

WHEN WOMEN WAGE WAR

by Steve Zeisler

There is a difficult statement of Jesus recorded in John 16. We've sung and rejoiced about the peace that is ours as men and women who know Jesus Christ. The message of reconciliation with God and the accompanying meal of bread and wine are a testimony and reminder of the peace we have.

But Jesus' words in John 16:33 have a tension in them: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." He has spoken these words to us that we might have peace, yet in the world, in ordinary life, we have tribulations, struggles, and hardships. His testimony is that he has overcome the world, not done away with it yet.

We're familiar in the 1990's with the announcements of peace, yet there is a continued absence of it in the world. The Soviet empire and its satellites are reduced in their ability to threaten the West; the Cold War has ended. Dividends of peace have been hoped for, yet at the very same time, regional outbreaks have destabilized the Soviet bloc. President Bush has announced a dramatic commitment on the part of this country to reduce and eliminate strategic nuclear arms, and the Soviets have responded. And yet, at the very moment that we were hearing this glorious news, we were also discovering how close the Iraqis were to having nuclear weapons. The likelihood of nuclear proliferation to other countries, many of them unstable, is very great.

The book of Judges is about war and political instability. It's about the people of God being strengthened by him under domination and difficulty brought about by war. We are in the midst of a series in the book of Judges, and today we've come to chapter 4.

War Stories

I want to begin with a background observation on the process of applying Old Testament narrative. Specifically, we want to consider narrative that deals with wars in which the people of God, who were a tribe physically related to each other by blood, were to battle other tribes. They were to take possession of a territory, which was promised to them by God, by either driving out the opposition or exterminating them. How do we apply these narratives to our circumstances? We are not members of the same physical family; we are members of a spiritual family. We have a spiritual relationship with one another. We don't have human enemies- tribes of people which are to be destroyed or cast away. We don't have a physical land that we are to defend. However, we do have spiritual enemies. We are engaged in a spiritual war. The apostle Paul writes that our war is "not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers." The weapons of our warfare are not fleshly. They are powerful for the tearing down of spiritual strongholds.

The question stands: How do we apply these narratives of war in Canaan to our spiritual experience? We apply them by recognizing the spiritual realities behind every person, behind every wicked idea, behind every institution that does evil, and behind every relationship that is destructive. Behind all these things, there is an enemy- Satan. We are to battle against his destructive purposes. We're to trust in God, to love our human enemies, and to persuade them to align themselves with God's purposes. Change comes from the power of the gospel, not by coercion. Let me also note the relationship between Judges 4 and 5 before reading them. Chapter 4 is a prose history that tells of a battle fought at the foot of Mount Tabor. Chapter 5 is a poem written about the same events. The additional observations of the poem give us vivid details and insight that help us analyze what took place.

Victory Over Time

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. And 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.

Courage that is based on faith is answered by intervention from God

This is a familiar pattern to us. By now we're used to the cycle of sin in Judges- people are given some degree of relief from their problems, and then they ignore the Lord and do evil. The consequences of their evil descend upon them, and they're taken over by a foreign power that is hurtful to them. The story is familiar, but in this case, it has become more complicated. As we have previously seen, Othniel and Ehud rallied the people and decisively defeated a single enemy. It was done and peace reigned. In this passage the enemy has two identifiable leaders. Verse 25 tells of the mopping-up operation that follows the main battle. This account will help us with issues in our life that are complex, that aren't resolved with once and for all choices.

Verses 6-8 of chapter 5 tell of the pain that the Israelites lived in during the time of their dominion under Jabin the king of Canaan and Sisera his general:

In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,
In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted,
And travelers went by roundabout ways.
The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel,
Until I, Deborah, arose,
Until I arose, a mother in Israel.

New gods were chosen;
Then war was in the gates.
Not a shield or a spear was seen
Among forty thousand in Israel.

This description doesn't just tell us who the enemy is; it tells us what he's done. It describes a people who are utterly defeated. They can't travel openly on the highways anymore. The peasantry has ceased. This means that there is no open farming of territory they once farmed. There was no commerce, no trade, and no travel. Among the forty thousand fighters of Israel, there was not found any shield or spear. This was a hurting people who had lost hope and had been thrust aside by a terrible enemy. In verse 3 of chapter 4, the story says Jabin and Sisera oppressed the sons of Israel severely for 20 years.

Weapons of Iron

The mention in verse 6 of chapter 5 of Shamgar and Jael raises the problem of the inferior weapons of the Israelites. With the introduction of iron working from other parts of the Mediterranean, a new possibility for warfare developed. More violent weapons, against which ordinary armies felt defenseless, were introduced into battle---iron chariots and iron spears. Sisera's army was equipped with these superior weapons. Judges 3:31 notes that Shamgar took an oxgoad and, in God's strength, slew 600 Philistines. An oxgoad is just a sharpened stick. Jael killed Sisera with a tent peg, driving it through his head. Wooden weapons were used by the oppressed against the power of iron in the hands of the oppressors. We recognize the same scenario in the Christian life very often. Our weapons appear inferior. They don't match up in their destructive power to the weapons of the enemies that we face. The power of the media to seduce and undermine the values of our culture seems so great. Each generation faces worse kinds of seductiveness, and in many respects, all that we have to oppose it is the simple telling of the truth.

It has always seemed unfair to me that you can't tempt people to righteousness. You can tempt people to be evil by deceiving them. You can reign them in slowly over a period of time, without their knowing it, until they're caught in a trap. They are finally given over to something that is destructive, and they never even knew what was happening to them. Righteousness, however, must be freely chosen. Nothing is gained if you do the

right thing for the wrong reasons. In order for character to be formed in someone, you have to persuade them to act as God has called upon them to act, that is, to do what is right, in faith, because it's right.

Good triumphs over evil in our experience when two things happen---when men and women act in courage because of faith and when God intervenes. It's never the result of superior organization, better fighters, or better strategy. What does happen over and over in Judges and in the modern world is that the people of God act courageously for faith's sake, and then He intervenes. I have some friends who are on their way to Malaysia to serve as Bible translators. The government doesn't want them there. The government of Malaysia is Islamic and is opposed to Christian missionaries. As a result, they have created a whole array of problems for this family that wants to serve the Lord in Malaysia- legal problems, problems of getting visas, etc. Once they do get there, if they are able, they're going to be ministering among a people who have animistic beliefs. These people believe in the power of mountains, idols, and other things to sway their lives. They're going to translate one book into a language they don't know yet and offer people the truth of that book. They are a family on their own without the power of any government or army behind them. We haven't seen yet how God is going to act, but he'll respond because they are willing to step out in faith. That is how war is won. That's the way we find ourselves successful in battle, never because we have superior human forces.

The Prophetess

The prose story continues in verses 4-10 of chapter 4:

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment. Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and said to him, "Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded, 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. And I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon; and I will give him into your hand.'" 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." And 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." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him.

Deborah is a remarkable person. She is like a torch that enlightens everything else around her. Note well the description given of her in verse 4. People are most often identified by their families. She is the wife of Lappidoth. They may also be identified by their tribe or region. But in Deborah's case, the first thing highlighted about her is that she was a prophetess. She knew God and his purposes. The narrative describes her sitting under a palm tree offering counsel or judgment to the people of Israel. Barak was called to come to her. Others came voluntarily, but he needed a summons. When he is finally told, "The command of the Lord is that you are to lead the people in battle," he is hesitant to do so. Finally he says, "If you will go with me, I'll go." Barak was a courageous man. When it comes time to fight the war, he is willing to fight the war. However, he is uncertain of what God wants for him. He asks Deborah to go along with him so she can inquire of the Lord. The essential person is not the military man, Barak, but Deborah, whose contribution was to speak the word of the Lord.

Faith and a Miracle

Verses 12-14:

Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Arise! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the Lord has gone

out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

This is a very important note. She said, "Arise, today is the day," and Barak obeyed before he knew what actions God would take. When he was certain it was the Lord's command, he was willing to go. Verses 15-16:

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. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.

How did this small army of 10,000 men defeat this greater army with greater weapons that had marched out from its stronghold to destroy them? The passage hints that the riverbed of Kishon is important, but we are not told precisely until we get to the poem's commentary. Verses 20-21 of chapter 5:

The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
O my soul, march on with strength.

Sisera's army went out in the dry season and marched down the riverbed with their chariots of iron drawn by powerful horses. Everything was in favor of the opposition, except that God unexpectedly and miraculously sent a rainstorm. The rainstorm produced a flood, and the riverbed became a trap. The chariots were a hindrance instead of a help, and the soldiers were terrified. They ran before the ill-equipped army, were chased, and were destroyed. Courage that was based on faith was answered by intervention from God. And the more powerful army, the army of Sisera and Jabin, was routed.

A number of seniors in high school were at our house last week. We were all thinking and wondering about acceptance at college for next year. The eight campuses of the University of California system have a very precise mathematical formula for acceptance. There are rumors everywhere about other schools that are hard to get into. Rumors say that if you get accepted, you won't be able to get classes, and you'll be miserable. We regularly need a word of reassurance from the Lord that there are reasons to be confident. God can accomplish his purposes doing battle with the computers of the University of California or with anything else. Our responsibility is to be courageous, to trust him to do what's right, to care about other people, and not to be consumed with self-interest. Our activity, based in faith, will be met by his intervention. This was the role Deborah played. She told people repeatedly: "God is in charge. Don't just look at your inadequate weapons. Don't just look at the iron chariots. Don't just look at the difficulties. Our Lord loves us, and he will act." It is glorious to tell the truth about God, as Deborah did, to people who need to hear it. Paul reminds us in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation."

May we follow Deborah's example and speak God's truth to the needy world we live in.

Catalog No. 4304
Judges 4 & 5
Fourth message
Steve Zeisler
October 6, 1991

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety

for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.