



SESSION SIX – DEBORAH’S PRAYER

In this session we turn to a sticky and often controversial passage of Scripture. We will return to the Old Testament, this time to read the prayer of Deborah, a prophet and leader in Israel who presides over a battle against an enemy force that ends in a shocking fashion.

CONTEXT

Deborah’s story occurs near the beginning of the book of Judges. To place that within the biblical storyline, Deborah lived (and prayed!) about 230 years after Miriam, and 100 years before Hannah. Deborah comes into the story after Israel has settled in the Promised Land and is figuring out how to live within it while under consistent threat both from enemy peoples and from their own willingness to stray from the commands and purposes of God. After the death of Joshua, the man who led the people into the Promised Land, a leadership vacuum of sorts formed. Deborah is one of Israel’s judges, individual people who took on leadership during this time before the formation of the monarchy to come, about a century later.

The biggest threat to the Israelites during Deborah’s years in leadership was Jabin, king of Canaan. He has been brutally oppressing the Israelite people, and they cry out to God for help. Deborah coordinates efforts to come against Jabin and his well-equipped army.

Chapter 4 of the book of Judges provides a prose account of the battle Deborah will reflect upon and the actions of God she will celebrate in her poetic prayer in chapter 5.

Read Judges 4:1-23.

4. Read about the Kenites in Judges 1:16. Who are they, and what relationship did they have to the Israelite tribe of Judah? Compare this to Judges 4:11, 17. Where did Heber the Kenite live, and where was his allegiance? How do these relationships influence what motives you would expect from Heber's wife Jael?

5. The actions of the people in this passage can be characterized as *unorthodox*. What positive virtues or characteristics did they possess? How did they act in ways that surprised you, ways which seem ambiguous or even unsettling?

	Positive Virtues/Characteristics	Ambiguous/Surprising Actions
<i>Deborah</i>		
<i>Barak</i>		
<i>Jael</i>		

6. Given that the struggle between divine versus human leadership is a major theme in the book of Judges, what might it mean that the characters are presented in such a deliberately ambiguous way?

7. What does this story have to say (both positive and negative) about leadership in Israel during this crucial period in its history?

8. Little is said here about the motives of each of the key players in the drama that unfolds. What purpose does understanding motive serve when we read about decisions biblical figures make? What dangers might we need to be aware of if we seek motive apart from what the text makes explicit?

9. According to verses 14-15 and 23, who was ultimately responsible for the Israelite victory? Why is this important?

10. What evidence of God's active role do you see in this text?

11. Based on what you have read so far, make a prediction of what specifically Deborah might pray about in her poetic recounting of the events of chapter 4.

THE PRAYER

Now we move from the historical perspective of the battle (chapter 4) to the poetic retelling of it (chapter 5). Like Miriam before her, Deborah turns to the medium of song for her prayerful recounting of the events she has witnessed and in which she has participated. This chapter includes more detail about God and how his intervention is crucial to the outcome of the battle. If you have difficulty fully understanding what Deborah's prayer is all about, you can take comfort in knowing that scholars find this scripture passage difficult, as well! The questions below will guide you toward unpacking the main points of the prayer.

Read Judges 5:1-31.

1. Developing an overarching structure for this prayer can be difficult, as it touches on a wide variety of key topics. However, there are certain verses that tend to "hang together" in their main point. Sketch out a brief outline of these major components of Deborah's prayer, using the following outline for guidance if needed.
 - a. Verses 2-3
 - b. Verses 4-5
 - c. Verses 6-9
 - d. Verses 10-11
 - e. Verses 12-13
 - f. Verses 14-18
 - g. Verses 19-22
 - h. Verses 23-37

- i. Verses 28-30
 - j. Verse 31
2. What does verse 2 celebrate as the proper working relationship between God and his people?
 3. Verses 4-5 form the theological foundation upon which the remainder of the prayer is based. What is the main point of these verses, and how does keeping it in mind throughout the rest of the prayer contribute to understanding the overall point of what Deborah is praying?
 4. What do verses 6-9 indicate about the situation the Israelites found themselves in when Deborah arose as a leader? What potential sources of hope do these verses point to?
 5. Refer back to Judges 4:3 & 13, remembering what technological advance the Canaanites possessed. Now reread Judges 5:4 & 20-21. Knowing the scholars generally agree these are poetic ways to refer to heavy rainfall, what do these verses have to say about God's approach to defeating the Canaanites?
 6. What responses do the various tribes of Israel have to God's call to action (delivered through his prophet Deborah) in verses 13-18? What does this suggest about the unity of God's people as a whole at this time?

7. What does chapter 5 of Judges suggest about how God employs human cooperation to bring about his plans and purposes?

8. In verse 7, Deborah is referred to as a “mother in Israel.” In verses 28-30, we are introduced to another maternal figure—Sisera’s mother. Both Deborah and Sisera’s mother (with the help of one of her female servants) make predictions about what will happen in the battle. Compare and contrast them, using the chart below and referring back to chapter 4 as needed.

What Deborah Prophesied	Predictions of Sisera’s Mother	What Actually Happened

9. What does this comparison between Deborah and Sisera’s mother suggest about how human expectation and God’s action relate to one another?

10. What do the Scripture passages from this week suggest Deborah believes about God? How do those beliefs shape how she approaches him in prayer?

PRACTICE

In the Old Testament, prophecy operates predominantly through the prophet speaking to God's people and calling them back to faithfulness to God. Deborah's prayer includes reminder that the powerful and capable LORD is on the side of his people, at the same time that she implores God's people to ask themselves serious questions about whether they are making proper effort to answer his calls to join him in his work in the world.

1. What are the theological truths about God's character and capability that Deborah speaks, both in the narrative account of chapter 4 and in her prayer in chapter 5?
2. In what ways do you see Deborah calling the Israelite people to closer adherence to the ways of God evidenced in the two chapters we examined this week?
3. Were a prophet like Deborah to speak to the Christian church today, what might she say? That is, what aspects of the difficulties experienced by the Israelites in Judges 4-5 continue to be relevant to believers today?

Now take a few moments to look back over the notes and homework you have collected from this study.

1. Note the characteristics of God that have become clearer to you as a result of this study.
2. Jot down how this clearer understanding of who God is has shaped your prayer during this study, and/or how you hope it will shape your prayer in the future.

Using your answers to the above questions as a guide, start a conversation with God that begins with praise for his ability to work within human lives to bring about his plans and purposes. Share with God the ways in which you want to see his people continue to grow more faithful to him. Ask him what role you might play in bringing that about in your own circle of influence. Reflect on the characteristics of God that you have come to see more clearly as a result of this study. Conclude your prayer by exploring any insights or prompting you feel the Holy Spirit is bringing to you through your study of Deborah's prayer.

Use the space provided below to write out your prayer, or to record your experience and insights gained as a result of your prayer.