
Time to Get Rained On

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I'm not perfect. You perfect?

Don't need to do anything about ... your weight? Eating habits? I do.

Lots of angry reactions to people, and then learning you were wrong?

Jumping to conclusions? Me too.

Alcohol? Cannabis? Anything more serious? No show of hands?

How might I start moving toward a better way of living? Something that might be more satisfying, more rewarding, more productive for me?

Let's ask Deborah.

In the Old Testament book of Judges, chapters 4 and 5, we meet Deborah; she lived about 3,000 years ago, in ancient Israel. She was the only female leader of Israel in the entire Old Testament record.

For a long time, in the early days, 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, one after another, and Deborah was #5 in the sequence.

She didn't set up an office somewhere and 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. And people would go there to have Judge Deborah decide their disputes (**Judges 4:5**).

And in fact, Deborah probably couldn't have had an office in downtown Jerusalem even if she wanted one, because 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.

This was part of a cycle that Israel kept going through: living according to God's design, they would find themselves strong and independent; but then 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 New England 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 your parents on the plane and send them back to Indiana, you go back to all your bad parenting habits. So the people of Israel would relax their morals, indulging in short-term temptations and stuff, and they would grow weaker — and 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 a good leader with healthy values would point the way out of their jam. They would somehow get free, they would rejoice, they would get back in line — and then they would gradually sort of slide, 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 my God-given conscience, do well for a while, then get a little lazy or casual about it, kind of feel like ignoring my better judgment, ultimately bust God's design for life, crash, get in trouble, hurt myself, hurt other people, suffer the guilt, feel the remorse, cry, plead with God for 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!

Israel was 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 might have meant an army of as many as 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 virtually no weapons; 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 finally, it was as if God said, Okay, I'm going to make a way out for you.

But for someone's situation to change, something has to change *in that person*. The Israelites found that it wasn't enough just to change their attitude. 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.***

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's a guy with a military background named Barak; God inspires Deborah to call on Barak and give him a battle plan. He's to muster 10,000 Israelite guys, and head for Mount Tabor, overlooking the Kishon River. 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.

In any case, Deborah doesn't back down. So 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. 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. I guess he's sort of paralyzed. It's as if Deborah has to smack his face to get him to snap out of it.

“Go!” Deborah 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!

Ah, changing a bad habit, though. Ugh. 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 to 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 to love me through this, and take care of me through this, and provide for me through this.

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?”** God is moving cloud formations over my battlefield. He's swelling the banks of the river. Maybe he's preparing a groundswell of encouragement just when I need it to make a break with my habit. Maybe just when I think I'm to the end of my financial rope, I'm going to find he's prepared a backup rope! Maybe in my medical crisis, he's got a burst of hope waiting for me at just the right moment. He has prepared the way in my relationship, in my schooling, on the job. Maybe not even the kind of outcome I'm hoping for, but somehow I will still find myself in a place of peace.

The psalmist David realized this when he wrote, in **Psalm 139:5: You hem me in — behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.** God isn't sitting back with his arms folded, calculating how responsible I am for my own situation. God is *for* me.