

THE COMPASS

Desperate Housewives of the Bible, Part 2

Time to Get Rained On

Doug Brendel

I'd like you to meet Deborah (**Judges 4, 5**).

She lived about 3,300 years ago in ancient Palestine.

Today we might call her Debbie.

Deborah actually means "bee." Maybe her friends thought of her as Bebe, I don't know.

Deborah had a husband, named Lappidoth, which is the word for "flashes of lightning."

Today we might nickname him "Flash."

If Deborah took her husband's name, as is common in our culture, we might know her today as "Debbie Lightning."

I think it's safe to say that Deborah had the most unusual job of any woman in Israel.

She was in charge!

For a long, long time, there was no king in Israel. The historical accounts of the

Scriptures say that everybody did just as they "saw fit" (**Judges 17:6**).

This worked most of the time, but when there were serious disputes that couldn't seem

to be resolved, there needed to be some kind of governing authority to sort it out.

So Moses (**Exodus 18:17-26**) instituted a system of judges, and down through the

years after Moses died, there was always a judge ruling Israel.

This is why in the Old Testament you have a book of Judges. It tells the story of these people and how God spoke and worked through them.

Of all the judges who ruled Israel, Deborah was #5, and she was the only woman.

We know that women were relegated to second-class status in a lot of ways, so it was extraordinary that she was put in this position.

But she was.

And I love her style.

She didn't set up an office somewhere have her constituents make an appointment with a secretary.

She lived in the hill country north of Jerusalem, so she just set up shop there under a big palm tree, which came to be known as the Palm of Deborah.

And people would go there to have Judge Deborah decide their disputes.

Judges 4:

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.

On the other hand, it may not have been that Deborah didn't want an office in downtown Jerusalem.

It was that back then, the people of Israel were doing their best to stay low-key.

This was not exactly a lovely, peaceful time for the people of Israel.

They were not free. They were under the rule of a very bad guy, the king of the Canaanites, whom we only know in history as Jabin. We don't know if this was his actual name, or if *Jabin* was the title given to any king in Canaan.

But in any case, we know that he was brutal.

It appears that he was carrying a huge grudge.

See, after Moses died, Joshua took over as the top judge of Israel. And during Joshua's time, the king of Canaanites (also known as Jabin) had gone to war against Israel.

But Joshua and his army won, they killed all the soldiers of Jabin, executed Jabin himself, and burned the city of Hazor to the ground (**Joshua 11:10-11**).

With Joshua as judge, Israel did really well.

They served God faithfully, God protected them from an amazing array of enemies, and they thrived.

But after Joshua died, it was like the Israelites relaxed or something.

Almost like when you were a kid in school, and the principal walked in and stood at the back of the classroom.

You were on your best behavior — until finally the principal walked back out, and you could breathe again!

Or when your parents come to visit you here in Arizona for the holidays, and you take care not to yell at your kids because Grandma and Grandpa are around.

But then when you finally put them on the plane and send them back to Indiana, you go back to all your bad parenting habits. Ha!

The people of Israel went through a similar cycle (**Judges 2**), but the stakes were way higher. The situation was way more serious.

They would live by God's design under a judge, but then when the judge died, they would wander off the path.

That judge wasn't there to stay in their face, to remind them and teach them and warn them.

They would start engaging in self-destructive stuff that God had clearly told them not to do.

Their attention would wander. They would be drawn to short-term pleasures and sexual indulgences.

And they would start to suffer the consequences of this junk, that God had warned them about because he loved them so much.

God couldn't keep protecting them. Couldn't keep pouring his blessings out onto them.

And eventually they would fall under the control of some foreign power.

It would get so bad that they would cry out to God in desperation — and finally God would send help. A new judge. A military hero. A good and godly leader to point the way back to God.

They would somehow get free, they would rejoice, they would get back in line with God's plan — and then that judge would die, and the cycle would repeat itself.

This is what happened with the people of Israel time and time again.

And I wish I could just shake my head and wag my finger at the people of ancient Israel for this kind of foolishness — but we do the same thing, on a personal scale.

Over the course of my life, I've ridden this rollercoaster.
 Follow God's design in some area of my life — say, anger management, or dealing with conflict situations appropriately, or whatever —
 Follow God's design, do well for a while, then get a little lazy or casual about it, kind of forget about God, ultimately bust his design, crash, get in trouble, hurt myself, hurt other people, suffer the guilt, feel the remorse, cry, plead with God for forgiveness and mercy, he helps me get it back together, hallelujah. Follow God's design for a while more, do well again, then start getting a little casual again ... it's a cycle!

The nation of Israel went through this.
 Over the centuries, they repeatedly descended into pagan behavior, drifting further and further from God — and it seemed to take more and more pain for them to become motivated to get back on track with God's design.
 And it seemed to take more and more extreme measures to get them out of trouble!

They were at the bottom of the cycle in Deborah's day.
 The people had left God far behind, Jabin had come down from the north and conquered the country, and the Israelites were suffering terribly.
 Jabin was the political leader; he had a right-hand man named Sisera who commanded the military.
 Sisera had a phenomenal advantage over Israel — he had 900 chariots made of iron. It was impossible for a country like Israel to defend against them.
 You couldn't shoot through them, stick a spear through them, slash a sword through them — forget about it.
 And behind one chariot would be as many as 100 or more soldiers.
 Military experts estimate that, back then, to have 900 iron chariots probably meant an army of 100,000.
 This was a huge operation.

This was not a peacekeeping force. Sisera was cruel. He was dedicated to oppressing Israel, to squashing the people and making them miserable.
 The Israelites couldn't use the main roads; they had to slip around secretly on the back roads to avoid the troops.
 They couldn't organize caravans, couldn't trade, couldn't do business freely.
 They couldn't live out in the open; they couldn't live in tents because they were continually being raided by the Canaanites.
 They had either been stripped of their weapons or given them up in some kind of a peace deal with the Canaanites; in any event, there was a ratio of one shield and one spear for every 40,000 Israelite men.
 The people lived in hiding, cowering in fear.

They lived this way for 20 years.
 They pleaded with God to forgive them, show them mercy, somehow give them relief from their tormentors.
 And one day God said OK. Enough. I'm going to show you the way out.

This is how I've seen God at work in our own time, in my own life.

I can be in a rotten place, it can feel like it's going to be this way forever, and then God brings change.

It turns out he hasn't finished with me. My story isn't over. There's another chapter.

Life, I am surprised to discover, *is fluid!*

But for my situation to change, something in me has to change.

The Israelites found that it wasn't enough just to change their attitude.

They were full of remorse, they were totally re-focused on God as their provider, they recognized their dependence on him, their attitude was completely submissive — but that wasn't enough.

God was calling them to action.

When I'm asking God to help me, and I get my attitude straightened around to where he can work in me, he doesn't generally wave some kind of magic wand to change my situation.

He calls me to take some action.

He challenges me to do things differently than I've been doing them.

He knows that if all I have to do is flip the attitude switch, I can flip that switch every day — but if I dig some new *behavioral* grooves, and learn to live differently, my deliverance will be longer lasting.

I'll achieve fuller redemption.

But **what God calls me to isn't always easy. In fact, it doesn't even always seem reasonable.**

That's how it was when God called Israel to action under Deborah.

There was a guy in Israel in those days named "Thunderbolt" — Barak, in the language of the day — whose people, by the way, lived way up north in enemy territory.

God inspires Deborah to call on Barak and give him a battle plan.

He's to muster 10,000 guys from the north of Israel, and head for Mount Tabor.

Then, God says, through Deborah, **"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"** (Judges 4:7).

Now if I'm Barak, I don't like the math.

I'll have 10,000 guys with virtually no weapons, Sisera will have probably 100,000 guys, with iron chariots and all the weapons you can imagine.

Hm.

So Barak says to Deborah, Tell ya what. **"If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go"** (Judges 4:8).

I don't know if he thought she would chicken out and back down.

Or maybe he was superstitious, figuring she was God's woman, and if she went with him, he'd somehow be safe.

Or maybe he thought if he got into a scrape, Deborah could hear from God and tell him what to do.

Maybe it was a recruiting thing; he figured guys would sign up for this expedition if Deborah was doing the asking.

In any case, Deborah doesn't back down. She is a pragmatist; she is realistic.

She wants to get the job done. She wants Barak to do what God is calling him to do, but

she recognizes that people are imperfect.

She knows that ***we experience the benefits of responding to God's leading in proportion to the extent of our obedience.***

If I follow God about halfway, I am not going to get full benefits. I will experience some losses.

If I have a problem with truth-telling, and I go with God about 75% down the road toward becoming a truthful person, I am going to suffer some consequences.

She knows that Israel is going to win because God has called them to victory in this engagement. But she also knows that Barak won't get full credit unless he goes in full faith.

9 "Very well," Deborah says (Judges 4:9), "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"....

They set out together — they gather up their 10,000 guys — they head to Mount Tabor. Sure enough, Sisera hears about this troop movement and he rustles up his army with their iron chariots and heads in that direction himself.

So now here are the Israelites, up on Mount Tabor.

And here are the Canaanites, in the valley below.

The Israelites are seriously outgunned. Sisera has 20 years of military dominance behind him.

The iron chariots won't function well on the mountain, but the Israelites can't stay up there forever.

The moment Barak and his guys come down the mountain, you just know that the Canaanites are going to annihilate them.

But there's something else down there in the valley: a river, called Kishon.

Some parts of the year, it's nothing more than a pitiful little brook, hardly worth anything at all.

But in the rainy season, the Kishon River gets huge. It floods the whole valley. Makes it impassable.

And now, if the soldiers happen to look up, they notice there's something up in the sky: clouds.

And God has set the stage for a little surprise.

The heavens open up, according to **Judges 5**; the sky starts gushing water.

The earth turns to goopy mud, the chariots start sinking.

The river starts flooding, the horses start panicking.

Barak is up there on the hill; he can't believe what he's seeing.

It's as if Deborah has to smack his face to get him to snap out of it.

"Go!" she says to Barak (Judges 4:14). "This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?"...

When God prompts me to set something straight in my life, he has already paved the way for my success.

If I'll go, he's already gone ahead of me.

I would suggest that it was going to rain that day whether Barak had shown up or not.

It was going to rain that day whether Deborah had traveled with Barak or stayed home.

The Kishon was going to flood that day whether the bad guys had been lured there or not.

But the only way Barak and good guys could benefit from God's pre-planning was to be there when it happened.

Follow God's leading. Step out in faith. Exercise a little irrational courage.

If I'm struggling with a destructive habit, and God prompts me to get on track with his design, I can take courage in the fact that he has already paved the way for me.

He has seeded the clouds for my rainstorm.

He has swollen the river for my surprise victory.

But I have to go there.

I have to get over my fear. I have to get over my faith-hump. I have to head in that direction.

I have to be at the mountain in time to get rained on!

I may feel I don't have the weapons I need, the tools I need, to do what God is urging me to do. But neither did Barak. I don't need swords and shields. I need to believe God will love me and take care of me and provide for me.

I may feel I don't have the defense mechanisms I need to fight this battle. I feel weak, I feel helpless. But so did Barak. I don't need iron chariots. I don't need whatever defense mechanisms society tells me I need. I need to believe God will love me through it, and take care of me through it, and provide for me through it.

I may feel paralyzed, staring my enemy in the face. Staring my addiction in the face. Looking at my lacking. My financial shortfall. My medical problem. My relationship nightmare. There's confusion in my family. I'm in school and my grades are bad. I have a job and my performance review is coming up way short. Maybe I did this to myself. Maybe I'm an innocent victim. But whatever my situation, the enemy is gathering in my valley. The horses are snorting and stomping, they're champing at the bit, they're eager to come after me. I can hear the clanging of the swords and spears and shields against the iron chariots. I am scared!

I can't overcome this addiction without some other substance to use as a substitute; it's not physically possible!

I can't ever get my bills paid and still be a generous giver; it's not mathematically possible!

I can't face this disease without panic.

I can't deal with this marriage. This parent. This child.

I can't make this semester in school.

I can't handle the meeting with my boss tomorrow morning.

Except that **"Has not the Lord gone ahead of me?"**

He's not bound by the conventional wisdom.

He's not fixated on my fears.

He has mapped out a battle plan, and he is *in it*.

He is going ahead of me.

He's moving cloud formations over the battlefield.

He's swelling the banks of the river.

He's preparing a groundswell of encouragement just when I need it to make a break with my habit.

Just when I think I'm to the end of my financial rope, I'm going to find he's prepared a backup rope!

In my medical crisis, he's got a burst of hope waiting for me at the just the right moment. He has prepared the way in my relationship, in my schooling, on the job.

He isn't sitting back with his arms folded, calculating how responsible I am for my own situation.

He's just delighting in my dependence ... he's relishing our relationship ... he's reveling in realization that I really do need him, and he really is my best friend!