

May 14, 2023

“The Deborah Question”
Judges 4:1-16

FCF: The limits of our trust

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The LORD is good.

(anchor) We need to trust Him in everything. And every issue.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Charles Blondin was a 19th century daredevil known for walking a tightrope stretched out over a quarter of a mile, spanning the breadth of Niagara Falls. One day in 1859, he walked 160 feet above the falls several times between Canada and the United States as crowds on both sides looked on. It is said that it was after pushing a wheelbarrow across while blindfolded that Blondin asked for some audience participation. He had just proven he could do it. Of that, there was no doubt. But now he was asking for a volunteer to get in for a ride. He asked his audience, “Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?” Oddly, no one volunteered.

There can be a limit to our trust. We’re in a series in the Old Testament book of Judges. Last week, we read about Deborah. Such texts can raise some questions and test the limits. So, as we did a few weeks ago with “holy war,” we are going to step back and ask some questions.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Judges 4:1-10, 12-16](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“What questions?” you may ask. The people of Israel are settling in the land of Canaan but life is anything but settled. They were facing all kinds of trouble because they had turned their backs on the LORD. It was a time of oppression. So the people cried out and the LORD responded by sending another judge, another deliverer - Deborah. What do we know of her? As you read Judges 4-5, there are three things that stand out. She was a composer. She wrote this poem full of wonderful images and rhythms. She was a judge - far more like a supreme justice than any of the others, holding court, pronouncing verdicts on issues brought to her. She was also a prophetess - speaking words of instruction, warning, and encouragement. And speaking with the LORD’s authority - every bit as much as Moses, Isaiah, or Jeremiah. Put another way, if you were there, hers were words which you needed to heed for she spoke for the LORD.

Which raises questions. What does this mean for us today? Not at a societal level for Israel was a theocracy. The state and church were intertwined. But what does this mean for God’s people, the community of believers, the church? We need to be careful with narrative. We must not assume the descriptive is prescriptive, that just because a thing was done that it should have been done. Still, such texts can communicate principles. God is at work. And He does not change. All of which gets to this question. “How are women called to serve in the church?” What is encouraged? What is restricted? How is that seen here with the case of Deborah?

It’s a serious question, one that needs to be thought through. We must not be captive to the traditions of the past or the pressures of our times. So we have to consider our practice here.

And our message - to the watching world, to our growing children. What are they witnessing? We ourselves need to know as well. After all, roughly 50% of the folks in this room are women.

As we press into this, let me share with you my basic fundamental assumption. And it was reflected in the reading earlier from Psalm 19. The LORD is good. The LORD's word and ways are good. And we need to trust Him in everything - including the hard issues before us.

Let's press into the question in two ways - the flawed responses and the better answer.

I. THE FLAWED RESPONSES

First, the flawed responses. That is, attempts to answer the question Deborah presents.

A) From the Progressive

Let's break this into two groups. First you have the progressive, the liberal response.

1. The assertion

The assertion here is that Judges 4-5 proves that "anything a man can do, a woman can do." It's made by dismissing gender differences as fiction, rejecting them as social constructs and myths.

2. The rebuttal

The problem with this position is that Deborah's leadership is clearly distinct from her male counterparts. And the narrator draws attention to this. She does not fight. She recruits Barak to go to battle. Unlike the other judges, she is not a lone ranger. The others tend to be independent. So she does not fight or go it alone. And she excels not just in wartime but in peacetime as well. In those ways, Deborah's example points us towards very real gender distinctions. And they are so real that they come out in styles of leadership. So the progressive response is flawed.

B) From the Conservative

What then of the conservative, the more traditional response? How does it fare?

1. The assertion

The assertion here is that "women shouldn't be leading." That is, what we see with Deborah is an anomaly, an exception, caused by the timid abdication of the cowardly men of the time. So she had to step up and step in because they wouldn't. What should we say to this response?

2. The rebuttal

The text doesn't say this. It doesn't say, "There was no one else so Deborah stepped up." In fact, when you look at other prophetesses like Miriam in Moses' day and Huldah in Jeremiah's day, you certainly can't say there were no other prophets at hand. The fact of the matter is that Deborah was called by the LORD for this task. He specifically and intentionally chose her.

So neither the progressive response or the conservative response get us very far here.

Illustration:

It's like being forced to choose between two lethal poisons. Or being asked, "Which way would you like to die, by hanging or the firing squad?" Or sailing with Odysseus and navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. It's not that one is better than the other. They are both wrong.

Application:

So the answer, if we are concerned about personal abuses, is not to say, “Better to take the looser approach.” And the answer, if we are concerned about societal drifting, is not to say, “Better to take the stricter approach.” Again, forcing that choice is not the way of wisdom at all.

Rather, the people of God should look to the Word of God and lean into the Spirit of God to guide us. For we know He is good. We need to trust Him in everything. And every issue.

II. THE BETTER ANSWER

What might the better answer be? For that, we need to survey the biblical landscape, to take in the wider picture. What we see is that men and women are created in God’s image, equal in value and worth. That said, though we are equal in dignity, we are not identical in calling.

A) The Old Testament Pattern

1. With instruction

Consider the Old Testament pattern. Women advised, counseled, and rebuked men. They taught and prophesied. They instructed men, but often in a limited private setting. And none preached.

2. With leadership

We see women leading beside men but none holding a rank of Abraham, Moses, David. Miriam aspired to such and God rebuked her. When Barak tried to avoid it, Deborah urged him on.

B) Jesus’ Ministry

1. The apostles

What do we see in Jesus’ ministry? Women held vital roles. They accompanied Him, supported Him, remained with Him at His crucifixion, were the first witnesses of the resurrection, and carried His instruction to His disciples. That said, Jesus clearly chose twelve male apostles.

2. The accusation

Now some will say this was because Jesus was constrained by the traditions of the day. But that seems an absurd response when you look at how freely Jesus spurned such things in so many ways. Note how freely He associated with all sorts of folks and women. They loved Him for it.

C) The Apostolic Era

1. Basic principles

What then of the apostolic era, the other writings of the New Testament outside the Gospels? Again, we are equal but not identical. Women should learn the faith, share their knowledge and be encouraged to do so. But they should not be the primary principal instructors in a church. For the Lord has reserved such roles, then and now, for men - that is, the office of elder.

2. Particular texts

This is why particular texts read as they do. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that women are to “keep silent” in the church - referring not to wordlessness but to the evaluating of the doctrine of a speaker. Such authority has been invested in the elders of the church as their responsibility.

This is also why Paul says in 1 Timothy 2 that women should not “teach or exercise authority over a man.” These are two phrases connected together referring to one thing - the role of elder.

In all of this, we have to remember that our role does not equate to our value. Our value is never in what we do but in who we are as God’s image bearers. That’s the Bible’s message.

Illustration:

In a church, men and women are like puzzle pieces - from the same box, forming a larger picture, incomplete without one another, needing one another, losing so much when we neglect God’s good design. Along these lines, a study committee of our denomination wrote ([READ](#)):

The committee affirms wholeheartedly that the Bible requires women's gifts to be fully employed within biblical parameters. Anything to the contrary has only wounded the body of Christ, robbed it of many of God’s gifts, and caused outsiders to question the church’s devotion to the Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. Moving forward, the committee desires to see churches utilize women’s gifts and abilities so that they may, as Westminster Shorter Catechism question 1 says, "Glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Application:

What else might we say at this point? Let me share a few broad reflections. Leadership must about service and sacrifice, never power and privilege. We all should bear that in mind.

We also need to be aware of the ways we all bring our experiences of such teaching to the study of such texts - good and bad, cases where such things have been applied well or quite poorly. Indeed, we need to consider our gender, the seat in which we sit before our study even begins. We need to bear that in mind as we listen to one another. And not jump to conclusions.

Again, the LORD is good. We need to trust Him in everything. And in every issue.

CONCLUSION:

Perhaps some words of Aslan might help. I’m thinking of *The Silver Chair*, part of the Chronicles of Narnia. Aslan has appointed Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum the Marshwiggle to find Prince Rillian and free him from the spell of an evil witch. He gave four signs. They have missed the first three but the fourth still remains. They would recognize the prince by his asking them to do something in the name of Aslan. As the story unfolds, they find themselves trapped in a room with a knight said to be insane, his ravings so violent he has been tied to a silver chair. Our heroes witness one of these ravings. They hear the knight’s pleas for help. He says he is not insane but rather under a spell by day and bound to this chair by night. He begs them ([READ](#)):

“If you have any pity, cut my cords and set me free....By the bright sky above, by the great Lion, by Aslan himself, I charge you.”

Is that it? He asked in Aslan’s name. Is it the fourth sign? “If only we knew,” Jill cried.

“I think we do know,” Puddleglum replied.

“Do you mean everything will come right if we do untie him?” asked Eustace.

“I don’t know about that,” said Puddleglum. “Aslan didn’t say what would happen. He only told us what to do. That fellow may kill us once he’s up. But we must still follow the sign.” So they set the knight free and found that he was Prince Rillian, the object of their quest.

But why was it so hard to follow the signs? Aslan had told them earlier in the story ([READ](#)):

Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart, and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.

The air is less thick in some places than others. Clarity and certainty come more easily with the call to justice and mercy in our day - that is, until we drill down into what all that actually means. But things get harder, the air gets thicker, when we speak of the call to sexual purity, radical generosity, empathy towards our neighbor - and with gender distinctions, the differing roles for men and women in the home and in the church. The air gets a bit thicker there, doesn't it?

But, again, the LORD is good. We need to trust Him in everything. And in every issue.

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