

Lesson 5

Deborah & Barak

Judges 4-5

Introduction

Judges 3:7-5:31 covers a time between roughly 1367 and 1221 BC. The section lists Cushan, Eglon, the Philistines, and Jabin as the enemies and oppressors of Israel during this time. The judges (deliverers) were Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah. All these judges arose from unexpected places and situations – which denotes a unique way God saves.

The Book of Judges highlights the significance of women, presenting them as vital contributors to God's kingdom. For instance, Achsah, Caleb's daughter, is showcased for her wisdom and beauty. Furthermore, in the story of Israel's fourth deliverance, two very different women, both deeply committed to God's cause, play crucial roles.

4:1-3: Israel's Great Need of Deliverance

The exact time of Ehud's death is not detailed, but he likely passed away before the end of an 80-year period of peace after his victory over the Moabites, around 1281 BC. Following his death, Israel reverted to wrongdoing in the eyes of God, demonstrating that their faithfulness was shallow and heavily reliant on external leadership like Ehud's. This return to sin primarily emerged in the northern tribes, which were less impacted by Ehud's influence.

Subsequently, Israel was conquered by a Canaanite king named Jabin, who was ruling from Hazor. This Jabin was not the same as the one from Joshua's era but might have represented a line of rulers sharing the title. It is possible that while Cushan and Eglon had oppressed Israel, Hazor gained strength.

Sisera, the commander of Jabin's forces, stationed in Harosheth-hagoyim, led an army equipped with 900 iron chariots, overpowering northern Israel for two decades from around 1281 to 1261 BC. This period underlines the cyclical nature of Israel's faithfulness and downfall, as well as the emergence of new threats during times of vulnerability.

4:11-14: Enter the Prophetess Deborah

Deborah stands out among the Judges for several unique reasons. She was notably the only female judge, highlighting women's rarity in such significant political or spiritual leadership roles in Old Testament times. Unlike other judges who rose to lead in response to foreign oppression, Deborah was already serving as a judge and a prophetess, actively guiding Israel with wisdom via divine revelation. She presided over matters from a designated spot under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, making her accessible for judgment.

Deborah's leadership differed in her proactive approach to Israel's deliverance from Sisera. She summoned Barak from the tribe of Naphtali, the hardest hit by Canaanite oppression, instructing him, under God's guidance, to gather an army of ten thousand from Naphtali and Zebulun. God, through Deborah, promised to lead Sisera, the Canaanite commander, into their hands.

Barak accepted this mission on the condition of Deborah's presence, which might reflect his respect for her prophetic authority rather than a lack of courage. Deborah agreed but foretold that the ultimate glory of victory would be awarded to a woman, a prophecy fulfilled in an unexpected turn of events.

Following her commitment, Deborah accompanied Barak to Kadesh to raise the army, emphasizing the collective effort from various tribes against Jabin's oppression. Meanwhile, the focus briefly shifts to Heber and Jael, hinting at another divine orchestration for Israel's salvation through unexpected agents. This showcases the multifaceted ways in which deliverance can unfold.

4:12-16: Salvation Comes

The strategic movement of Barak's ten thousand men from Kadesh to Mount Tabor was deliberate, intended to be noticed by their enemy, Sisera. In response, Sisera gathered his formidable force of nine hundred chariots and infantry, planning to confront the Israelites in the Esdraelon valley. In this place, he hoped to leverage his military advantage. Despite the threat, Deborah, the prophetess and Israel's judge, remained undaunted. She encouraged Barak to initiate the attack, assuring him of Yahweh's support and victory.

As Barak descended Mount Tabor with his forces, the battle turned in Israel's favor through divine intervention. A sudden rainstorm rendered Sisera's chariot force ineffective, throwing his troops into disarray. Realizing defeat, Sisera attempted to escape on foot. However, the Israelite forces, led by Barak, decisively defeated the enemy, annihilating Sisera's army and forcing him to flee, leaving no survivors from the Canaanite force. This marked a significant victory, demonstrating both the courage of the Israelite troops and the providential support they received.

4:17-24: Jael Kills Sisera

As Sisera fled from the battlefield, he sought refuge in the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber, believing he would be safe there due to the existing peace between King Jabin and the Kenites. Jael welcomed him, offering shelter and a drink of goat's milk instead of water, and then covered him with a rug to rest. Trusting Jael, Sisera fell into a deep sleep from exhaustion.

Seizing this moment, Jael used a tent peg and hammer, tools with which she was proficient, to kill Sisera by driving the peg through his temple, thus ending the reign of terror he had inflicted for twenty years. When Barak arrived in pursuit of Sisera, Jael showed him the evidence of her decisive action.

This act of bravery by Jael marked the beginning of the end for King Jabin's dominance. Israel intensified their efforts against Jabin, eventually leading to his defeat and mirroring the victory over the earlier Jabin from the time of Joshua. Jael's actions demonstrated individual courage and signified a pivotal moment in Israel's struggle against their oppressors, contributing to their eventual liberation.

Judges 5: A Song of Praise

The fifth chapter of Judges features the Song of Deborah and Barak, commemorating their monumental victory over Sisera. This ancient Hebrew poem, known for its complexity and challenge to translators, varies in interpretation across different English Bible translations. Despite these variations, it is universally acknowledged as a masterpiece of world literature, highlighting the significance of celebrating liberation from oppressive forces.

5:1-11 – Praise for God’s Deliverance

The Song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 starts with gratitude towards God for the leadership and volunteerism displayed by Israel's leaders and their followers, emphasizing the necessity of both for fulfilling God’s purposes. It highlights the awe-inspiring power of God, describing his march from Seir, causing the earth to shake and the heavens to rain, reminiscent of his majestic appearance at Sinai. This demonstration of divine might was crucial for Israel, especially given the dire circumstances before Deborah’s rise, where major roads were abandoned due to enemy control, foreign gods were worshipped, and the people lacked the courage to defend their land despite the looming threat of war.

The poem recounts the bleak period under the oppression of Canaanites and Philistines, where no warrior stood up against Sisera’s tyranny until Deborah's leadership rejuvenated Israel's spirit. She acknowledged that victory was unattainable without the brave efforts of her commanders, for whom she praised Yahweh.

Calling upon every part of society—from the elite riding white donkeys to the merchants on the roads to the shepherds—Deborah and Barak's song invites all to rejoice in Yahweh's righteous acts that restored a semblance of normalcy to Israel. This call to celebration serves as a unifying moment, recognizing the collective effort and divine intervention that led to their triumph.

5:12-18: Fight for Freedom

Here, Israel's rallying response to combat their oppressors is recounted. Barak led the charge, capturing enemies inspired by Deborah's call to arms. This ignited a wave of support from the survivors of twenty years of subjugation, who joined as warriors under Deborah's leadership. The tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (representing west Manasseh), Zebulun, and Issachar rallied together, marching into the valley of Esdraelon to confront the enemy forces.

However, not all tribes were willing or able to contribute to the fight for freedom. The Reubenites, despite their initial good intentions and contemplation, ultimately chose to stay with their sheep, prioritizing their immediate concerns over the nation’s struggle. Similarly, the Gileadites, including the tribes from east Manasseh and Gad, remained across the Jordan, away from the conflict. Dan and Asher, too, stayed out of the battle, preoccupied with their maritime commerce. These tribes' absence in the fight highlighted a divide between those who participated in the liberation effort and those who remained indifferent or preoccupied with personal gain.

Despite this, the poem emphasizes the exceptional bravery of Zebulun and Naphtali. These tribes are lauded for disregarding personal safety, demonstrating utmost courage by risking their lives in the fierce battle for freedom. This part of the song not only celebrates the unity and bravery of those who fought but also subtly critiques the inaction of those who stood aside, underscoring the varied responses within Israel to the call for liberation.

5:19-23: The Resistance

The Song of Deborah and Barak narrates a pivotal battle where Canaanite kings, allies of Jabin, confronted the Israelite insurgents near Taanach by the waters of Megiddo in the Esdraelon valley. Despite their efforts, the Canaanite forces failed to secure victory or plunder. The text highlights God's divine intervention: "the stars fought from heaven" against Sisera. A massive rainstorm turned the Kishon River into an uncontrollable flood, rendering the Canaanite chariots ineffective as they struggled through the muddy terrain.

Additionally, the poem mentions the curse laid upon the inhabitants of Meroz by the "angel of Yahweh," through Deborah. This curse resulted from Meroz's failure to support Yahweh's cause by not assisting in the battle against the Canaanites, despite their proximity to the conflict. Even after the victory was secured, their lack of action highlights a missed opportunity to join in the collective effort for liberation, drawing attention to the importance of unity and participation in the face of national challenges.

5:24-27: Jael's Contribution

The next section highlights the heroic actions of Jael in the battle for freedom, contrasting her commendation with the condemnation of Meroz. Jael is celebrated as the "most blessed of women," highlighting her extraordinary courage and ingenuity despite her ordinary life among her tent-dwelling people. Renowned for her quick thinking, Jael offered Sisera milk instead of water, accelerating his descent into sleep. Demonstrating remarkable bravery and determination, she risked her life to approach the sleeping general. With significant strength, Jael decisively drove a tent peg through Sisera's temple, playing a pivotal role in the struggle for liberation. Her act of valor is remembered as a turning point in the conflict, emphasizing her crucial contribution to the cause.

5:28-30: Deborah's Sorrow

The next section is where Deborah introduces a contrasting perspective of grief experienced by Sisera's mother. Understanding the universal sorrow of a mother for her child, regardless of his deeds, Deborah empathetically portrays the anxiety and distress she feels. She imagines Sisera's mother anxiously waiting for his return, pacing in the palace, and peering out the window, puzzled by the unexpected delay of her son's army.

Surrounded by her attendants, who offer comforting explanations for the delay, such as the time to distribute spoils of war or the captivation of females, Sisera's mother clings to hope. These consolations suggest a victorious return, laden with riches and honors for his family. However, unbeknownst to her, these hopes are in vain. Deborah subtly reveals the tragic reality that, while Sisera's mother anticipates his triumphant return with gifts, her son has already met his demise at the hands of Jael, a woman of

humble origins. This poignant section of the poem underscores the personal tragedies and the widespread impact of conflict, extending the narrative's emotional depth by highlighting the loss experienced on both sides of the battle.

5:31 – The Supplication

Deborah's character is depicted as compassionate yet unwaveringly committed to her faith and her people. Despite recognizing the sorrow that the death of someone like Sisera could bring to a mother, her resolve is not softened by mere sentimentality. Her primary allegiance lies with God and His people, valuing their welfare and God's will above all else.

The poem ends with Deborah's fervent prayer, reflecting a dual wish. She prays for the demise of all who oppose God, seeing Sisera as emblematic of the Lord's adversaries who only yield to force. This reflects her desire to establish God's kingdom on Earth, envisioning a time of uninterrupted peace for God's people following the defeat of their last oppressor. Additionally, Deborah prays for the faithful to shine brightly like the morning sun, serving as beacons of light that dispel darkness in the world.

The story of Deborah concludes with a note of triumph: the land experienced peace for forty years, roughly from 1261 to 1221 B.C. This rest period underscores the impact of Deborah's leadership and the fulfillment of her prayers for her people, marking a significant phase of stability and light after a time of conflict and oppression.

What's in this for Us?

Unexpected Heroes: The judges arose from unlikely circumstances, reminding us that leadership and salvation can come from unexpected places and people. This teaches the importance of recognizing potential in those around us and in ourselves, even if not traditionally expected to fulfill certain roles.

The Role of Women: The significant contributions of women, such as Achsah and Deborah, highlight women's vital role in leadership and in advancing God's purposes. It encourages inclusivity and valuing contributions from all members of a local church body, regardless of gender.

Divine Intervention and Human Cooperation: The stories emphasize the partnership between divine intervention and human action. While God provides the means and opportunities for deliverance, human cooperation, and courage are required to actualize it. This teaches us the importance of being open to God's guidance and willing to act upon it.

Unity in Diversity: The varied responses of the Israelite tribes to the call for liberation—from full engagement to indifference—illustrate the complexity of national dynamics. The successful tribes show that unity and collective effort are crucial in overcoming challenges. This serves as a reminder of the power of collaboration and the need to work together towards common goals, even in the face of diverse interests and capabilities.

Conclusion

The unexpected rise of leaders like Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah serves as a testament to God's sovereign ability to work through individuals from all walks of life, affirming the potential within each

person to effect significant change. The role of women in these stories, particularly in a time and culture where their contributions were often overlooked, challenges contemporary audiences to recognize and value the diverse gifts and callings within the local church.

Also, the intertwining of divine guidance with human action/response emphasizes the active participation required in our faith. It is a call to be attentive to God's leading, ready to move when He directs, yet understanding that our actions play a crucial role in realizing God's purposes. Finally, in an era of increasing individualism, the story of Israel's deliverance reminds us of the power of coming together for a common cause, especially in the face of adversity.

For Discussion

1. How does the concept of leadership in the Book of Judges compare to modern-day leadership values and expectations?
2. In what ways do the stories of unexpected heroes in Judges challenge our perceptions of who is qualified to lead or make significant contributions to society?
3. What lessons can contemporary communities learn from the inclusivity and roles of women, as depicted in the stories of Achsah and Deborah, in advancing collective goals?
4. How does the cyclic pattern of disobedience, oppression, and deliverance in Israel's history speak to the human tendency towards forgetfulness and complacency in spiritual and moral life?
5. How might the divine intervention seen in Judges inform our understanding of the relationship between human effort and divine will in achieving personal and communal victories?
6. Considering the varied responses of the Israelite tribes to calls for unity against oppression, what factors influence an individual's or group's decision to participate in collective action?
7. In the context of Judges, how do the consequences of actions and inactions highlight the importance of individual responsibility within a community?
8. How can the modern believer reconcile the acts of violence used for deliverance in Judges with the principles of peace and love emphasized in the New Testament?

9. What does the story of Jael's bravery and decisive action tell us about the potential for significant impact by individuals in situations of conflict and injustice?

10. Reflecting on the entire narrative of Judges, what insights do we gain about God's character and His dealings with people, especially regarding justice, mercy, and redemption?