

Deborah, the Dutiful Judge

Devotional Reading: Matthew 20:20–28

Background Scripture: Judges 4–5

Today's Scripture: Judges 4:4–10, 14, 21–22

I. Deborah's Plan Judges 4:4–10, 14

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.

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.

4. 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).

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. *Deborah* is one such female prophet, and she is married. Here, we see the only mention in Scripture of her husband, *Lappidoth*.

5. 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*.

6. 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. *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. 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*.

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.

7. 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. 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 is a huge technological advantage.

The *Kishon River* is southwest of Mount Tabor and flows along the Jezreel Valley. *Sisera's* 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."

8. *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?"

9. 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*.

10. *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*, 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*.

Deborah accompanies *Barak* just as she said she would.

14. The time comes for battle. *Barak* advances the army when Deborah gives the command. *Go!* is a call to action. The Lord uses the same Hebrew word later to prod Gideon to take initiative (Judges

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.

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.

II. Jael’s Action

Judges 4:21–22

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.

21. 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. Heber’s wife, Jael, invites Sisera in and offers him respite.

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).

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

22a. 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. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that Jael fears the shift in power dynamics following Israel’s conquest. Jael is proactive—just like she was with Sisera—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.

22b. 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.

Involvement Learning

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Into the Lesson

List examples of leaders whose egos got in the way of their mission. These examples may come from politics or government, sports, religion, education, or business and may be current or historical.

Into the Word

Read Judges 4:4–10, 14, 21–22 and decide whether each sentence is true or false.

1. Deborah said, “God has called me to defeat our enemies.”
2. Deborah said, “Our enemies are too powerful. God doesn’t want us to risk bloodshed by going into battle with them.”
3. God hid the enemy of the Israelites from them because he knew the search would make them stronger.
4. Barak had little respect for Deborah, but his only choice was to obey her.
5. Deborah prophesied that her actions would win the battle.
6. Deborah told Barak he’d win because of his great military prowess and strong army.
7. The death of Sisera came about because of Barak’s military prowess.

What was God’s role in the military victory?

What was Deborah’s role in the victory?

What was Barak’s role in the victory?

Complete the following sentences:

Deborah showed her submission to God by . . . _____

God showed his power through Deborah by . . . _____

Deborah served her people by . . . _____

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

Into Life

Write down one way that you can follow Deborah’s example of heeding God’s call to serve others?

Thought to Remember

God spoke a faithful word through Deborah.