

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 And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

5 And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

6 And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaph-tali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?

7 And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand.

8 And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go.

9 And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh.

10 And Barak called Zebulun and

Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him.

14 And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee? So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him.

4. 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; Luke 2:36). *Deborah* is one such female prophet, and she is married. Here, we see the only mention in Scripture of her husband, *Lapidoth*. Nothing more is known about him.

5. The designation *mount Ephraim* appears about 30 times in the Old Testament. It probably refers to the hilly area where the tribe of Ephraim dwelt. The distance between *Ramah* and *Bethel* is about five miles. The towns are situated approximately five and ten 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 Deborah's *palm tree* offers a convenient landmark. The association with *Deborah* implies that she and her tree were well known.

Deborah's role as civil magistrate is revealed by the fact that the Israelites come *up to her for judgment*.

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, but *Kedeshnaphtali* is 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.

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.

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?" His proof of truth will be her willingness to risk her life by accompanying the army on the expedition.

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 *honour*; *Sisera* will be sold *into the hand of a woman*. The deliverance and consequence come from *the Lord*. Deborah emphasizes that it is God who is in control.

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 (Judges 4:2), which lies within the tribal boundaries of *Naphtali*, north of the Sea of Galilee.

The town name *Kedesh* 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 *Kedeshnaphtali* from which Barak was summoned in Judges 4:6 or another town in Issachar. 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*.

14. The time comes for battle. Barak advances the army when Deborah gives the command. The term *Up* 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 *hand*.

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 goes out before* 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. Deborah’s Plan Judges 4:21–22

21 Then Jael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

22 And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will shew thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples.

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 (4:17). Heber’s wife, Jael, invites Sisera in and offers him respite (4:18–19).

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 *fastened . . . into the ground*. Sisera’s fall happens as Deborah prophesied: at the “hand 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. 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

Deborah, the Dutiful Judge

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

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.
—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.