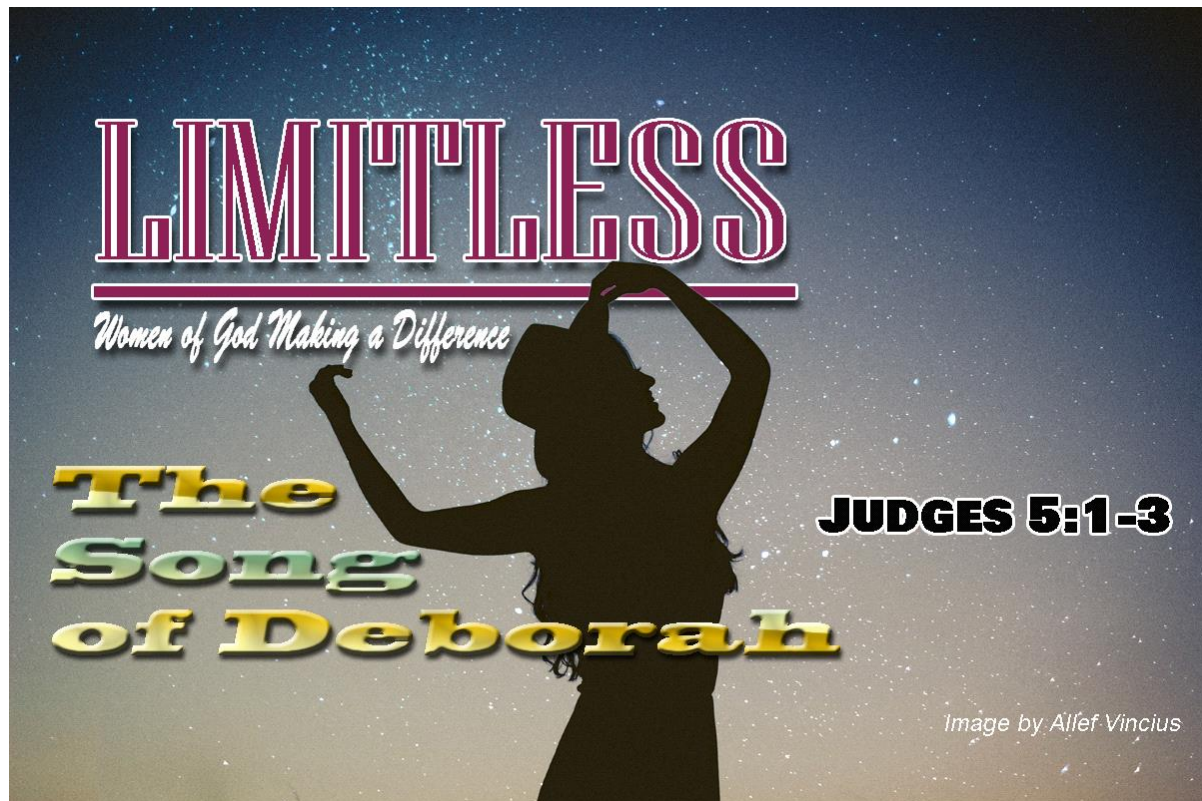


May 3 [Deborah] “The Song of Deborah”



### Judges 5:1-3

- 1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:
- 2 “When the princes in Israel take the lead,  
when the people willingly offer themselves—  
praise the LORD!
- 3 “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!  
I, even I, will sing to the LORD;  
I will praise the LORD, the God of Israel, in song.

Opening Music:

Limitless: Colton Dixon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VddKd73aNCI>

**Burnita Shelton Matthews was born in Burnell, Mississippi on December 27, 1894. Her father was a planter. While growing up, She attended local schools, and later attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of music, because her father wanted her to be self-supporting and felt she could do this by teaching music.**

**In World War I, she moved to Washington, DC and in 1917 started attending night school at National University Law School. In 1919 she received her Bachelor of Laws degree and in 1920 her Masters. During that same year, she passed the bar exam. Because she was female, she was rejected by every professional legal association of that time. Unwilling to admit defeat, she and other women lawyers of the time formed their own associations including the Woman's Bar Association of the District of Columbia and the National Association of Women Lawyers.**

**Unable to find work in an established law firm, she founded the law firm of Matthews, Berrien, and Greathouse with two of her colleagues where she remained in private practice until 1949. She worked hand and hand with the National Woman's Party to bring matters of women's rights to the forefront of the national caucus.**

**In 1949, Harry S. Truman appointed Burnita Shelton Matthews to the office of judge of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, making her the first female federal judge in United States history. She served as a federal**

judge until April 25, 1988, when at the age of 93, she passed away. Her strength, tenacity and love for the law and the people that it serves, was an inspiration to the many women who would follow in her steps, both in the legal profession and in the march to remove the glass ceiling of a fixed caste system that prevented so many woman from achieving their dreams.

Next Sunday is Mother's Day. As I pondered the opportunities for possible sermons this month, it occurred to me that, although we often have speak about motherhood on Mother's Day, we don't often talk about women from the standpoint of those individual who rose against the odds to make a mark and move against the wall of prejudice that we built as a society. And yet, there are many women written about in our Bible that not only found footing in leadership roles but often exceeded all expectations, breaking the glass ceiling and providing us with standards that defied the odds and overcame the obstacles placed in front of them. When God told them to climb the mountain, they didn't complain, but instead ignored the naysayers and set about climbing the mountains. It is easier to climb the mountain when people are cheering you on than when you are trying to climb the mountain to constant jeers and declamations that you are less than adequate for the task.

The women that we will discuss this month are not the women that we normally draw attention to in our worship messages. The stories for these women are

often short and sometimes easily dismissed. But these women left bold footprints in a world where their accomplishments could too easily be dismissed were it not for the impact they made against insurmountable odds. These women answered God's call and changed the way we perceive the role of women in a world that would too easily have dismissed them otherwise. All too often we have them relegated to a minor footnote in history texts and studies. These women did not buck the system, but instead worked within the system to change the system from the inside out, and rose against the social limitations of their day to make a difference in the world around them. They did not focus on the limits imposed upon them by prejudice and social standards, but instead saw the path ahead as Limitless, as they allowed God to use them to lift and encourage both women and men alike.

Today, we will bring our focus to Deborah. Deborah was a Judge in Israel for 40 years. But that doesn't mean a whole lot if we don't know what it meant to be a judge in Israel during that period of time that post-dated Joshua and pre-dated Saul. We need a little background to gain perspective and understand why Deborah is so important to us.

If you can remember, Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt but it was Joshua who led them across the Jordan River and into the land of Canaan, the land that God had given to the descendants of Abraham. And once there, Joshua

led the Israelites in conquering the land and its peoples. It is important to understand that Israel was composed of twelve independent tribes and that God had called Joshua to lead these twelve tribes in their conquest of the land of Canaan. The mantle of leadership had passed from Moses to Joshua but Joshua, like Moses, was not a king. He held no title. He was simply a tool that God used to bring the twelve tribes together to act as one as God delivered them to their new home. But when Joshua passed, there was no one to fill that role and it wasn't really felt that the role was needed since they had already settled in the land. It would be almost 400 years before Saul would become the first king of Israel.

During this time when there was no king, the tribes retained their individuality. The land itself was divided into 10 areas in the land of Canaan. Two of the tribes, Gad and Reuben, and half of the tribe of Manasseh chose to stay on the east side of the Jordan rather than take an allotment in Canaan. We tend to think of Israel at this time, as being a unified nation, but it really wasn't. Each tribe was given unto itself.

But, just like us, the Israelites were a stiff-necked people and they often turned away from God. They didn't forget their roots so much as they became complacent and allowed the ways of the previous inhabitants of Canaan to slip in and take their focus away from Yahweh. When they drifted, they would find

themselves facing challenges from other nations and often they found themselves at war and subsequently subjugated. They would repent and God would provide them with a leader and the term for these leaders that he provided during these times, was Judge.

We should not see this role of judge in the same light as we discuss a judge today. Although they would often hold court and decide civil disputes among the Israelites, the true reason for the raising up of judges, was to bring the twelve tribes to a united front during a time of crisis. These Judges were called by God and transcended tribal leadership. In other words, the judge was recognized by all twelve tribes. There was no succession of judges, it was not passed from father to son. Each judge was called by God individually. There were times when there were no judges in Israel during this period. There were also times when the leadership of judges overlapped one another. We are very familiar with some of these judges, judges like Gideon, Samson and Samuel. There was a total of fifteen judges during this transition period that started with the passing of Joshua and lasted until the beginning of the reign of Saul. Samuel was the last judge and he was a judge for approximately twelve years before Saul came to the throne.

Deborah was the fourth judge of Israel. We first hear of her in the fourth chapter of the book of Judges, verses 4-5.

**4 Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading (the Hebrew term can also be translated as Judging) Israel at that time.**

**5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.**

By the time we meet Deborah and learn about her, we find out that she is already a prophetess and a judge in Israel. She is in high standing. She is respected and listened to by all twelve tribes. We know that she must have been extremely wise because men and women would come to her and have her render decisions regarding their disputes.

During this time, Israel is under the control of Jabin, king of Canaan because the Israelites had once again turned their back on God, and he had allowed Jabin to invade and subjugate them. The commander of Jabin's army was Sisera. Sisera had 900 iron clad chariots under his command which was pretty impressive at that time. He was very oppressive of the Israelites for over twenty years.

Deborah called on Barak, a man from Naphtali, to come to her and she said this to him:

**“The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera,**

**the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.' ”**

This tells us something more about Deborah. Not only is she respected and wise, but she speaks with the authority and voice of God. We don't know if it is disbelief on the part of Barak, or if it is because Deborah is a woman, but we find that Barak is hesitant. He replies to Deborah with these words:

**“If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go.”**

In other words, “It's all fine and dandy that you tell me that God said to do battle with Sisera when it is just me and my men putting our lives on the line, but if you really want me to believe that this is a message from God, then put your money where your mouth is and you come WITH me.”

There is a whole sermon there regarding listening to the message of God and not focusing on the messenger. In this case we already know that Deborah speaks with the voice of God. The truth is that sometimes we hear a message from God and we just don't like the source, so we disregard the message rather than spend time in prayer and discernment. We should realize that, until recent history, it was hard for men to accept the words of a woman as worthwhile and important. Now guys, that may hurt us a bit to hear, but its the truth. I will wager that if you take a moment and look at your wives, you will see them nodding their heads in agreement. Women have had to fight and claw their way into positions that they



are qualified for only to be ignored and relegated to busy work because they couldn't possibly have anything of importance to add to any major conversation. It is so very condescending. So many of the women I know are so very much wiser and smarter than I will ever be.

It is important to note here that Deborah could easily have started an argument with Barak or berated him for his reply. But no, she is confident in her relationship with God. She knows where her message comes from. She has no doubt that the message is true and correct. She knows that God is going to deliver Sisera and his army into the hands of the Israelites. So, she doesn't hesitate with her reply:

**“Certainly I will go with you, but because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.”**

In simple terms, Deborah recognizes that Barak is disrespecting her words, testing her, challenging her even though she has earned the respect that is due her office and position. God doesn't appreciate the lack of respect either. He holds Deborah close and has her speak those words that are a slap in Barak's face. She has no problem with following through on what God has spoken through her. She will go with Barak into battle and trust in the words of the Lord her God. She is firm in her understanding, and her relationship with her Heavenly Father.

Sometimes we do make assumptions when we read the Bible. Often those assumptions are wrong which is why we have to keep context imperative to what we are reading. If we did not know this story well, we might rightly assume that the Deborah would claim victory over Sisera. But that is not the case. Because if we continue reading, we learn that Barak and his men do engage with the army and chariots of Sisera, and that they overwhelm and destroy them, but Sisera escapes on foot. He tries to hide in the tent of one of his allies, Heber the Kenite. It seems that Heber isn't home, but his wife, Jael, greets Sisera and invites him into the tent. She comforts him, gives him some milk, covers him with blanket and lets him go to sleep. Then she quietly gets a tent stake and a hammer and drive the tent stake through his temple and into the ground.

Meanwhile, Barak, who had been pursuing Sisera, happens upon the tent and Jael goes out to meet him and then brings him into the tent to show him why Sisera will now longer be an issue. What Deborah said, had come to pass. The defeat of Sisera was due to a woman, Jael.

And in the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> verses of this fourth chapter of Judges we read the following:

**On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.**

**But our scripture today comes from Judges 5, verses 1-3 and this chapter is aptly named “The Song of Deborah.”**

**Judges 5:1-3**

**1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:**

**2 “When the princes in Israel take the lead,  
when the people willingly offer themselves—  
praise the LORD!**

**3 “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!  
I, even I, will sing to the LORD;  
I will praise the LORD, the God of Israel, in song.**

I won't go so far as to say that Barak completely changes his way of thinking, but he certainly seems to be willing to be a part of the celebration. He did do his part, even if it was a little reluctantly. But we should not let that take our eyes off of Deborah. We need to understand and celebrate the spirit of Deborah in this victory. Here are a few things that we need to recognize in this story.

- 1. Deborah never turns her eyes and ears away from God. She never claims victory for herself or even acknowledges her part in the story.**
- 2. Her song is in praise of God for all that He has done, not for anything that she did.**
- 3. She continues to lead her people by exclaiming in her song**

**“When the princes in Israel take the lead,  
when the people willingly offer themselves—**

**praise the LORD!”**

**Victory comes when the people willingly allow God to use them.**

**4. When she sings:**

**“Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!**

**I, even I, will sing to the LORD;**

**I will praise the LORD, the God of Israel, in song.”**

**She is telling the rulers of the world that God is worthy of song and worthy of praise. This is His victory and His victory alone.**

**Deborah’s example is one to be followed by each of us. She teaches us, even today, that we should keep our eyes focused on the Lord and not be given to distraction. We come to understand that He is our guide and our protector. That we give ourselves over to His service and permit Him to work His will through us. By doing so there is victory over any problem that we face, any mountain that stands in our way.**

**The second takeaway of this message is that all of us face challenges. We can look around us and see some of the challenges that we face are not the same challenges that others face. Whether it is the color of our skin or the nature of our sex, whether we feel that those challenges are superficial or real, they are still challenges. Whether we take our cues from Burnita Shelton Matthews or from Deborah, we recognize that God has placed mountains in our path for a reason. They may be there to make us stronger. They may be there to show us our dependency on His love and strength. We may never know the purpose. But we need to see the mountain not as a challenge, but as a place of growth for our souls. God may remove the mountain from our path. But, if he chooses not to**

remove the mountain, He does want to know that we are willing to climb that mountain with His help and that we are willing to ask for and expect that help. We need to find gratitude for those mountains, rather than view them as obstacles.

Lastly, we need to recognize the challenges that others around us face that may not be a challenge to us. No mountain is the same size and it is not our lot in life to compare mountains. But it is our Christian duty and responsibility to help those around us find the strength, courage and tenacity to climb their mountains, through example, as Jesus was an example to us. He expects us to give them a hand and bring encouragement so that they can find the same source of strength, grace and mercy that has enabled us to climb our own mountains.

This week, I challenge us all to shift our focus from the problems surrounding us and focus our eyes and ears on God as He gives us direction for our lives. When He says "Go," let us do it without hesitation or questioning knowing that He has the situation in hand and has prepared the way before us. We celebrate His victory with our own songs telling the world and its leaders, that God is still on His throne and that we are His faithful children.

**AMEN**

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