It has been said before that everything rises and falls on leadership. I remember one friend of mine saying, ‘Well, that is not necessarily the case. Everything rises and falls on the sovereignty of God.’ And I thought, ‘Okay,’ but we know what this person means. Everything rises and falls on leadership, that leadership matters. Leadership makes a big difference.

Robert Lewis, one of my mentors, said it like this as it relates to the man and his leadership in the home, “So goes the man, so goes the family.” So leadership does matter, leadership has a place. Leadership matters in the home. Leadership matters in the church. Leadership matters in our organizations. Leadership matters in our nation. Leadership matters in the Supreme Court. As you know, just recently Justice Antonin Scalia passed away. And then this past week President Barack Obama made a nomination for another justice. And when we think about judges and the importance of their leadership, we cannot minimize how important it is that we have good leadership in place.

In fact, meet Deborah. Deborah is the only named female judge that we know of in the history of Israel. And we find her story in Judges Chapters 4 and 5. She was a very powerful leader whom God used in great ways. And we see that her leadership was critical during a time whereby Israel was in bondage to the Canaanites.

So leadership matters. It matters in our schools, and our universities. It matters in our businesses and our churches. It matters everywhere. And we cannot minimize its importance. We see this theme throughout Scripture that when leaders lose sight of God the people lose sight of Him too. And when people lose sight of Him, all sorts of issues transpire.

Now Deborah was a judge that lived in about 1150 BC. As I said we will find her in the book of Judges, and the Bible sort of goes like this: You have the first five books of the Bible that are known as the Pentateuch, or the Torah, or the Law. And then we see the book of Joshua after that. Moses had led God’s people out of Egyptian bondage and they go into the wilderness. And then Joshua, in the book of Joshua, leads God’s people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land of Canaan. Then the next book is the book of Judges. And this was when there were different judges that we meet, with Deborah being the fourth judge. There are other judges and maybe you know their names, like Samson, Ehud or Gideon, these different judges.

Now where did these judges come from? Perhaps they were appointed by Moses back in the time when Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, came to him and said, ‘Look, you are judging all these different issues, and it is way too much for you to handle. Put other leaders in place that can help you manage this great task.’ And so these judges were put
into place. Again, Moses leads God’s people out of Egypt, they go into the wilderness, and then Joshua leads the people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. And then about a hundred years later, Deborah would be sitting as a judge.

Deborah’s name in Hebrew means ‘honeybee.’ In fact a lady that comes to our church is named Deborah, and she came up to me, and she said, ‘I am a Deborah.’ And I told her, ‘From now on you shall be called honeybee.’ Deborah means ‘honeybee.’ And Deborah is one of the female leaders that we come across in the Old Testament who is just featured in such a great way. Esther is another one of these leaders that leads well. And we think about Ruth, not so much her leadership, but just the quality of her being, and the person that she was.

What makes Deborah unique is that she has this twofold role. She is both a judge and she is a prophetess. There were other prophetess that we see, like one of Philip’s four daughters, Anna, Mariam and Huldah. So we see these different prophetess in the Scripture, and Deborah is one of those. She speaks the truth, she is someone who speaks from her gut in truth and she is someone of strength in the way that she would lead.

And Deborah is someone that I want us to be familiar with in this series, ‘Six Men and Six Women.’ I want us to meet different key figures throughout Scripture so that we can understand the power of biography. There is something about stories that are transformative. As Christians, we have been transformed by the greatest story ever – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so we come to Deborah and we want to think about her story. She was serving in a time where everyone did what was right in their own eyes. That is the key phrase of the book of Judges. If you read the book of Judges, you will notice that phrase over and over and over again. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Here is sort of how this cycle works when we read the Biblical narrative of God in His relationship to His people. It goes sort of like this: When you look in the Scriptures, you will see this cycle that God delivers His people, but then what God’s people end up wanting is they want to be like the surrounding nations. They want to be like everyone else. They want to fit in. They want to do what is right in their own eyes. And then they essentially reject God. They reject His ways, and God allows them to go their own way. Then they end up experiencing consequences in their lives as a result. And after enough consequences they cry out to God, and He delivers them again.

He delivers them, and once they are delivered they end up losing sight of the fact that they have been delivered, and they end up wanting to be like other nations, to be like everybody else, they want to do what is right in their own eyes, and as a result they reject God, and He gives them over to their own ways. Then they end up experiencing
consequences, and when they have experienced enough consequences they call out to God once again and He delivers them. You get the picture, right? It is a cycle that happens over and over again.

That is the way the cycle went and it is recorded in the Scriptures. And I will tell you something, as Christians, when we want to be like everyone else, when we want to fit in rather than stand out, it is then time when we need to realize that there is no Christian vision for fitting in. God has called us to be a city on a hill. He has called us to be salt and light. And if our goal is to fit in, then we are going to lose sight of what it means to stand out. In fact, if we fit in, we have ceased to stand out already. That is to say, if we have adopted the values, if we just take on the values of belief systems that run contrary to what we believe, we have ceased to stand out.

So everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And the judges would end up judging until the time of Saul. Samuel would kind of be that last judge, and then Saul would be the first king. Why did the people want a king? It was because everybody else had a king in the nations around them, and they wanted one too. And we have these issues as humans that we want to do what is right in our own eyes, and we want to be like everybody else. And because everybody around Israel had a king then they wanted one too.

Deborah was leading in a time when the nation was a theocracy. A theocracy means that God was ruling. Now God obviously always rules, sovereignly speaking, but the people were looking to God and they thought they didn’t have a king. God was their king but they wanted a human king. And God ended up letting them have Saul as their first king. So God often gives us what we want, and then after we go through the consequences of getting what we want, what we realize is we don’t want what we want, we want what we really need, and what we need is God.

Deborah was a judge during this theocracy. We need to be careful when we read about the theocratic times when God is leading that we understand that He is not ruling in that way. Yes, He is sovereign, He rules and He reigns, but He works through leaders. He works through government. And He works through different types of government. Read Romans Chapter 13 for an example. So we can’t go and try to force certain things that we see in the Old Testament on our current context. We have to use a lot of wisdom as we approach the Scriptures in that way.

Deborah is featured, as I said, in Judges Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 5 is basically a poetic recap of the prose that was set forth in Chapter 4. So our focus will be more on Chapter 4, but if you read Chapter 5 you will see it is a poetic recap of Chapter 4. Now I want to just sort of give you the story line in a big picture, and then we are going to look
at just some highlights of Deborah’s character. And then we are going to talk about what
Deborah might want to say to us today. So I want to give you an overview, then I want to
point out some highlights of Deborah’s character, and then I want us to listen to Deborah
as if she could speak to us today. I want to introduce you to five important principles
that I think she would want to share with us.

So first let me give a little wherewithal of what is going on in Judges Chapter 4.
We are not really sure one hundred percent who the author of Judges was. Some would
say it was Samuel, and you might choose to believe that and find studies to back that up.
 Others might suggest other ideas of who the author was. Always remember, depending
on who we are looking at, that we need to weigh the evidence as much as possible. At
the end of the day, I don’t really care who the author was in this particular situation. If
the author identifies himself, like Paul did in the book of Romans, and I would come to
the conclusion it was someone else, that would be a problem. But I don’t see Samuel
saying, ‘Hey is it me. I am about to write this book about the judges.’ But if he did write it,
then that is okay too.

Now let’s see the setting. Look with me in Chapter 4 and beginning in verse 1.
“Now Deborah, a prophetess, was judging Israel at that time.”

Do you see that cycle again? Now we have to be careful because what you are
going to read about here is sort of this warfare passage. And a sceptic of the Bible will
point out and claim that God, who we serve as Christians, is a war god. But this is a
defensive battle that is going to take place here. The Israelites were under oppression.
Also it was a theocracy, so in the same way today that we live in a democracy, we would
have the military which are for our nation what the police are for our individual
communities and cities. They protect us. And so God was obviously the one reigning
and ruling as a theocratic leader over God’s people, and there would be times where the
people would be oppressed. And in this case the oppression had gone on for twenty
years. God gave Israel up, He let them have what they wanted and that was to be like the
other nations around them. But then they were oppressed, tremendously so.

Then they cry out of God for help. And they want to be delivered. And what is
going to happen now in the rest of these verses is about Deborah. It says in verse 4,
“Now Deborah, a prophetess, was judging Israel at that time.” And Deborah is going
to be this lady who is going to powerfully go forth in leading the people. This story is
LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF DEBORAH
‘Six Men & Six Women’ Series

going to show how God is going to use Deborah to deliver the Israelites out of Canaanite bondage.

Interestingly enough, Deborah goes to Barak, and as she goes to Barak she tells him, ‘Listen, we need to go and see God’s people delivered from the Canaanites.’ Now you have Sisera who was the military commander of the Canaanites. And then you have Barak whom Deborah went to see to tell him that they need to go deal with this issue. And Barak says to Deborah in verse 8, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And Deborah said that was fine, but know this, she said, the glory when they are delivered will be given to a woman.

No doubt Barak would have thought that this was referring to the glory going to Deborah, but it is referring instead to Jael, who we will talk about in a little bit. So Barak and Deborah go out and they end up going into battle with Sisera and his army. Sisera realizes as the commander of the Canaanites that his army is being killed off, and what happens next is Sisera escapes and runs away. He ends up at the tent of Jael, someone he thought was one of his allies. Jael offers him some milk and some curds, after Sisera asks for water. He then falls sound asleep, and Jael takes a tent peg and drives it through his temple killing Sisera.

Barak shows up at the tent and he sees that Jael has delivered Sisera. And as a result Israel is now freed from the Canaanites. And then in Chapter 5 we go into a prose and a song where Deborah praises God. Okay. Have you got it? Now let me put this in a real quick fashion. What I just said is that God used Deborah to deliver Israel from the Canaanites. Is that easier? Okay. That is where we are.

Now let’s look at some of the features, or qualities of Deborah in her leadership, so that we can begin to hear her voice. Who was Deborah? Deborah was a wise and discerning leader. Look in Chapter 4 and verse 4. “Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth.” Now we don’t know much at all about Deborah outside of the fact that she was a judge, a prophetess and that she was married. Outside of that, we don’t know if she had children, we don’t know anything about her mother or father, we just know that she had a husband named Lappidoth.

She “was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel.” Try and envision this judge that pleased God, and see her seated underneath a palm tree with people coming to her, and bringing cases to her. It would be kind of like a Judge Judy fashion, only sitting outside under a palm tree. So here is Deborah who would just sit and listen to their cases sitting under a palm tree. “She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.”
So Deborah had an ability to judge. She had an ability to help make good decisions and to deal with certain matters. She is featured here in Chapters 4 and 5 as one of the judges. She was put in place as a judge obviously because she had that ability. We often talk about this term of judging. ‘I don’t judge.’ Have you ever heard that statement? It makes you want to say, ‘Well, why not?’ Everybody judges. If we don’t judge then we don’t make judgments. And if we don’t make judgments then we are not judging the difference between right and wrong. If we don’t know the difference between right and wrong, then we are not being discerning. And if we are not being discerning, then anything goes.

So basically to not judge is to not discern. And to not discern is to not know the difference between right and wrong. And to not know the difference between right and wrong, makes you a relativist. And to be a relativist is to have no value system to guide you. In fact to say, ‘I don’t judge,’ would make that statement a judgment. You would have just made a judgment that you don’t judge. So we all make judgments. You are judging right now whether you agree with my judgment about judging.

Now obviously we would discern the difference between being judgmental and making judgments. We have to make judgments. We have to make judgments on what type of house we want to buy, what type of car we want to buy, what type of education we want to take, how we want to use our money, where we want to go on a vacation, what we need to do about our child’s crisis – we are always judging. And if we don’t have a framework by which we judge, a value system, or a grid, then we are going to be impulsive in the way that we live our life. We are going to be slaves of our feelings and our emotions.

And that is what is so great about the word of God. It allows us to read something and it gives us a framework, a worldview by which we can make proper judgments. In fact, we live in a democracy rather than in a theocracy that Deborah was a judge in. And there are a lot of things that I like about a democracy, and there are other things that I don’t like about it. Maybe you are thinking, ‘Bobby, you are not supposed to say that.’ Well I am very thankful to be an American. I have been to a lot of different places in the world and I think that America has a lot of problems, but all in all it is still a great place to live. There are a lot of freedoms in America that we can be thankful for. If you have done a lot of traveling in the world, you will know what I mean. You don’t have to pay to go to the restroom or a lot of other different things.

Now that is not to say that there aren’t a lot of issues in our culture. One of the things that I don’t like about a democracy is it is an uninformed democracy. So I think one step up would be to be an informed democracy. What do I mean by that? Well we have to be informed before we get a driver’s license. But all you have to do to be able to
vote is get to a certain age and you can go into a voter’s booth and be totally uninformed. So wouldn’t it be nice if it was an informed democracy – like an improvement? So if I vote for candidate A, and his views are X, Y and Z, it would produce this type of culture. Or if I vote for candidate B, and he believes in C, D and E, it would produce another type of culture. Or if I vote for candidate C, and his issues and his beliefs are just you name it, then it would produce this type of culture. See, wouldn’t it be nice to know that this is the kind of culture, this is what our world would look like if these values were implemented, and that is what this particular candidate wants to implement.

Instead many people just go in and vote on a buzz because they like the way somebody dresses, they like their personality, or they just go with the flow. And we need to know what kind of a world we really want. And an informed democracy would allow us to be more informed about the kind of worldview that one has. And as Christians we need to vote for the candidate that most aligns with our values. But we can’t know our values, if we don’t know what God values, and what the word of God says. And that takes time.

Deborah is someone who would have needed to know the values in the theocratic nation, the values of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. She would have needed to understand how to lead people in that way, and she would have needed these values to help her to make decisions. So she was wise, she was discerning.

Not only that but she was courageous in the midst of oppression. We know from Chapter 8 and verses 5 down to 8 she ends up going to Barak and telling him that the Lord has commanded them to go and to deal with the situation with God’s people being in bondage. And now in verses 8 and 9 it says, “Barak said to her, If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go. And she said, I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”

So Deborah goes to Barak, and he doesn’t want to go unless she goes with him. And Deborah tells him she will go with him, but she wants him to know that when all is said and done, the glory is not going to go to him, but it is going to go to a woman. No doubt Barak probably thought Deborah was referring to herself, but she was actually referring to Jael, who ends up killing Sisera with a tent peg.

So Deborah showed great courage in this oppressive time. And it is important in leadership that we have courage. Courage often is best seen when oppression is most pronounced. And there comes moments where courage is needed. Deborah was willing to be courageous in one of those moments. In the same way Esther was willing to be courageous. Or we can think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the time of Hitler during
World War II where he was willing to be courageous. He was obviously an activist and not a pacifist, and Christians fall into different categories. But I will leave that for you to decide.

I will tell you that I think the church at times has been oppressive throughout history. And when the church has been oppressive, I don’t think it was because it had been operating the way that Jesus called the church to operate, but it had been operating outside of the way Jesus called it to operate. So if you talk about the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem Witch Trials, or maybe certain aspects of the Crusades, there are some things that we should be able to concede, as Christians, where the church was faulty at times.

And it was because the church does have people, and it does have a black eye. And when people are doing those things, they are operating not in alignment with Scripture, but out of alignment with it. God wants us to be salt and light. He wants us to be loving. He wants us to be gracious. He wants us to be truth bearers. Christians should be the most pleasant people to have in a culture. The culture should desire Christians because Christians should be promoting goodness in the culture. They should show that they care about the weak. They should care about the homeless. They should care about the poor. They should care about widows and orphans. They should care about those who are diseased. They should want the best for others. They should be the forgiving type. They should be hard working. This is the kind of people Christians are to be.

And sometimes, and sadly so, the Christian church has had a black eye. And there have been certain movements throughout history that gave the church a black eye. As you know there would have been people in the name of Christianity using the Bible to defend slavery. And then obviously there were others using the Bible to show that slavery was not right. God led his people out of slavery, out of bondage from Egypt. And no doubt the Bible has been abused at times throughout history. And when we look at the whole Bible we can see that God is not into slavery. The whole point of redemption is rescue, it is deliverance, it is freedom.

During the feminist movement in the 60’s there was a lot of stuff going on where certain people were using the Bible to show a chauvinist dictatorial standpoint. In fact many of the forerunners at the front of the feminist movement were people who had abusive relationships with their fathers. And so for me as a person I want to look at some of these things and go, ‘You know what, that is sad.’ Because we are created male and female in God’s image and He values male and female equally. He loves all of His creation. And so some good things can come out of a movement, right? Like, we don’t
need to be oppressive. We don’t need to be chauvinist. There is no room for that kind of male dominating leadership.

At the same token, God wants Christians to keep order. Yet what the church ends up doing is they start placating instead of just following God’s order. So you end up with the movement that we can see today as it relates to the LGBT movement. There were a lot of good things that I think the church needed to hear and the culture needed to hear about the importance of being loving to everyone. Christians need to be loving to those people who feel like something that they have done means they can never be forgiven. We should not be exhibiting extremism as some do by carrying signs around condemning them. And what the media often portrays today is the extremists. Sadly that puts Christians all in the same boat with the extremists people.

We as a church should not be oppressive to women. We should not believe in slavery. And we should not be harsh and cruel to homosexuals. We are to be loving and gracious. But that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have Biblical outlines for the way a marriage is supposed to work. Now let be honest with you, and let me say this: If you are someone at church today visiting us, and maybe you are checking out Life Fellowship. Maybe you are not a Christian and maybe you are someone who struggles with same sex attraction. First of all I would want to say if anyone has ever said that God hates you or anything like that, from the bottom of my heart I am totally sorry. That is not true. God loves you. He cares deeply about you.

But could I say this? I will go to bat in the name of speaking up for love, and for the importance of the church to speak for love, but would you also be willing go to bat in the name of us being able to each carry our own convictions about what we believe right and wrong is? Because true love can accept each other even where we don’t agree, and coercive love makes people agree even when they don’t. I have been saying over and over, as a voice to the church that we need to be loving, we need to be gracious, we need to be compassionate, but without compromising our convictions.

And my heart was bothered this week, and I felt bullied when I saw the LGBT had gone to the NCAA and told them they needed to remove their NCAA status from schools that did not align with their values. Now they didn’t do that, but I felt bullied by it. I felt bullied. And I think if you are someone that is a part of the LGBT movement I would want to tell you that I am sorry if the church has ever been a bully, and I will always go to bat as a pastor if I hear in our church, or anywhere else, that we are being bullies. Because we do love you and we do care about you. Yes, we may look at some things differently, but it takes maturity to look at things differently and still accept each other.
But in the same way that at times the church was a bully to the LGBT movement, and I am sorry for that, don’t allow the LGBT movement to bully people’s convictions into conforming. That is not fair either. We are to love each other, and mature love allows people to carry their convictions. That is what real love is. We can accept each other, even though we don’t agree with each other. And if I feel like the church is going to start getting bullied, it is going to tempt me to come out of the closet and be a voice. Why? Because in the same way that the LGBT movement didn’t want to oppressed, the church doesn’t want to be oppressed either. That is something that I think we need to think about.

And I would say to you that are members of Life Fellowship, I know that some people would want us to be completely silent about this issue, but I am convinced if pastors go completely silent, that their congregations will see things exactly the way the culture does. And I can’t do that, because I am going to stand before God on your behalf someday. And this isn’t an easy task, but courage is required during times of oppression.

Third, Deborah’s courage flowed from her faith in God. Look at verse 14. “And Deborah said to Barak, Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand.” Look at that faith. “Does not the Lord go out before you.” So Deborah had a courageous faith, and her courage flowed from her faith in God. She believed in Him. She believed His word.

Not only that, but Deborah was a fervent-hearted worshipper. Look in Chapter 5 and verse 3, after they have been delivered. “Hear, O kings, give ear, O princes, to the Lord I will sing; I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.” So Deborah was a fervent hearted worshipper.

And there is one last observation that I want to bring out about Deborah. As I have already said she showed wisdom and discernment, she showed courage in the midst of oppressive times, her courage flowed from her faith in God, she was a fervent-hearted worshipper. And last, Deborah was passionate about justice. Look in Chapter 5 and verse 31. “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!” Just let that sink in for a second, just camp on that for a little bit.

Because if we are not careful, what we can end up doing is we can become so inclusive that we don’t even see how the seed would become. We can become so blinded. For instance, we could begin to think that love equals agreement with every single issue. So basically love would mean no convictions. But when does love equal no convictions? “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” God gave His own Son for sinners. And Jesus was convicted about this – “I
"am the way, the truth and the life, and no one gets to the Father except through me.”

Love and convictions aren’t enemies.

And what does Deborah say? “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the son as he rises in his might.” We have to realize that it is hard for us to understand a statement like that, but it wouldn’t be hard to understand it if we were in Nazi Germany and we were in a concentration camp. And we saw people dancing around as they were throwing babies in the air and letting them fall on spears, and things like that. Or if we lived in the time where the Canaanites were taking their babies and they were sacrificing them to their gods. It wouldn’t be hard then for us to say, ‘First and foremost, God, please save these people. Help them to come to know you. But if not, please just execute judgment on them.” See, Deborah knew that she wanted God’s justice to come so that people could experience greater wellbeing in life, so that people could experience God’s blessings more. And she knew the atrocities being committed by the Canaanites was allowing people to have their abundant life stripped away.

It is like with the ISIS. You would want ISIS to come to know Jesus first and foremost, and to know God’s love, and to be forgiven. But if in their hearts, they have become so recalcitrant, and will not repent no matter what, then you would understand the need for justice. And you would praise God for His justice so that other people would not have to go through those atrocities.

So with this framework in place, folks, let’s listen to Deborah. What would Deborah say to us? What kind of advice do I think she would give to us? I think first of all Deborah would say that no matter how many times we have rejected God, if we call on Him from a sincere heart, He will hear our voice. But we have to be careful because what we are doing is we are redefining morality to make it palatable. We are redefining values to make it digestible. We are redefining morality in our culture today so that God can feel freshened up, so that He can be a 2.0 version God. So that people can handle that.

Instead of calling people up toward God what we are trying to do is to bring God down in a way to make Him fit our standards. But God calls us to adjust. He called me to adjust. I couldn’t continue on in the drunkenness, the drugs, the promiscuity and all the things that I was doing. I had to come to the realization that His ways were better, and learn to walk with Him. And I have not regretted that. And no matter what you have done, you are loved by God. He cares about you. And the reason that He wants you to walk in righteousness is because He knows that righteousness is where the true joy is. When you walk in unrighteousness, you collect guilt, shame and consequences, and He doesn’t want that for us; He wants us to know His pathway. So no matter what you have
done, know this: God loves you. He can forgive you for anything you have ever done, small or large. That is the kind of God He is.

And we see in this passage today that God’s people were oppressed. They wanted deliverance and God heard their cry. I think Deborah would also tell us that it is better to do what is right in God’s eyes, than it is to do what is right in our own eyes. It is so tempting, isn’t it, to do what is right in our own eyes? I encourage you today to take out a piece of paper and answer this question: What are the five things that I value the most about life? What are my five greatest wants, the five things I want most in life? Would it be that big fancy house? Would it be power? Would it be fame? Would it be a big bank account? Would it be to be in the ‘in’ crowd? Would it be to be beautiful? What would your five greatest wants be? Write those down, because it is not so much the eyes that are the real issue anyway, it is the heart. We desire in our heart, and then we search with our eyes for the things in our heart.

David was on the rooftop and he saw Bathsheba bathing. And what was going on in his heart was soon taking place in action. We have to pay attention to the meditations of our heart because they will become the reality of our life soon enough. You will detect a lot by thinking about what your desires are, what your wants are. But if you write your wants down, will it be something like this? ‘I want to be as much like Jesus in character as possible. I want to shine for Jesus. I want to be a virtuous spouse. I want to walk in humility.’

If those are the types of things that you dream about and you look for in life then you are headed in the right direction. You show me your list and I will explain to you your future. You show me what is going on in your heart and I will tell you where you are headed. Think about your friendships and those closest to you and what they think about, what they desire, what they want out of life, and there is your future. It is better to do what is right in God’s eyes than it is to do what is right in our own eyes, because God will lead us in ways that we will never regret.

I also think Deborah would want to say this: ‘Don’t let anyone tell you that the God of the Bible oppresses women. Remember how he used me to free His people.’ When we think about the Scriptures and we think about this passage in particular that we have been looking at in Judges Chapters 4 and 5, the heroes of the story are women – namely Deborah and Jael. Jael is the one who took the tent peg and drove it through Sisera’s head. It was a picture of Jael being willing to stand up to this oppressive leader so that others could be freed.

And we see that God uses women in great ways. Women were the first people to show up and to be an eyewitness to the empty tomb. Jesus was close to women while He
was here on earth, remember Mary and Martha. Paul would say, “There is neither male nor female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus.” We read about Deborah, Esther, Jael, Ruth, Naomi, Mariam and Mary. And we can step back and know that God would never want us to oppress women because if we do we are acting totally out of alignment with Scripture.

Fourth, I think Deborah would say, ‘The next time life oppresses you, focus on the size of your God, not the size of your problems.’ It is so tempting, isn’t it, when life throws us a curve, for us to focus on it. It is so easy for us to focus on our problems instead of our problem solver. When our problems increase, that just means we need a greater vision of God. The bigger our problems seem, the more we need to realize how big our God really is. This doesn’t mean we aren’t aware of the reality of our problems, it just means we are more aware of the reality of the God who can deal with our problems.

Maybe today you feel like God does not know what is going on in your life. Maybe you feel like your marriage is in a place that is almost hopeless. Maybe you have rebellious children that are out of control. Maybe you have a bank account that is drying up. Maybe you are in a job situation that you can no longer handle. Maybe you have an emotional issue or an addiction that you can’t control. If any of these things are your problem, you need to focus on the size of your God, not the size of your problems.

And the next time God bails you out of a hard spot, be sure to give Him praise. That is the theme of Chapter 5 where we see that Deborah is praising God in poetic fashion. She is praising Him. And praise has a way of taking us out of the pits. You can praise your way out of the pits. I have told you before about some of the depression that I went through last year. And how for four to six months now I have been in a really great spot. But last year the depression was very dark, folks.

And if I can just be vulnerable with you, I will tell you that when you are a pastor you don’t really know what to do. Because you think if you don’t share that you are depressed, and then later on when maybe I am on the radio or doing an interview I talk about having a dark season, people will wonder why I didn’t tell the church about it. And then you would feel I was being secretive. But if I share too much then people can’t handle it because pastors aren’t supposed to struggle.

I want to be real with you. I went to over 400 AA meetings in my first year of sobriety. If there was one thing that I learned in that it is that I have to be real, that transparency is my survival medicine. But as a pastor it puts me in really a hard spot. Because I want to be an open book, and yet if I don’t talk about it people may look on me
as being dishonest, and if I do talk about it too much then people will struggle. So I don’t always know the right line to walk.

But here is what I will tell you. I have a group of elders and a group of great friends in my life that I shared the full story with. They know what is going on in my life at all times. We spend time together. And I will try to let the church know enough without having you feel like, ‘Oh my goodness, he is having a meltdown.’ But it is a fine line. And here is the thing. My heart’s desire ever since we moved here was that I could be a long term pastor at Life Fellowship. And that desire is still there.

Now I always have to have open hands and follow God wherever He would lead, but my desire would be to stay right here. And if I could pastor here another 20 or 30 years, I would bet that I am going to go through some horrific times. I hope not, but I bet I would. And that would mean that I need the resource of the church too. So what ended up happening was this depression period was horrific for me. Folks, I was so depressed, and even though I told the elders about it I don’t think they realized how haunted my soul was. I tried to tell them that I just didn’t want to be alive.

Do you know how hard it is when you are in this role and I am walking by faith to come up and preach when I didn’t even want to be alive? I would see people who were older, and I would wish that I was their age because I could be closer to death. I would hear about people who had cancer, and I would wish that I did because I thought that might zap me out of here. I can remember driving by Blythe’s Landing and seeing the water out there, and there is a difference between wanting to take your life, and not wanting to be alive. I didn’t want to take my life, but I didn’t want to be alive. I can remember thinking it might be nice to have an accident and drown out in that water.

Now I know you are all thinking, ‘Wow.’ And it is easier to share that when you come out of it because if I had stood up here in the midst of it you would have been thinking, ‘Oh my, what is he doing up there teaching and preaching? What is going on?’ It wasn’t because of some sin in my life; it was just because of God’s necessary trial. And God has allowed me as a pastor to experience life so that I can be part of this circle of empathy.

You know it is one thing when you have never been depressed to look at people who are, and to think they just need to snap out of it. It is one thing when you look at someone with an anxiety disorder and wonder why in the world they are so anxious all of the time, they just need to get over it. It is one thing to look at people whose marriages are messed up and just think they just need to leave and forget each other. It is one thing to look at people who have rebellious kids and to think they should have just followed the
book, ‘Growing Kids God’s Way,’ because that would have fixed it all. It is one thing to look at an addict and wonder what their deal is, why they are so obsessed.

But I can tell you as a person that I know what it is like to have had marriage problems, to know what it is like to have had an addiction problem, to know what it is like to have had emotional disorders, anxiety disorders, and depression where I didn’t even want to live. And then throw doubts on top of it while I am writing, ‘Doubting Toward Faith.’ The things have made me a part of the circle of empathy. And if you are struggling, I am not going to look at you and think you just need to get over yourself. Because I know that everybody has a different human makeup, and some people have unstable souls. Other people are more stabilized. And other people have chemical imbalances going on.

And I think with myself it was just that I was going into my 40’s, and I was seeing how much our culture has changed. And I was just feeling so much change about to come my way. My kids are growing up and we will be coming empty nesters in just a few years. Both my and Heather’s parents could potentially be gone in ten years; of course I certainly hope that is not the case. Our dog, Esther, is almost ten and I know she won’t live much longer.

And I had to re-negotiate my faith stance, and not let my emotions overwhelm me; not let my emotions overcome me. I was very honest with friends in my life, and you know what God did by His grace? He began to bring me out of that in time. It was crazy, and I would never want to go back there ever again. But I really believe that I had to go through that so I could look at someone who is depressed and be able to say from my heart, ‘I hurt for you and I know what you are going through.’ And I believe those things can make someone a better pastor than being someone who has never been addicted, never had anxieties, depression, etc., because that can create a lot of self-righteousness.

Here is what I can tell you now in the name of praising your way out of something. If there is one thing I am going to be a legalist about, I want to be a legalist about gratitude. I want to be a legalist about praising God. And every night before I go to bed, I probably have gotten legalistic, and I have even been telling God, ‘I know I am saying the same thing, but I really, really mean this, God. I don’t want to be legalist, but hear my heart.’ And this is what I tell God every night since I have been brought out of my dark night of the soul. ‘Thank you, God, for helping me with my fears and my worries and my anxieties and my doubts and my depression and my marriage and my relationship at home. Thank you for helping me with my hopelessness. Thank you for giving me hope and thank you for restoring me to you in this special way.’
And honestly, folks, sometimes that is all I have got. I turn that shower off, dry off, and I go to bed as a thankful man. *(Audience applauds).* Praise God! Why? I wasn’t delivered from the Canaanites, but I was delivered from my own demons. And God is worthy of praise. When God bails you out of a hard spot, be sure to give Him praise.

So please don’t panic when I go through struggles in life. Let me say this and I get it. There are things that I could do that I could disqualify myself from the ministry. I get that. But if life just sometimes hurts, or I am just in a funk, I need the church too. Okay? I am not pastor perfect. I am not the professional. I don’t have it all going on all the time. And I will do a lot better if the expectations can be realistic instead of supernatural. I want to walk with integrity and so do our fellow leaders here. We want to walk humbly but we are fallen, so let’s be gracious with one another.

Now back to the last part of verse 31 in Chapter 5, here is what I want you to see. “*And the land had rest for forty years.*” See, that is what Godly leaders can do. They provide secure places for people. They give rest to people. And that is what happened here. But guess what? Once Godly leadership goes away – so goes the leaders, so goes the land. Chapter 6 and verse 1 says, “*The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.*” They lost sight of God again and there went the cycle.

Where are you at today on that cycle? Are you slouching toward Gomorrah? Or are you leaning toward God? Are you at the place where you are looking out and kind of wanting to be like the culture? Or are you already like that? Are you in the consequential stage of life? Are you ready to call out for rescue? Have you been rescued? Are you in the praise state? If you are, stay there!

We have to wrap this up. Let me wrap it up by saying this: The great judge Jesus Christ Himself came to be judged on our behalf. He came to be judged for every sin that we have ever committed. Go figure! All of our sins were laid on Him, and He loved us so much that He would take our judgment upon Himself so that we could be set free. Let’s pray.

Father, thank you for this message from the book of Judges about Deborah. Help everyone here today to leave excited about you. No matter what people believe in this room, we want them to know that they are loved here, and they are loved by you. At the same token I pray that I have been able to express a little bit of my heart here today. I pray, God, if anyone does not have a relationship with you, that they will say this: *Dear Jesus, forgive me for all of my sins, for all of my rebellion. Rescue me. I take you as my Savior right here and right now. In Jesus’ name.*