

2026 TALK, 11.1.26, JUDGES 4 & 5

THE HOLY SPIRIT & THE WOMEN OF THE O.T. – (1) DEBORAH

But let me start this talk by mentioning Venezuela & Greenland. Impossible to ignore the biggest recent headlines... Just one reflection from this last week or so, which I took from the book of Judges: This was a difficult period in Israel's history. A time when strong rulers with the biggest armies could easily oppress their neighbours. It feels as if, today, we are returning to a similar way of behaving on the world stage. Might is right. In the words of the current President of the US – 'This is OUR hemisphere'... I hate to bring bad news Donald, but: 'The earth is the LORD's & everything in it'. Deborah's song, in verse 30 talks of the mighty dividing the plunder. A reminder of some leaders' attitude towards the world's riches... While a tyrant may have been removed from Venezuela, the world still faces the prospect of bigger tyrants, who also think of the world as their playground... But as the suffragettes declared on one of their marching banners: 'Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God'....

Let me share with you a difficult memory from the most recent Baptist Minister's Conference, last autumn. I **was** greatly encouraged by the fellowship we enjoyed those 3 days. Very moved by the stories I heard of what God was doing in churches across our Central Baptist Association. However, there was one encounter which deeply disturbed me. A fellow Baptist minister told me that he deeply admired Donald Trump, as a strong leader delivering economic prosperity to the US... I couldn't believe what I was hearing... Could it be so easy for a mature Christian leader to be so mis-led? I don't think it is too much to repeat what I have said about Donald Trump in the past from this pulpit. Could this President (along with others on the world stage) be seen as 'the man of lawlessness', mentioned in 2 Thessalonians ? Too much?...

I must not digress any further... Let's get back to my title. This short series of talks, on the Holy Spirit & the Women of the O.T., was partly inspired by the last time we sang the song, 'All Through History... It struck me for the first time (despite having sung that song many times), that the only heroes of the faith mentioned in that song are men. Similarly, if you look at the review of figures of faith in Hebrews 11, there is only one woman mentioned by name there. Women do also get one other brief, general mention. So, at least the

completely male writers of scripture do, in a small way, seek to re-dress this hard-wired male to female imbalance.

The fact is: a proper look at the O.T. reminds us that, although women tend to just play smaller, supporting roles in many of these stories, none of the story of God's people would have happened without these women. And then the good news of the N.T. begins with the story of Mary. And Jesus' approach towards women (as well as most of the N.T.) points the way to a fuller understanding of the equality of the sexes. This is just as well – The Prophet Joel reminds us that, 'in the last days (that is, our days), God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, women & men, old & young'... On a more immediate point. An increasing number of Baptist ministers are women. Just as well more women are hearing the call to ministry - it has become increasingly clear, there is a shortage of people coming forward for ministry at present...

Thinking of hearing God's call, let's turn to Deborah. In the coming weeks we will be thinking of Ruth, Hannah & Esther. But today we are celebrating the story of Deborah.

What is God's unlikely response to King Jabin of Canaan & to Sisera, the leader of a chariot army? (Jabin & Sisera together were making the most of the latest breakthrough in military hard-ware. They boasted 900 Chariots built with iron no less!). God's response to this fearsome army is, by the Holy Spirit, to call... **one woman**. Deborah takes a stand to free God's people. Before this happens, we see that God's people had cried out to God in their distress. What was the answer to their prayer? A woman, recognised as a prophet. She was someone who spoke for God. Not her husband, Lappidoth. No! Deborah... But she wasn't what might be called 'a strong leader'. She had no palace. In fact, she held her court, of sorts, under a palm tree. That's where she heard the disputes of her people. That's where she was forcefully reminded of how badly her people were suffering at the hands of two hard men.

So Deborah sends for Barak. He is someone she knows & trusts. Probably someone from Deborah's own tribe. A leader, a prince in Israel. Someone she knows to have the respect of the men of Naphthali & Zebulun. (Naphthali & Zebulun are both areas of Galilee. What was it about Galilee that produces such men & women of God?...). Barak is able to assemble an impressive army of 10,000 men, which was quite large for this early period of Israel's history. It's

clear from Deborah's song, that not everyone in Israel heeded this call. Some held back. But not Barak & his 10,000 volunteers.

Deborah has clearly been listening to God. Deborah has the anointing of God's Holy Spirit. Otherwise, she could not have confidently said to Barak: 'This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands... Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?'. And because Deborah is full of faith & the Holy Spirit, Barak defers to her & follows her instructions. God had given Deborah a 'cunning plan'. A strategy for defeating Sisera & his fearsome chariots. Sisera had camped his army by the River Kishan. Which meant that his chariots were vulnerable to a surprise attack down the slopes of Mount Tabor, where Deborah went with Barak. The chariots could not flee across the river. And they were next to useless being ridden up the slopes of Mount Tabor. The chariots were suddenly useless. The enemies of God were defeated. Sisera was humiliated, fleeing on foot from the army of God. Further humiliation came upon him, as he was killed with a tent peg in the hand of Jael, another woman of Israel...

The story of Deborah is a cautionary tale for all 'strong leaders'. For all those who fool themselves into thinking that, as long as they have the strongest weapons, they will be invincible... The LORD says something different. God's word of life, made flesh in Jesus Christ of Nazareth in Galilee, declares: 'Not by might, nor by power but by my Holy Spirit, says the LORD'. As Jesus himself proclaimed of his true leadership as Good Shepherd of God's people: 'The Son of Man did not come to **be** served, but rather to serve - and to give his life as a ransom for many'. 'As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: 'God's grace is made perfect in weakness...' And to Timothy: 'The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil'. Our message from the LORD to Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin & the like, goes something like this – 'You are very much mistaken... Our reading of the story of Deborah, our reading of the Bible as a whole, leads us to conclude this: your ways are not God's ways. What the world needs now, is not to listen to you, but to hear the voice of the LORD of all the nations, the LORD of all creation. We need to listen to Jesus, the King of love.'...

So what is Jesus' message to us here, this morning, from the story of Deborah? Do **you** hear the voice of Jesus speaking to **you** today? There is much that we can learn from Deborah's experience of God's Holy Spirit, speaking **to** her & **through** her. But let's not forget Jesus' words to those who heard his teaching: 'Blessed are those who hear my words – and put them into practice'...

God's people cried out to God in prayer in their distress. The LORD heard their prayer. God's answer was on one level an unlikely one. God called & sent Deborah to lead God's people. The result? Because God's people listened to God's voice through Deborah, they enjoyed peace for 40 years. This outcome would have seemed impossible to the people when they first started praying. They had been terrorised for years by these two hard men. But nothing is impossible when we pray, when we listen to God & put God's word into practice in our lives...

Shall we – like Deborah - take **our** stand, in the name Jesus and in the power of God's Holy Spirit, against the false leaders of this world...? Against the powers & authorities of this dark world, which set themselves up against God's Kingdom & the rightful rule of Jesus?... Against those who think nothing of oppressing people made in God's image... Against those who also think nothing of plundering the wealth of God's creation as if it were their own?...

We know from the story of Deborah, that this is only possible with God's help & in the power of God's Holy Spirit. We know that God has given us a complete set of heavenly armour for this fight. Our struggle is not against flesh & blood, but against the principalities & powers that our world leaders are in slavery to... So, I encourage you all to ask yourself this question: ***What does God want to give to me, to equip me for the challenges of 2026 ?*** How will God's Spirit train & equip ***me*** for the battles that lie ahead in the coming months? Whatever God is wanting to give you for the days ahead, we also need to say this: ***Let us stand together in the strength of the LORD.*** We know our enemy will seek to sow fear & division among us. But as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author & perfecter of our faith, we will stand... & keep standing in Jesus' name... And we can know the peace of God - if we continue to rejoice in God & God's victory in Jesus... Alleluia?

So finally, my last question for us all is this. God gave Deborah a song. A song of faith, a song of victory. ***So, what is your song of victory right now? & what is Carey's song of victory for 2026?...***

I encourage you to seek God for a particular song for yourself... And seek God for what you think his song for Carey is right now... And if you feel God gives you a particular song (for yourself or this church), please mention it to me. God may be wanting us to use that particular song as an anthem for us on Sunday

mornings. A song to build our faith & vision & strength for this coming year. I think we are going to need to learn to sing in spirit & in truth for the days ahead... As Paul puts it: 'Rejoice in the LORD always. I will say it again, Rejoice!... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything present your requests to God - with thanksgiving. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts & minds in Christ Jesus our LORD.' Alleluia! Thanks be 2 God !...