

Perhaps you are flat on the mat and God is trying to teach you how, if you will just be willing to fight, to get back up and to stand up, by His grace, and to fight. He has His own providences designed and His own strategies laid out to take care of iron chariots and generals like Sisera, who can be taken care of by a housewife in a tent, named Jael.

Never forget that the battle is always the Lords!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/16/1992 by Stephen Davey.

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