

Deborah, the Dutiful Judge

Devotional Reading: Matthew 20:20–28

Background Scripture: Judges 4–5

Judges 4:4–10, 14, 21–22

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

⁸ Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

⁹ “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ There

Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

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²¹ But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

²² Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

Key Text

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. —Judges 4:4–5

Introduction

A. Supportive Greatness

Numerous world records were broken during the 2024 Olympic Games. One was for sport climbing, set by Sam Watson (USA). Sam claimed the climbing record by completing the course in just 4.74 seconds! Amazingly, Sam also held the previous record of 4.75 seconds. He beat his own record by .01 second! Sometimes, the smallest victories require the most extraordinary dedication.

Sam is a fantastic athlete, but like anyone attempting an audacious goal, he needed help and support. Enter the role of a coach! Sam's coach enabled his growth capacity through knowledge, confidence, and courage. He emboldened Sam toward consistent training and offered encouragement when doubts crept in. Coaches are rarely seen or noticed, but their impact is esteemed when their students succeed. As you ponder today's lesson, consider the out-in-front and behind-the-scenes roles of Deborah and Jael in Israel's victory. Leadership comes in many forms.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Judges opens with the news that Joshua, Moses' successor, has died. His death signals a transition to what we now call "the period of the judges" (about 1373–1043 BC). The firm, centralized leadership that nomadic Israel knew under Moses and Joshua is gone. A theocracy remains in its place—a rule by God.

Before the tribes of Israel went to their respective portions of land, they agreed to serve God (Joshua 24:14–28). But that didn't happen; the Israelites' commitment to God faded as the generation of the conquest died. The new generation worshiped fictitious Canaanite gods such as Baal and Ashtoreth (Judges 2:10–13) as "everyone did as they saw fit" (17:6; 21:25). Because of their idolatry, God handed his people over to their enemies. Oppression and hardship resulted (2:14–15).

A cyclical pattern characterizes the book of Judges: (1) obedience to God brings peace and stability to Israel; (2) the people's resolve weakens, and faithfulness to God's covenant falters; (3) a disintegration of spiritual well-being breaks down

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 1: Faithful Witnesses Model God's Fidelity

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Deborah's role in the defeat of Sisera.
2. Explain how Deborah demonstrated faithfulness in difficult circumstances.
3. State one way to follow Deborah's example of heeding God's call to serve others.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Supportive Greatness
- B. Lesson Context

I. Deborah's Plan (Judges 4:4–10, 14)

- A. The Setting (vv. 4–5)
- B. The Task (vv. 6–7)
God Still Speaks
- C. The Prophecy (vv. 8–10)
You'll Bring Honor
- D. The Action (v. 14)

II. Jael's Action (Judges 4:21–22)

- A. Violent Response (v. 21)
- B. Prophetic Fulfillment (v. 22)

Conclusion

- A. Emboldened Leader
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

the community, leaving God's people vulnerable to repression and attacks from external enemies; (4) oppression and suffering trigger repentance; and (5) God mercifully raises a leader to deliver them from their enemies.

Typically, when we hear the noun *judge*, we think of a magistrate who renders legal decisions in a court of law. The Old Testament use of the term is much broader, however. The book of Judges uses the word *judge* to describe a leader who renders decisions for the nation. As such, the word is used to describe officials who make legal decisions in civil and criminal cases (example: Deuteronomy 25:1–2), prophets (Judges 4:4), military commanders (2:18), and even the Lord himself (11:27). In all instances, the “judge” was to lead in accordance with the will of God.

Today's text takes us to approximately 1225 BC, where we consider the fourth of Israel's judges.

I. Deborah's Plan

(Judges 4:4–10, 14)

When Deborah succeeded Ehud as judge, she found herself in the same situation as her predecessor: “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (Judges 4:1). Because of their desire to do evil, God allowed Jabin, the king of Canaan, to oppress Israel for 20 years (4:2–3).

A. The Setting (vv. 4–5)

4. Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

In the most basic sense, a *prophet* hears from God and relays his message to the people. Men commonly held the role of prophet in ancient Israel, but several female prophets are also noted (Exodus 15:20; 2 Kings 22:14; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; and Luke 2:36). *Deborah* is one such female prophet, and she is married. Here, we see the only mention in Scripture of her husband, *Lappidoth*. Nothing more is known about him. This verse formally identifies Deborah as Israel's civil leader.

5. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.

The designation *Ephraim* appears about 30 times in the Old Testament. It probably refers to the *hill country* where the tribe of Ephraim dwelt. The distance between *Ramah* and *Bethel* is about five miles. The towns are situated approximately five and 10 miles north of Jerusalem, respectively.

Trees often mark places of idol worship in the Old Testament (example: Deuteronomy 12:2). But there is no hint of that here. Instead, the mention of the *Palm of Deborah* offers a convenient landmark. The tree's association with the judge implies that she and her tree were well known.

Deborah's role as civil magistrate is revealed by the fact that the Israelites *went up to her to have their disputes decided* (compare Exodus 18:13).

B. The Task (vv. 6–7)

6. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor.’”

This verse introduces the reader to *Barak*, a military commander in Israel. His importance is seen in (1) his mention by name a dozen times in Judges, (2) the specification of the names of his father and hometown, and (3) his inclusion in “faith's hall of fame” (Hebrews 11:32).

The four points of geography mentioned here help us set the scene. There is more than one city named *Kedesh* in the Old Testament. Barak is from the one located in the tribal territory of *Naphtali*; it is a city of refuge for those accused of unintentionally taking the life of another (Joshua 20:7; 21:32). *Mount Tabor* is roughly 50 miles to the north of where Deborah and Barak confer and about 11 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee.

How to Say It

Harosheth	Huh-roe-sheth.
Kedesh	Kee-desh.
Kishon	Kye-shon.
Lappidoth	Lap-ih-doth.
Naphtali	Naf-tuh-lye.
Zebulun	Zeb-you-lun.

Located just within the northern border of the tribe of Issachar, the mount's elevation (1,886 feet) does not qualify it as a "mountain" in the modern sense of the term. Therefore, picture a hill set very close to the tribal borders of *Naphtali* and *Zebulun*. A helpful New Testament title for the tribal lands at hand is "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matthew 4:15, quoting Isaiah 9:1–2).

Deborah begins to speak the word of God to Barak. At this point, we may wonder whether the *command* to take *ten thousand* men from those two tribes means 10,000 total or 10,000 from each. The answer to that question is in Judges 4:14, below.

What Do You Think?

Consider Judges 4, 7, and 13–16. Why does God sometimes use "a cast of thousands" to accomplish his will but at other times he uses many fewer?

Digging Deeper

When have you participated in serving others with a large group? Small group? Independently?

God Still Speaks

Deborah wasn't just a judge; she was also a prophet. She had a unique advantage when defending against Israel's enemies: she heard God's voice. Therefore, she knew what to do and how to do it. If only all leaders had such an advantage!

While God may not call me to battle, I often find myself in tense circumstances with high stakes. Sometimes a particular decision feels like life or death. I often find myself desperate for God to speak clearly about what I should do and how to do it, especially if I am to lead others and care for their well-being.

It is easy to forget that while God may not speak in a loud, booming voice to give me obvious and specific directions about each step, I can access his will through the Holy Spirit and the study of Scripture. The more I walk with the Spirit through prayer, the more I discern his will—and perhaps most importantly, my heart desires to follow him. Have you invited the wis-

dom and guidance of God into the significant decisions of your life? How are you allowing God to work through you as a leader for the sake of serving others well?
—N. M. H.

7. " 'I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.' "

Deborah continues God's message to Barak: God is the *I* in this passage.

The Canaanite army is formidable. Of particular interest are its *chariots*. *Sisera* leads the force and has an advantage over Israel in terms of both quantity and quality of fighting forces. The chariots' construction includes iron (Judges 4:3). Barak and Deborah's conflict with *Sisera* falls between "the bronze age" (3300–1200 BC) and "the iron age" (1200–550 BC). To have chariots outfitted with iron at the time of our text (about 1225 BC; see Lesson Context) is a huge technological advantage.

Bronze chariots have defeated the Israelites in other, previous contexts (Joshua 17:16–18; Judges 1:19; 4:3). The Israelites (and Barak) have a choice: on what will they focus? Will they fixate on the strength of iron chariots or remember the strength of God (Deuteronomy 20:1)?

The *Kishon River*, the site of the mentioned ambush, is southwest of Mount Tabor and flows along the Jezreel Valley. *Sisera's* military base is Harosheth Haggoyim of the Gentiles (Judges 4:13), a town that hugs the river downstream. It is about 16 miles west of Mount Tabor. The villages of the Jezreel Valley are largely Canaanite, so *Sisera* has a "home field advantage" (consider Judges 1:27).

What Do You Think?

What is the role of fear in our lives?
How does it protect, guide, or assist us?
Is fear ever a good thing?

Digging Deeper

What role does God play in overcoming our fears? How might the Christian community assist?

C. The Prophecy (vv. 8–10)

8. Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

Barak shows his doubt. One might compare his misgivings with those of Gideon, who wanted proof that the Lord was speaking (Judges 6:36–40). Essentially, Barak asks himself, “Is Deborah really speaking the commandment of the Lord, or is she making it up?” His proof of truth will be her willingness to risk her life by accompanying the army on the expedition.

9. “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Deborah agrees to go with Barak, though she warns that there is a consequence for his doubt: the journey will not result in Barak’s *honor*; Sisera will be sold *into the hands of a woman*. The deliverance and consequence come from *the Lord*. Deborah emphasizes that it is God who is in control.

Variations of the Hebrew word underneath the translation *deliver* appear five times in Judges (2:9, 14; 3:8; 4:2, 9). The phrase’s use in these passages is illustrated by poetic parallelism in Deuteronomy 32:30: “Unless their Rock had sold them, unless the Lord had given them up?” The parallel with “sold them” (the same Hebrew word as this verse’s “deliver”) is the phrase “given them up.” It means God will “confine them.” In other words, Sisera’s destiny is not in his hands!

You’ll Bring Honor

The children’s film, *Mulan*, tells the story of a young woman named Fa Mulan who wants more than anything to bring honor to her family. The Chinese Imperial Army calls Mulan’s father to serve in the war against invaders from the north. Mulan’s father is a war veteran with old injuries that make the rigors of combat inadvisable. But he believes upholding the family’s reputation and honor is more important than his health. To avoid shame, Fa Zhou answers the call to war.

In response, Mulan feels compelled to protect him. She disguises herself as a man and joins the Imperial Army. Mulan defies traditional gender

roles and societal expectations. She faces adversity with creativity, courage, and strength. Mulan sets aside the customary ways a young woman might merit her family. A song in the film explains the traditional expectations: “We all must serve our Emperor/Who guards us from the Huns/A man by bearing arms/A girl by bearing sons.” She rejects demureness and embraces physical strength, surprising everyone. Ultimately, the emperor voices gratitude for Mulan’s service and bows to her in honor.

Today’s texts also showcase honor given and received in unexpected places. By using unanticipated characters, God keeps the honor for himself. In what ways does honor drive you? What is your reaction to honor deflected from yourself and conveyed to others? —B. R. T.

What Do You Think?

How does the concept of honor motivate you?

Digging Deeper

How does your life honor God?

10. There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

Barak obeys the Lord’s command to assemble an army from the tribes of *Zebulun* and *Naphtali*, the tribes closest to the forthcoming action. King Jabin’s headquarters is in Hazor (Judges 4:2), which lies within the tribal boundaries of Naphtali, north of the Sea of Galilee.

There refers to the town of Kedesh. The town name occurs frequently in the Old Testament. It refers to several different towns and sometimes to a general region. It is uncertain whether this Kedesh refers to Kedesh in Naphtali from which Barak was summoned in Judges 4:6 or another town in Issachar (see 1 Chronicles 6:72). It may also be synonymous with the city of Kishion mentioned in Joshua 19:20. Kedesh of Issachar would be in the right vicinity, however, near the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee and approximately 10 miles from Mount Tabor.

Deborah accompanies Barak just as she said she would.

D. The Action (v. 14)

14. Then Deborah said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him.

The time comes for battle. Barak advances the army when Deborah gives the command. *Go!* is a call to action (see also Judges 5:12). The Lord uses the same Hebrew word later to prod Gideon to take initiative (7:9). Again, Deborah reminds Barak of the promise God made in 4:6–7: Sisera is delivered into Israel’s *hands*.

As brief as it is, the text reveals an unusual military maneuver. Barak and Israel’s 10,000 soldiers are in a strong defensive position when stationed on *Mount Tabor*. There, they possess the higher ground. When expecting an attack from a skilled foe, one does not usually abandon such a position! But Deborah and Barak aren’t waiting for the attack. God directs the army through Deborah, and they take the initiative to strike a blow. Knowing that *the Lord [has gone] ahead of [them]* is the key to the ensuing victory (compare Deuteronomy 9:3; Psalm 68:7–8).

At first glance, the flat plains beside the Kishon River favor chariots. However, the song of Deborah states that the Kishon River “swept them away” (Judges 5:21). Whether this mishap caused the defeat of Sisera’s army or whether the bodies of the defeated were thrown into the river after the battle is difficult to say (compare Exodus 14:23–25).

What Do You Think?

How did Deborah utilize discernment?

Digging Deeper

What does discernment look like in your spiritual walk? Your day-to-day life?

II. Jael’s Action

(Judges 4:21–22)

In the verses between today’s lesson texts, Sisera’s army is destroyed by God at the hand of Barak and the Israelite army (Judges 4:15). Sisera manages to escape, but his fortune doesn’t

last long. He maneuvers to the tent of an ally named Heber the Kenite (4:17). Heber’s wife, Jael, invites Sisera in and offers him respite (4:18–19). Exhausted by the battle and 17-mile retreat to Harosheth of the Gentiles, Sisera is grateful for the chance to rest safely (4:20).

Jael makes bold decisions and takes the role of leading actor in this segment. She deals with Sisera swiftly and shrewdly.

A. Violent Response (v. 21)

21. But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Sisera assumes safety in Jael’s tent and falls *asleep*. While he rests his battle-weary body, Jael takes advantage of his vulnerable position. She uses a *hammer* to drive a large spike into Sisera’s *temple*. Jael does not stop with one blow. She continues until the peg is driven *into the ground*. Sisera’s fall happens exactly as Deborah prophesied: at the “hands of a woman” (Judges 4:9; see above).

Modern ethics and law make it difficult to discern the motivation for Jael’s actions. She commits treason by assisting Israelite forces (compare Rahab’s story in Joshua 2). Jael is sharp-witted, clever, and cunning. By offering Sisera hospitality, gaining his trust, and then turning on him, Jael ensures her safety (see next verse).

B. Prophetic Fulfillment (v. 22)

22a. Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.”

Jael is undoubtedly aware that *Barak* is not far behind Sisera. Her people, the Kenites, actively worked against Israel at the beginning of the conflict by telling Jabin’s army commander, Sisera, the location of the Israelite army (Judges 4:11–12). Therefore, it is easy to imagine that Jael fears the shift in power dynamics following Israel’s conquest (4:15–16). Jael is proactive—just like she was with Sisera (4:18)—and preemptively goes out to *meet* Barak. She confidently informs him that she

knows where to find Sisera, which is the aim of his current pursuit. In doing so, Jael aligns herself with the winning party. Presumably, Jael believes Barak will turn against her people when he finishes with the Canaanites. We may reasonably infer that Jael's motives align with the hope of protecting her clan.

What Do You Think?

How do you react to the violence in this story? The whole of Scripture?

Digging Deeper

Consider Matthew 5:7 and James 2:13. How do you reconcile this story with the New Testament call to mercy?

22b. So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

The dramatic event concludes with proof of triumph: Barak enters Jael's tent and sees *Sisera* lying there, *dead*. Deborah's words as prophetess are verified. Barak experiences victory through indirect means. He will not return home with honor and praise pointed toward his skill and prowess. He must share the commendation of victory with a Kenite woman (see Judges 5:24–27).

Conclusion

A. Emboldened Leader

When a prophet's words demonstrate truth and accuracy, they confirm the prophet's calling and legitimacy. God proves Deborah's predictions and faithfulness throughout the narrative. Judge Deborah is an emboldened witness of God's fidelity and integrity.

As prophetess, Deborah called Barak to her palm tree to relay God's commands. She boldly informed him he was to go into battle and that God would bring about victory. Her initiative set Barak into action. Deborah remained steadfast despite Barak's doubts and courageously followed him into the war, taking her place in military leadership for the sake of her people. She reminded Barak along the way that God planned their success, serving him through exhortation. She also assisted in discern-



Visual for Lesson 1. *Display the visual in a prominent place. Invite students to spend one minute silently reflecting on their answer to the question.*

ing the correct timing and movement of the army (the role of both prophet and strategist). After their victory, Deborah led God's people in praise: "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD!" (Judges 5:2). She proved herself a loyal and dutiful deliverer for Israel, continually giving all glory and honor to God.

When the word of the Lord prompted Deborah, she responded with obedience. May her example inspire us all toward deferential submission to God's instructions. Like Deborah, may we encourage others to take God at his word.

B. Prayer

Almighty God, help us remember that the victory is ours. Thank you for using people of all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and skills to implement your will. May you embolden us to answer your call whenever and however it comes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God spoke a faithful word through Deborah.

Visuals FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 351) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Summer Quarter. Order No. 9780784740637 from your supplier.