

## Come Sit Under the Palm Tree of Deborah

By Dr. Dave Neale

Back in my days as a prof I used to teach a special topics course called *Great Stories of the Bible*. Basically, I would set the Bible out there on the desk and I would say “Comb through your assigned section of the Bible and look for the weirdest stories you can find, and let’s talk about them.”

The premise, as you have heard me say on occasion, is that the stories preserved in the Bible are there because each one holds some lesson for the community of faith, that through long usage, it seemed good to the community to preserve.

Here is what I said in my intro to the class: “The Bible is the most read, yet unread book in the world. We read it, but somehow, we do not really hear it. When even the most familiar stories are read with a fresh and discerning eye, they come alive with surprisingly relevant lessons for today.”

I don’t recall if anyone ever did this passage, but it’s the kind of story that would make the list. I could have done the Matthew text, but how many more sermons do you need to hear about the talents?

I think there is a good chance that every preacher you have every had has steered around this story as a text for a Sunday sermon, so let’s jump in!

So, just so you know where I am going, not unlike *Stand Still in the Jordan*, my title is *Come Sit Under the Palm Tree of Deborah*. The message will invite us to understand God’s role in history and our relationship to time and our own problems. Come and rest here, I exhort us.

### Behind the Text

First, let me give you some context on where we are. We have come through Genesis and Exodus looking at the stories of the inception of the nation and its path to the Promised Land. Now we find ourselves in the land in the time of the judges.<sup>1</sup>

This is that period of transition between Joshua and the great elders who survived him, and the establishment of the monarchy. The tribes were a loose confederation, attempting to consolidate their political and military hold on the promised land. This was a period of 325 years! My goodness, how long O Lord indeed!

God’s plan overarches history, interspersing periods of amazing miraculous engagement, with sometimes generations, nay centuries, of seeming silence.

Now, in the conquest of the Promised Land, in some instances the people were able to drive out the inhabitants and occupy the land. But this was not *usually* the case. In fact, in Judges chapter 2-3 we have a long list of places from which the inhabitants were not “driven out.”

### In the text

A striking feature of the Bible is that the community of Israel declined to hide the awkward human failures of their history. The candor of the stories of the Bible is breathtaking. It is the story of *real human interaction* with a loving God.

Here are some examples, although we could find them on every page:

- the deception of Jacob by Isaac;

- the cowardice of Moses;
- the infidelity of David;
- the prostitutes, tax collectors and ne’re-do-wells in Jesus’ coterie;
- and, throughout the history of the judges, the repeated disloyalty of the people to Yahweh.

In Judges there is a distinct cycle pattern in the telling of the story in Judges of just such an awkward reality.<sup>2</sup>

Each cycle has these features:

- People “do what is evil in the sight of the Lord” (a stock phrase, also the worship of Baal and Asherah are always present);
- Anger of the Lord is kindled and they are delivered into the hands of their enemies and suffer subjugation;
- People groan and cry out;
- The Lord hears their cry and send a judge to deliver them;
- The judge dies and the people relapse.

I counted 8 examples as I leafed through Judges this week. There are 13 judges!

This teaches us that even though human evil knows no bounds, ultimately God’s gracious nature is our salvation. For us Christians, we believe that this very redemptive aspect of God’s nature reaches its ultimate expression in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The world is saved through Christ; Judges is the prologue.

Deborah served as the judge of the tribal confederation for 40 years (1237 BCE-1198 BCE). She came to judge Israel 120 years after the first judge (Othniel). As we have said, the conquest took decades, generations to play out.

She was the only female judge/prophet in Israel’s history. Her name, which means “bee” shows how industrious and dedicated she was. She represents leadership and the breaking of barriers.

Colourfully, she was known to hold court under the Palm Tree of Deborah, and all the Israelites came up to her for judgment.

I can just see her there in my mind’s eye. Quietly waiting while the members of the troubled tribes make their way up the dusty hill to her tree with their burdens of life. She waits under the palm. She wonders what it all means and where it will all lead. Will God’s people be faithful this time? Will God remember us? Do we matter at all?

So briefly told, the story tells us the Lord raised up Deborah and the Israelites gave the Canaanites a good drubbing at Mt Tabor in the Galilee, even though they have 900 chariots of iron.

With his army destroyed, the cowardly Sisera, their general, flees on foot and is invited into the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite. Under the ruse of refuge and commensality, she gave him milk when he asked for water and ...**brought him curds in a lordly bowl** (Judges 5:25, in the *Song of Deborah*, the oldest section of the OT).

Jael... well, ...***She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera a blow...*** (See Judges 4:17-22 and 5:24—27).

### From the Text

What do we do with a story like this? What's the point Lord? I should have done the Matthew passage!

I have several suggested ideas for us.

It isn't the generals or the chariots or the men swaggering about that are the heroes of this story. It is the women. Women don't show up much in the biblical narrative, because it was written by men. Early Israelite society at this time was based on equality. Monarchy and hierarchies had not yet formed in the nascent nation. They didn't have a ruling class, the rich and the poor, it was an egalitarian society.

This story teaches us what the gospel has taught us all along. That women are vital to the kingdom of God; look at the ministry of Jesus. And that it is the lowly and the ordinary that comprise the Kingdom of God. Military power is one thing. But in the society of God all are equal.

The second thing I see here in the macro-narrative of Judges is the familiar story of sin and grace upon which all faith in God is founded.

Human failure, divine compassion and rescue, human failure, divine compassion and rescue. What we see in Judges is a template of the redemption that reaches its fullest expression in Jesus' ministry. ***For I came not to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.***

Here is the gospel for us today. We see that God has always been forbearing to us and that his mercy endures forever.

Can you see with me, that the pattern of Judges and the mercy of God to sinners means that *each day* we arise, we have a chance to put the past behind us? Can you see what an amazing way that is to live?

Each morning, beginning today, we have a fresh opportunity to tackle life anew. To do better than we did yesterday.

The Lord's Prayer says this very thing: ***Give us this day our daily bread...*** We see that it locates the provision of God day-by-day. Likewise, the meaning is the same for ***and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*** Present tense – life in the present.

So, the invitation today is to 'Come, come sit under the palm tree of Deborah with me.' What I mean is 'Today, let us always wait on our gracious Lord together. If not always in comfort, at least in calmness and faith. For we know well that time has no meaning with God.'

Sometimes our prayer can't rise to 'Lord, help me change the world.'" But 'Lord, just help me to do okay today.' ...***this day our daily bread...***

There is this great passage in 2 Peter: ***Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,***

And you know how sometimes you get to the end of the day and you think, 'I'm just done today. I think I'll go to bed and have a fresh go at things tomorrow!' In short, in the grace of God we are *born again* each morning. It's real for the Christian.

... **and a thousand years are like one day** to God! Time has no meaning with God.

The passage in 2 Peter goes on to say this... **The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.** (2 Peter 3:8-9)

But the real message I have for us today is in a less dramatic sentence in this story. **She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.** (Judges 4:5)

And finally, this; Judges teaches us that what may seem like a deafening silence from God does not mean you are not seen; it doesn't mean that God is far away, that redemption is not ultimately to be gained.

"Mother Teresa struggled in her faith for decades ...she wrote many letters expressing her pain and distress about the loss of the presence of God."<sup>3</sup> She wondered if she even believed in God at all.

Now we are deeply troubled by what is happening in our world today. It feels like shards of glass in the soul. We all know that we have missed the chance to break this futile cycle of retribution. Now, instead, the prospect of peace will be lost to many future generations, unless some great leaders arise. God, we cry out, save us from ourselves!

It is a sad time. It's disheartening, especially to those of us who have an attachment of faith to the Holy Land and the stories of the Bible.

But we are assured in our text from Thessalonians this week: **Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.** (I Thess 5:1-2, 8).

And sit together under the palm tree of Deborah.

Amen

Benediction

And now, may the Lord who bids us begin each day as a fresh opportunity live in newness of faith and the forgiveness of our sin, bless you in the week to come and give you strength. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

<sup>1</sup> Here is a list of the **Judges of Israel** in chronological order from the internet:

1. **Othniel**: God is force – Tribe of Judah – 40 years of peace until he died – 1373BC-1334BC – Judges 3:9-11.
2. **Ehud**: Strong – Tribe of Benjamin – 80 years of peace – 1316BC-1237BC – Judges 3:12-30.
3. **Shamgar**: Cupbearer, flier – Tribe of Benjamin – Unknown years – Judges 3:31.
4. **Deborah**: Bee, wasp (prophetess) – Tribe of Ephraim – 40 years – 1237BC-1198BC – Judges 4-5.
5. **Gideon**: Feeler, Hower, also known as Jerub-Baal – Tribe of Manasseh – 40 years – 1191BC-1151BC – Judges 6:1-8:35.
6. **Abimelech**: Father of a king (bad) – Son of Gideon by a concubine – Tribe of Manasseh – 3 years – 1151BC-1149BC – Judges 9:1-57.
7. **Tola**: Crimson/warm color – Tribe of Issachar – 23 years – 1149BC-1129BC – Judges 10:1-2.
8. **Jair**: JAH (GOD) enlightens – Tribe of Manasseh – 22 years – 1126BC-1105BC – Judges 10:3-5.
9. **Jephthah**: Opposer – Gileadite – 6 years – 1087BC-1081BC – Judges 10:6-12:7.
10. **Ibzan**: Splendid – Tribe of Zebulun – 7 years – 1081BC-1073BC – Judges 12:8-10.
11. **Elon**: Oak, strong – Tribe of Zebulun – 10 years – 1075BC-1063BC – Judges 12:11-12.
12. **Abdon**: Service, servile – Tribe of Ephraim – 8 years – 1063BC-1058BC – Judges 12:13-15.
13. **Samson**: Distinguished, strong – Tribe of Dan – 20 years – 1069BC-1049BC – Judges 13-16.

<sup>2</sup> See Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1

<sup>3</sup> According to an article in **The Week**