

Deborah: Mother in Israel

Mother's Day 2021. Southmount.

A feminist is getting on a bus when, just in front of her, a man gets up from his seat. She thinks to herself, "Here's another man trying to keep up the customs of a patriarchal society by offering a poor, defenseless woman his seat", so she pushes him back onto the seat.

A few minutes later, the man tries to get up again. She is still insulted so she refuses to let him up again.

Finally, the man says, "Look, lady, you've got to let me get up. I'm twelve blocks past my stop already!"

Our society embraces and celebrates strong women, more so than in other times. For example, we honour our Olympic athletes such as Christine Sinclair (soccer) and Kylie Masse (swimming).

But in Christian circles, there are still some who think that women are meant to be "merely" assistants for men.

When I was younger, I wasn't so pleased that the *Woman* was created to be the Man's helper. Around our house, the helper did chores. The "helper" did boring, repetitive chores, like helping with the dishes and the sweeping. The helper got bossed around. "Helping", it seemed, was for the inferior person.

I would have preferred to be the Boss. Whoever was the Boss was more important. I resented the idea that I was somehow inferior to my brothers, just because I was a female, and made to be a helper.

As I grew older, I started to notice from Scripture that it was the *Man* who needed help. He wasn't quite complete or capable on his own. In Gen. 2.18 'The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a **helper** suitable for him."

The Bible tells us that the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. (v. 20b)

It takes him a while, but eventually he notices that every other creature has a partner. God gets him to realize this fact while allowing Adam to name the animals of creation.

Once Adam realizes what he's missing, God gives him the gift of Eve, a help "meet" for him. "Meet" means "fitting" or "appropriate" or "suitable". Instead of being created as a subordinate, Eve was created as one "corresponding" to Adam.

Just as elephant kind requires both male and female to be truly and wholly elephant; just as goat kind requires both billy and nanny to be wholly goat, so Adam requires Eve to be wholly human.

Learning this had the effect of improving my self-image. It seems that the woman in the garden has an important role. It's a GOOD THING to be a helper.

It's a GOOD thing to be a woman! On the other hand, the one who needs help is help-less without the helper.

Gradually my understanding has increased: at this point in my life, I have learned even more about the "strong helper." An excellent resource is the book, *"When Life and Beliefs Collide"* by Carolyn Custis James.

In this book, she teaches women – and men – that what we **think** is important. What we think about God – in other words, our theology – is important. Our theology affects what we say to others when they need counsel. Our theology affects how we view ourselves. Our theology affects how we act. Correct thinking is crucial for women – and for men – today.

"Every Christian is a theologian whether we like it or not." Either we are poor theologians, or we are good ones. We need to learn how to be good theologians!

We show our theology in the words we choose. Do we take God's name lightly? If we throw around His holy name, we are insulting and disobeying Him. If we don't even think about it, we are lousy theologians.

When someone dies, do we encourage the grieving ones with words of comfort from the Bible?

For example, this is what Paul teaches us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe

that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with Him the believers who have died.

We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words."

Is this what we cling to and offer to those who grieve?

... or do we mumble lame and untrue platitudes like "God needed another flower for His garden." God is completely self-reliant – He needs NOTHING!! Don't make Him sound like He needs to scoop away our loved ones just so His garden will look nice – what kind of crummy God is that??"

If we don't have the right idea about death and heaven, not only is the comfort we offer weak and illogical, but it means we are not good theologians.

From Carolyn Custis James I learned a new word. Are you ready for it? The new word is "Ezer" – it rhymes with "razor" and it means "the strong helper".

Think of the song we WOULD sing together if we could, "Come, Thou fount of every blessing". The 2nd verse uses the key word, 'ezer': "Here I raise my Ebenezer/ Hither by His help I've come." Ebenezer contains the word 'ezer'. "Ezer" means strong helper. Woman is created to be not merely a helper, but a "strong helper".

It's worth noting that God Himself is our helper.

Deuteronomy 33:29 Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield and **helper** and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places."

Psalms 10:14 "But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the **helper** of the fatherless."

Psalms 27:9 Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my **helper**. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.

Psalms 118:7 The Lord is with me; he is my **helper**. I will look in triumph on my enemies.

In **Psalms 46**, God is described as "an ever present **help** in times of trouble."

If God Himself is called a "helper", then it can't be a put down for *me* to be called a helper. And if I am made in His image, it follows that I will be like Him. Whether I am a man or a woman, I will function as He does. I will also be a strong helper. (Of course, whatever I do will be done in *His* strength!)

Although some expositors have taught that all women should be subordinate to men because Eve was created after Adam to be his helper, the word *ezer* is never used in the Hebrew Bible with a subordinate meaning.

Seventeen out of the twenty times the word is used, it refers to *God* as the helper. Instead of being created as a subordinate, Eve was created to be a "suitable" helper, or one "corresponding to" Adam.

((*kenegdo*) QUOTED from Presbyterian Position Paper found on internet)

A woman is created to be an "ezer", a strong helper. She acts from a position of strength rather than subordination. She is designed for "Living Strong". As mothers, or as mothering figures, we need to be strong! Motherhood is not for sissies!

How then do we "live strong"?

Let's look at a Biblical example of a woman who was a true "ezer," a strong helper for the whole nation of Israel. [Turn in your Bibles to JUDGES 4:1-7 [READ](#)]

For many years, scholars have assumed that Deborah was married, *but not hiding* behind her husband (and he was clearly not threatened by being married to a strong woman...)

In fact, "Lappidoth" means "lamps." If this was her husband's name, we might figure that he was a pretty bright guy!!)

It is also possible that Deborah was a single woman. We don't know if she had biological children or not. If she did have children, we know nothing about them. Yet, she calls herself "a mother in Israel" (5:7). That is the only title she

claims for herself. The Bible calls her a prophetess and a judge – dual titles held only by 2 other people, Moses and Samuel. But she has a heart for God’s Israel, both the leaders and the people (5:9), and she thinks of herself as a mother in Israel.

It could be that there is more to being a mother than just the physical fact of giving birth. It could be that the strong women who nurture our children in Sunday School or Learners’ Band are truly “mothers in Israel” – or Canada. Any of us who patiently nurture our people back to spiritual health, or inspire change using our motherly ability to admonish and motivate are “mothers in Israel”. God uses us – He actually partners with us to influence our families and change the world.

From the story of Deborah we will discover 4 character qualities which, when put into practice, will enable us, as women in particular, to be true “ezers” in our world today.

What then, is the 1st character quality we can put into practice that will enable us to be true “ezer’s” in our world today? We need to be wise.

1. Be Wise.

Deborah was wise. 4:4, 5b “Deborah, a prophetess, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah ... and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.” The Palm of Deborah (V 5) was the place to go if you needed help solving a big problem.

Perhaps it was just a really big tree – “Meet me at Deborah’s Palm”, people would say. Did it get the name because it was close to her house? The fact that Deborah makes her judgments outside means she has a public ministry to the men who came seeking her wisdom. How wise that she keeps everything right out in the open.

All leaders, men and women, are wise to protect their integrity by leaving doors open, having witnesses, or having someone in the next room.

Not only do we as strong women, “mothers in Israel” or “mothers in Canada”, need to be wise, we also need to be proactive.

The 2nd characteristic of an “ezer” is to ...

2. Be Proactive.

Deborah is proactive. Look at verses 6 and 7. She chooses to take positive action. She sends for Barak, a military leader. Some people call Barak cowardly, but I think he must have had something going for him; Deborah clearly believed in him, in spite of his hesitation, and he had incredible faith in her too, if not in God! She basically sends him to war, based on what she has heard from God. (v 6)

She doesn’t wait for him to come to her for advice. She *summons* him. And, it is a mark of her standing in the community that when summoned, he comes! As a leader himself, he knows how to respond to strong leadership from someone else. Gender in this case was irrelevant.

I have always been grateful to be part of The Salvation Army, where women are trained for leadership. We are expected to be like Deborah of the Bible, wise and proactive. In The Salvation Army we, women as well as men, also have opportunities to **speak for God**. And that leads us to the 3rd characteristic of an "ezer":

3. Be Prophetic. (another way to say this is: "Speak for God".)

Deborah is a prophetess – she speaks for God. She says to Barak in verse 6, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: "Go, take with you 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. 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.""

Deborah shows that she is an "ezer", a strong helper, by Prophesying – speaking on the Lord's behalf; she gives Barak the necessary details regarding the battle. "Take 10,000 men and lead the way to Mount Tabor. God will handle it from there." (It is interesting to me that Deborah's name in Hebrew is an anagram for "she speaks".)

As a prophetess for God, she does not hold back from speaking unpleasant truths (this is one area where some of us, especially women, have difficulty; we would rather nurture than confront). Sometimes it takes courage to tell the truth.

Deborah straightforwardly assures Barak that because he is not taking the lead here, he also won't get the honour – rather, a woman will. (see verse 9)

Barak may assume that she is referring to herself. Maybe she thinks so too, but she only speaks what she knows.

As it happens, Jael is the woman who strikes the final deadly blow for victory for God's people. Jael and Deborah both show personal courage in their actions. Like Deborah, we need to use our words to speak for God in a prophetic role, and we also need to show courage when necessary.

4. Be Courageous.

Deborah is courageous. Look at verses 8 and 9. "Barak said to her," "If you go with me, I will go, but if you don't go with me, I won't go." (This reminds me a bit of the story of Joan of Arc; Barak is hoping that her presence will inspire the troops.) "Very well", Deborah said. "I will go with you..." "So Deborah went with him". She has this kind of courage because she trusts in God. Her faith in a mighty God is what makes her brave.

Off they go to Kadesh, to set up camp on Mount Tabor. This is all pretty far out of a woman's comfort zone especially in those days. Not many of us are called to go to an actual military front line. Deborah herself may have preferred to remain at home, under the Palm, acting as "a mother in Israel" – offering motherly nurture and advice.

Just as Deborah had prophesied, all of the enemy troops are destroyed by the power of God, except for their leader, Sisera. God instructs his people through the voice of Deborah, to leave their camp on the mountainside and go down to the plain, where it seemed that they would be easy prey for General Sisera and

his 900 iron chariots. Encouraged by what looks like an easy win, the enemy troops pour out by the thousands onto a plain where they know they'll have room for their horses and chariots. Then, as Deborah's song so eloquently describes it, (look at 5:20,21) "From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon."

900 iron chariots on a dry plain are the equivalent of nuclear weapons against the unarmed and oppressed Israelites – but on a flood plain, drenched by a heavenly hailstorm, 900 iron chariots are a liability! The enemy was then easily defeated by the now-inspired Israelites.

Sisera, the enemy commander, is the sole (sole – he's on foot!) survivor. The iron chariot in which he had placed his faith is now knee-deep in river mud, so he runs to Jael's tent.

Since Jael's family lives close to his borders, Sisera has been on relatively good terms with her family. It is possible that Jael's husband Heber the Kenite, had broken ties with Israel and gone over to the Canaanites.

But Jael is not Heber. She makes a big decision on her own. She welcomes Sisera into her tent. She gives him milk to drink (was it drugged?) and sends him for a nap. Then she nails him. She used what she knew to do what she knew she had to do.

Her courageous deed is celebrated in detail in Deborah's Song of Triumph. (5:24-27)

"Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
most blessed of tent-dwelling women.

He asked for water, and she gave him milk;
in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.

Her hand reached for the tent peg,
her right hand for the workman's hammer.
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.

At her feet he sank,
he fell; there he lay.
At her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell-dead.

Deborah showed the courage of a warrior in accompanying Barak to battle.
Jael showed the courage of a warrior in killing her enemy. (She had him pegged
as the bad guy!)

So do you think God calls any of us outside our comfort zone as nurturing
caregivers into the "front lines"? Yes. Early SA women had to wear protective
headgear ("bonnets") to keep rocks and garbage from hitting their faces while
they served God in open air ministry.

Even today, young women as well as men, choose to live in the poorest areas
of Canada like downtown Vancouver or Hamilton. They seek to identify with
the poor and homeless, no matter what the personal cost; they hope to lead
people to Christ. They even travel to impoverished countries just to
demonstrate Jesus' love.

What are the boundaries we might not feel "comfy" working outside? Consider these ideas: tutoring someone of a different culture; living in a very poor neighbourhood; working with prisoners, inviting a new Canadian to your home for dinner, hey – how about speaking to someone at church that you don't know or forgiving someone you are mad at! etc.

The Hebrew name "Deborah" means "bee". (She had honey for her friends and a stinger for her enemies.) Let's "bee" like Deborah and live like strong helpers. Here are 4 ways we can become like our mighty God, strong "ezers":

1. BE wise. Develop wisdom. Just as Deborah offered wise counsel to Barak, we can offer wise counsel to those around us. Our best source for wisdom is God's word. Listen to God and pass on what He says.

2. BE proactive. Choose positive action. Just as Deborah was proactive in summoning Barak and giving him direction, we can choose to be proactive. Rather than moan about your situation, discover and take positive steps to improve it. God is our strength – He will help us.

3. BE prophetic. Speak for God. Just as Deborah spoke for God, first in passing along His instructions and then in praising Him, we can speak for God. This might involve teaching in some way, either formally or informally. Or it we can speak for Him by our cheerful attitudes and our songs.

4. BE courageous. Just as Deborah showed personal courage when she left her comfort zone under the Palm Tree and joined the troops by the Kishon River, we can show personal courage in reaching out to people with God's love. Who will you meet who needs the support of an "ezer" this week?

Deborah, although she describes herself as a "mother in Israel", used her wisdom and courage to help Barak reach his potential. We, as ezers, strong helpers, can help our husbands, our children and others, both male and female, reach their potential. We can, as "mothers in Israel – or in Canada", help to nurture and support the family of God.

Serving God is never boring. Think of the variety in Deborah's life. She left the usual woman's role to act as a noteworthy advisor ("judge") among her people. Then she left that role to lead in battle. Finally, she adopted the role of worship leader. The song she wrote is a top hit – it has been in circulation for centuries! See chapter 5 for the complete lyrics!

We may be required at some time to leave our usual place, whatever that may be, to do something different for God. We too can become wise theologians who speak for Him; capable leaders who work, even fight, for Him; and examples of excellence in leading worship. Or we may be called to do "other stuff". (What is God calling you to do for Him?)

Deborah, prophetess, judge, and mother in Israel, is a wonderful example of a woman who lives up to her heritage of being created in the image of God, our Strong Helper, our Warrior-King, and the Protector of His people.

As his children, made in His image, women reflect not only God's gentleness, creativity and ability to communicate; we also reflect that part of His nature that is powerful enough to meet the challenges of life.

We know that His strength is perfected in our weakness for "He alone is our strength, our shield."