

Week 6 - Celebrate! - Judges 5:1-31

Scripture Reading: Psalm 18:6-19

Introduction

Some of you weren't around yet or weren't old enough to remember, but back in 1980, the sporting world was stunned when a group of college athletes from the United States defeated the seemingly unrivaled hockey team from Russia in the Winter Olympics

It was a real David and Goliath moment, and no one expected the U.S. team even to be competitive, let alone win, Their victory is considered the supreme upset in all of sporting history: The Miracle on Ice

Due to a scheduling delay, it was several hours later that the television network aired the game allowing the rest of the country to witness what those present in Lake Placid had seen in person

It was sheer bedlam in the stands in Lake Placid with chants of USA, USA, USA - and when the rest of the country finally witnessed the miraculous victory, Americans poured out into the streets waving flags and singing God Bless America

The entire nation was instantly transformed into hockey fans, and national unity was at a level I haven't personally experienced except for in the aftermath of 9/11

But there was no singing of songs in Russia after their unexpected and incomprehensible defeat

That's the closest parallel I could come up with to illustrate what we will see in Judges 5

Those of you who read through Judges 5 were likely a bit confused as you encountered the poetic nature of the chapter after having spent time looking at the prose account from Judges 4 last week

Poetry is frequently challenging to make sense of - even when it's in one's native language

And, when you are confronted by a poem several thousand years old, from a foreign culture, and in a foreign language, it can be exponentially more difficult to make sense of the text

Scholars inform us that this song is comprised of seven stanzas arranged into five acts - - - okay

We won't even get into how many strophes they say it contains - whatever a strophe is

I'm going to confess right up front that I am not an expert on any poetry, let alone Hebrew poetry

What I know of it is that it is quite different from English poetry in that it uses parallelism and repetition more than rhyme and meter as we are used to

And I might as well admit that I had a difficult time deciding how to present the passage this morning; I wrestled with the question of whether I should have us examine each stanza or each act as discreet units

Or whether some other approach was warranted

I tell you all of that to say I am indebted to former pastor and now professor Dale Ralph Davis for coming to my rescue as I will be following his structural outline this morning

What we are going to see, then, is a series of contrasts under each main point of the outline

Each contains a caution for God's people, but, more importantly, each contains a reason to celebrate

Because Judges 5 *is* a victory celebration as Deborah composes and sings a new song to celebrate a fresh deliverance by God from the oppressor Jabin and his general, Sisera

It's akin to the chanting of "USA, USA, USA" when the U.S. hockey team defeated Russia

And God's people should break out in spontaneous celebration when they see God working in this world

So let's get started and see what this ancient Hebrew song of celebration has to teach us

The first verse is a sort of preamble that serves to tell us that what we are about to encounter is a song that Deborah and Barak sang on the occasion of Israel's victory over Sisera and his troops

Then we come to the first section of the song itself, which runs from verse 2 through the first sentence of verse 11

And in this section, we see our heroic God come to the aid of his humiliated people

I. Humiliated People; Heroic God

The song opens with a rousing call to praise God, and Deborah gives the context for the celebration, and the reason for praise - **the leaders of Israel took charge, and the people volunteered**

Let's face it; if the leaders of a people are disinterested or negligent in their duties, the people will tend to follow their lead

But, at the same time, an enthusiastic leader doesn't necessarily translate into the people being eager to follow, and without followers, the leaders wouldn't exactly be leading

So Deborah says that the willingness of the people, from top to bottom, is a reason to bless God

Now, when an inferior blesses a superior, as we have in this case, it means "to acknowledge that person as the source of special bestowments" - to offer praise for them

So Deborah gives praise to God right from the start by claiming that God deserves the glory because the people eagerly volunteered for battle

Then in verse 3, she summons the kings and princes of Canaan to listen as she sings praise to God

Of course, had they actually been present to hear her sing, which they weren't, they wouldn't have enjoyed listening to the victors singing about how God had triumphed over them

Having declared her purpose, Deborah begins telling the story in verse 4

And she begins by singing about God as she envisions him as a mighty warrior striding forth to the aid of his people

Let's look at verses 4-5 [**Judges 5:4-5**] together:

Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.

The mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.

This portrayal of God moving from the area of Edom in the south is meant to illustrate what took place, not only at the human level, but also at the spiritual level

The Canaanite deity, Baal, was thought to reside in the north, on Mt. Zaphon so God marching onto the battlefield was just as much directed at Baal as it was Sisera and Jabin

So what Deborah illustrates occurring was more than an oppressed people gaining victory over their oppressor; God had also triumphed over Baal

God isn't a local deity like Baal and he isn't stuck on Mt. Sinai where he first introduced himself to Israel as their God

God is mobile and he marches forth repeatedly to rescue his people

And look at how Deborah describes God's coming onto the scene

The earth trembled and the heavens dropped rain and the mountains shook

This gives us some possible insight as to how Israel was able to defeat Sisera's 900 iron chariots and why Sisera had to flee on foot

If God's marching onto the field of battle caused it to rain the chariots likely became bogged down in the resulting mire

And by the way, Baal was the Canaanite storm God which would make their defeat by rain all the more humiliating

Then Deborah lays the situation of Israel against this portrayal of Israel's heroic God in verses 6-8, and it's not pretty. She points out in verse 6 that it wasn't safe to travel the main highways and the people had to resort to taking back roads - presumably to avoid being plundered by bandits and thieves - or maybe because of oppressive tolls.

In verse 7 she says that normal life in the villages ceased - people stopped doing routine things and simply hunkered down.

And with the farmers staying in from their fields and the merchant afraid to travel, trade among the tribes of Israel came to a standstill - God's people were thoroughly humiliated.

That is until Deborah answered God's call; then things began to change.

Verse 8 [**Judges 5:8**] is a difficult verse to interpret - especially the first phrase that our ESV Bible renders: "*When new gods were chosen*"

This would mean that what Deborah is singing of here took place before the liberation and was the cause for Israel being oppressed - and that makes good sense.

But the NIV represents the other thought here when it renders the same phrase: "God chose new leaders"

And that would mean that God's choosing of new leaders was a precursor to Israel's deliverance - and that also makes sense.

The problem is, the Hebrew is unclear and either could be correct.

I suppose it isn't exactly critical because her point is that Israel is in bad shape and seemingly unable to fight.

And, in the end, as we saw last week, when Barak issued his call to arms the people responded and 10,000 arrived ready to fight.

Deborah is proud of that fact and she gives thanks to God for their response as she commands the rich Canaanite merchants to retell the tale - she wants them to reflect on what happened and speak of God's deeds.

The losers are called upon to sing along with the victors.

And singing is just what God's people should have been doing in light of what God had just done for them.

We too must celebrate when God gives us victory in this life

God still fights for his people and we must never take that fact for granted.

Then, having introduced the situation, Deborah turns to the battle itself and she does so mainly by focusing on the people of Israel.

And we see that all is not well as she divides them into two camps: the courageous and the cautious.

II. The Courageous and the Cautious

As she narrows her focus from the nation of Israel as a whole look at the various tribes she begins in the latter part of verse 11 by saying [**Judges 5:11b**] "*Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord.*"

And by that she means that the Israelites went down from the hill country to the fortified cities of the Canaanites in the plains as they prepared to engage them in battle.

We then see Deborah kick up the emotional intensity in verse 12 as she creatively portrays God summoning and stirring the principal Israelite protagonists to action.

It's interesting that she begins by portraying her prophetic action as a song; thereby showing her delight in reflecting on her part in the drama.

The summons to Barak is more warlike in tone as God's command to him is to "lead away [his] captives"

The tables have been completely turned in Deborah's song as the captive Israelites become the captors.

And in verse 13, with the prophet being roused and the general summoned to his task, she again states that the people marched down against their oppressors

But in verses 14-18 as Deborah turns to call the roll of the Israelite warriors by tribe, we see that the list of those who responded is woefully incomplete

I broke the tribes into two classes - the courageous and the cautious - but Deborah adds a third class: the award winners

Deborah begins with those who answered the call to arms

And, unsurprisingly, the pride of being first mentioned is her own tribe, **Ephraim**

Next came the **Benjaminites** who were known for their military prowess followed by the commanders from **Machir, or Manasseh**, and military leaders from **Zebulun**

And then lastly, she lists **Issachar** who she lavishes praise on for their loyalty to her and Barak

Sadly, that was the extent of the roll of the courageous as she turns her attention to the remainder of Israel

She begins the roll of the cautious with **Reuben** saying that they spent a great deal of time in reflection

Like so many of God's people today, they heard the call, and they likely saw the endeavor as a good thing, but they delayed as they contemplated their involvement to the point that all they did was contemplate their involvement

Unfortunately, churches today are full of "contemplative men" who industriously search their hearts but never act

Gilead, or Gad, stayed on the other side of the Jordan

Apparently the war their brethren were fighting on the other side of the river didn't much concern them

Dan was busy with the shipping industry and **Asher** apparently found the beaches of the Mediterranean to be preferable to an inland battlefield

There are also many "offspring" of Dan and Asher in churches today

Like Dan we are often seduced by the things of this world that call for our attention to the neglect of the things of God

And when I think of Asher, verse 2 of the hymn *Am I a Soldier of the Cross* comes to mind:

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?

And so Dan, Asher, Gilead, and Reuben are all called out for rebuke

While two tribes, Zebulun and **Naphtali**, are singled out for special praise and **Judah** and **Simeon** are completely left out of the picture

After listing the tribes of Israel, Deborah turns to give an overview of the battle in verse 19-22 as she describes the defeat of Sisera and Jabin

This is the climax of her song as, with a rhetorical flourish, she describes the victory over Sisera and Jabin as victory over all of Canaan

As she describes the battle, the Canaanite force won no spoils as the intervention of heavenly forces on Israel's behalf and the sudden flooding of the river Kishon came together to foil them

And she describes the chariot horses rearing and running in terror as they try to get away from the flood

She finishes this section by relating the fate of a city or village named Meroz - the problem is, we don't know today where Meroz was or who inhabited it

Perhaps the best understanding is that the inhabitants of Meroz had made a deal with the Canaanites against God's explicit command and God made an example of them so the whole nation would see but we can't be certain

To recap:

An analysis of the roll call shows us that six tribes were involved in the contest with two of them receiving special honor
Four were singled out for rebuke for not answering the call and two were completely absent from the accounting
So out of the twelve tribes, half of them did well and were singled out for praise

Many churches today would be thrilled with a 50% rate of committed involvement from their people as we have become accustomed to the business model of 80/20 where 20% of the people do 80% of the work

None of us should ever want to be counted with “the idle 80” as we should all be eager to use the gifts that God has given us and answer his call to service

And, regardless of how many respond, **we should celebrate the rallying of God’s servants as they answer the call to enter the fray**

We’ve seen Deborah’s focus narrow from the nation to the tribes and now she gets personal

As we see victory and defeat personified in the characters of Jael and Sisera’s mother

III. Victory and Defeat Personified

Deborah’s song takes an unexpected turn as she pivots from telling of the mighty battle to focus on the interaction between Jael and Sisera

She begins this stanza with abundant praise of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite as she calls her the most blessed of women - or at least she was the most blessed of women who lived in tents which limits the praise somewhat

In verse 25 we get a bit more detail of what took place when Sisera asked for water to drink as Deborah describes Jael bringing him milk in a noble’s bowl - as a kind of tribute to a superior

And from that description we can surmise that Jael is lulling Sisera into a false state of security by deceptively playing to his ego as she formally presented him with the beverage

Next, the song deliberately slows down as Deborah describes Jael’s treachery and brutality in the killing of Sisera with what can only be described as savage pleasure [**Judges 5:26-27**]

She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.

I haven’t spent much time describing the characteristics of Hebrew poetry so far this morning because, frankly, it would probably have put you to sleep

But I do want to slow down for a few moments here to recognize and appreciate the nature of these lines because they are a great example of what to look for in Hebrew poetry

In verse 26 we have two pairs of parallel lines with the second line giving a more precise picture of the action in each case

First, we see Jael pick up the tent peg then we see her pick up the mallet with her *right* hand and we realize she had to have grasped the tent peg with her left hand and we can fully visualize the scene

In the second pair we see Jael “struck” Sisera and then a more graphic description as she “crushed” his head and she “shattered” and “pierced” his temple

Each succeeding description enhances and clarifies the picture in our minds

Then, in verse 27 [**Judges 5:27**] we see an excellent example of parallelism as the line begins with the words “between her feet” and the staircase descriptions that follow he “fell,” he “lay still,” then the repeated “between her feet” he “sank” he “fell dead”

That verse vividly serves to vividly depict the vanquished, emasculated foe that Barak witnessed when he burst into Jael's tent with the intention of taking Sisera while it simultaneously trumpets Jael's mastery of him

With that vivid description, it's quite easy to picture Jael standing triumphantly over the ruined body of Sisera

Then Deborah does what would be called a jump cut in the movie business as she suddenly and without warning transports us to the home of Sisera's mother

And we are instantly transported from the tent of Jael standing over the corpse of to the vision of Sisera's mother gazing out her window and wondering at the cause of her boy's delay and weeping over what she suspects has happened

As readers, we can't help but feel pity for her as we read her questions:

"Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?"

But any sympathy we have for her in her plight is wiped away as we continue reading because her heart is revealed

In verse 29 we see her personal attendants try to console her but we also see her efforts to convince herself that all is well by answering her own question

Look with me at verse 30 because it reveals her true nature; she is a heartless woman without morals or compassion [Judges 5:30] - look at where her mind goes by way of explanation:

Have they not found and divided the spoil?—

A womb or two for every man; spoil of dyed materials for Sisera, spoil of dyed materials embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?

She finds consolation in the thought that her son is busy raping and plundering!

And she expresses these activities as the most natural of occurrences as she reasons that her son has been victorious and, of course the spoils belong to the victor, and it takes time to violate the women of the defeated

And let's not forget the fancy clothes that her good son will soon bring back to hang in her wardrobe

Deborah paints a picture of a woman bereft of the smallest compassion and whose moral compass is out of whack

A woman who is rightfully going to be disappointed

As the song comes to a close Deborah returns to the theological plane as she returns her focus to God declaring [Judges 5:31a]

So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might

In this concluding line we see a double petition that acknowledges the blessings and curses of God's covenant

No doubt Deborah intends the curse for Israel's enemies like, Jabin and Sisera, but, within the context of the book of Judges, we can't help but see a warning here for God's people as well

There is inherent danger in turning from God because God is jealous for his people and will not tolerate their wandering

And as the Israelites persist in their apostasy, we will see this curse applied to them again and again

But there is also blessing for those who love the Lord and, as Jesus made clear in **John 14:15**, those who keep God's commandments are those who truly love him

And so Deborah closes out her song with the prayer that those who are committed to God's covenant will shine like the sun when it rises in full force

As the song closes we must remind ourselves that it is first an ode to God but it is also a celebration

And **God's people should celebrate God's salvation and do so with exuberance**

Conclusion

So, what should we take from this chapter?

I want to focus on two things as we close

First, this song is a commemoration and celebration of what God did for his people in the days of Deborah and Barak

This poetic piece, inserted in a chain of narrative, seems out of place

And I think that's intentional because it interrupts the flow of events and forces us to slow down and take a moment to appreciate the significance what God did for Israel

Our natural tendency is to go through life step by step, day by day, rarely allowing the activity of God to intrude on our consciousness - let alone to pause and celebrate it

But we should never be so involved in the day-to-day, so busy with our schedule that we fail to commemorate and celebrate what God is doing

God's people are well served by taking time to notice God's working in the victories in their lives and the lives of others and to revel in them

We should also pause to celebrate milestones in the church family - decisions for Christ, baptisms, weddings, births, anniversaries, birthdays, promotions, educational milestones, and spiritual advances - just to name a few

The blessing of God evident in those types of events is worthy of notice by God's people

Second, through the various contrasts we see in Deborah's song and specifically the contrast between the tribes of Israel, we are confronted by the idea of participation in God's work - or the lack thereof

While the two southern tribes receive no mention at all, we see six of the tribes recognized and praised for answering God's call upon them

And we see two tribes who received special commendation for their efforts by going above and beyond the call putting their very lives on the line in God's service

But we also see four tribes who suffered rebuke - though, notably not condemnation - for opting instead to remain on the sidelines while their brethren fought God's battle

Barak was hesitant and lost his full measure of reward - but he did go in the end to rally and lead the troops

The four tribes, though, were either too distracted or too invested in other affairs that they failed to respond to God's call

And so they took the path of interminable rumination or comfort or rationalization to avoid serving the God they claimed to love

The fact that those attitudes and lack of action are prevalent in churches today should give us pause because earthly blessing and heavenly reward are at stake - we dare not forget that when God gives us opportunities to serve him

God means for every true follower of his Son to be a minister - a warrior on the battlefield - and no one is saved to sit on the sidelines watching while others bear the brunt of service

But, in the end, Deborah's song is a song of celebratory praise to God who supplies the victory

And the chapter closes with the editorial comment "the land had rest for forty years"

Next week, we will begin a three-week look at the pivotal judge in the series of major judges, Gideon

I encourage you to read Judges 6:1-32 in preparation as we encounter perhaps the most enigmatic of the judges

Let's pray