

Jael

HER NAME MEANS
“A Wild or Mountain Goat”

HER CHARACTER: Decisive and courageous, she seized the opportunity to slay an enemy of God’s people.

HER JOY: To be lauded by Deborah and Barak for her part in a decisive victory.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Judges 4–5

Monday

HER STORY

Jael watched uneasily through the flaps of her tent as clouds swept the blue from the sky and rain fell like a shroud across the horizon. Sisera, she knew, had marched to Tabor. *But what good were iron chariots in a flooded valley?* she wondered. Yet the Israelites were poorly armed, with little chance of prevailing. Still, she remembered the stories of Moses and the people he had led across the wilderness. Had their God, she wondered, been asleep these many years?

The sight of a man running, then stumbling toward her interrupted her thoughts. A soldier fleeing? Was he Israelite or Canaanite? His identity might reveal the way the winds of battle were blowing. She went out to meet him, surprised to find that Sisera himself was approaching, dirty and bleeding.

“Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid,” she welcomed him.

“I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” Instead Jael opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink.

“Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say ‘No.’”

As soon as Sisera fell into an exhausted asleep, Jael picked up a tent peg and hammer. Her arm was steady, her aim sure. Hadn't she been in charge of the tents all these years? Quickly, she thrust the peg through his temple and into the ground. Like a piece of canvas fixed in place, Sisera, the great general, lay dead, slain by a woman's hand, just as Deborah had prophesied to Barak.

Was Jael a hero, an opportunist, or merely a treacherous woman? It is difficult to know. She and her husband, Heber, were Kenites, members of a nomadic tribe whose survival depended on its ability to stay clear of local disputes. Her husband had made his peace with the Canaanites despite his descent from Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law. Perhaps ancient ties had no longer seemed expedient, considering the power of the Canaanite rulers. But Jael may have believed in Israel's God. Or perhaps she merely wanted to curry favor with the Israelites, the day's clear winners. Certainly Barak and Deborah approved of her, singing:

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.

Judges 5:24–27

Jael's treachery and Deborah's gloating strike us as bloodthirsty, all the more so because we don't usually attribute such behavior to women. But by the standards of ancient warfare, both were heroes. Both were decisive and courageous women who helped God's people at a critical moment in history.

BOTTLES

When Sisera asked for a drink of water and Jael instead gave him milk, she was offering the best of the house. People of the area prized this drink, which was made by putting goat's milk into an old skin bottle and shaking it. The milk then curdled, or fermented, when mixed with the bacteria that remained in the skin bottle from a prior use.

But what on earth is a skin bottle?

Nomadic desert peoples, who were frequently on the move, found skin flasks much more useful than clay bottles, which broke easily. Women sewed goat or lamb skins together with the hairy part of the skin on the outside, then sealed them so they would hold water, milk, wine, or other liquids.

Hagar carried a skin of water into the desert with her (Genesis 21:14–15). Jael offered Sisera a drink of milk from a skin bottle (Judges 4:19). Hannah brought a skin of wine along when delivering her son, Samuel, to Eli the priest (1 Samuel 1:24). David carried a skin of wine to his brothers (1 Samuel 16:20). Jesus talked about not putting new wine into old, brittle wineskins (Matthew 9:17).

Christ's decree not to put new wine in old wineskins has, of course, significant meaning for us today. Are your mind and heart like an old wineskin—brittle, hard, tough? Ready to burst when faced with new ideas or new ways of doing things? Or are your mind and heart supple, soft, and flexible like a new skin? Are you open to learning new things about your community of believers? About yourself? About your God?

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Judges 4:11-22; 5:4-27; 5:21-22; and 5:24-27

1. What was God's role in these events? _____

2. Why do you think Jael did what she did? Do you see her as brave, fearful, desperate, treacherous? How much do you think her life experience in a brutal culture had to do with it? _____

3. What do you think God wants us to take away from the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael and all of the death woven within it? _____

4. How did God accomplish this great victory? Compare Judges 5:4-5. _____

5. God has proven over and over again that he can do what we think is impossible. What impossible things has he accomplished in your life? _____

6. Use three adjectives to describe Sisera. Think about the fact that he was running away from the slaughter of his men. But also think about the fact that he was the sole survivor? _____

7. Use three adjectives to describe Jael. Pretend you don't know what she is going to do. Pick your adjectives based only on these four verses (Judges 4:17-20)_____

8. Which characteristics of Sisera and Jael are worth imitating? Which are worth forgetting?_____

9. What made Jael able to do what she did? Fear? Bravery? Desperation? How much did the more brutal culture she was a part of have to do with her actions?_____

10. Why do you think Deborah praised Jael for such a savage deed?_____

*B*ehind the story of Jael and the death of Sisera is a God who promised never to forget his people and who holds to that promise. When hope seems dim and the prospect of victory seems close to impossible, God is at work, bringing about his plan.

The people of Israel during the time of the judges must have worn God to exasperation with their continual wavering. When times were good, they easily forgot God and went their own way. But as soon as times got tough, they went running to him for deliverance.

Sound like anyone you know? The story of the wavering of God's people continues even today. We so easily move forward on our own, thinking we can handle it all, until we run up against something too hard for us. Only then do we run to God for help.

But what an amazing God he is. Always there. Always willing to rescue us when we call. Always willing to forgive.

Promises in Scripture

When they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

—NEHEMIAH 9:28

*I love you, O LORD, my strength...
I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.*

—PSALM 18:1, 3

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.

—2 CORINTHIANS 1:8–11

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

*Most blessed of women be Jael...
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.
At her feet he sank,
he fell; there he lay.*

—JUDGES 5:24–27

- REFLECT ON: Judges 5.
- PRAISE GOD: That he defeats the enemies of our soul.
- OFFER THANKS: That we can be instruments of deliverance for others.
- CONFESS: Any tendency toward passivity in your struggle against sin and Satan.
- ASK GOD: To give you wisdom and discernment in the spiritual battle.

Lift Your Heart

*S*ometimes we are naive about the kinds of spiritual struggles that we face as Christians. Ephesians 6 talks about the importance of putting on the full armor of God in order to successfully engage in battle. This week take some time for a wardrobe check—make sure you aren't missing anything vital, without which you will be more vulnerable to attack. Here's a quick checklist for the well-dressed spiritual warrior:

- The Belt of Truth—Have any small dishonesties crept into your life?
- The Breastplate of Righteousness—Are you cooperating with grace to become more Christlike?
- The Shoes of the Gospel of Peace—The gospel reconciles us to God and others. Are you willing to receive it, live by it, and share it?

The Shield of Faith—Are you responding to life with faith or in a way that shows you really don't think God is quite as loving or as powerful as he says he is?

The Helmet of Salvation—Salvation is a gift. But like any gift, it has to be received.

The Sword of the Spirit—God's Word wounds the enemy and thwarts his purposes. Reading and praying through Scripture helps us take the offensive.

Lord, help me to be ready so that any moment I can stand against the enemy and even deal a decisive blow in the battle. Give me courage, discernment, and wisdom and help me to stay close to you in the midst of the fray.