

SESSION 2

DEBORAH: ENCOURAGING FAITH

▶ **The Point**

Use your influence for God's kingdom and for His honor.

▶ **The Passage**

Judges 4:1-9; 5:1-5

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

"Someone sees leadership potential in you that you don't see in yourself." That was the best thing I could tell my daughter when she called home during her sophomore year of college. And I knew it from experience. During my own college years, I learned a lot about leadership. Being president of the women's glee club and editor of the yearbook were just two things God used in my life to shape future leadership endeavors.

And now my own daughter needed to experience what others saw in her. She had been chosen to serve on a school leadership team. It was an honor to be asked, but she was hesitant about assuming more responsibilities. Others saw leadership potential in her, though, and they encouraged her to use it. I did too.

In the Book of Judges we find a woman who also encouraged others in leadership. God used Deborah to challenge and encourage Barak to step up and lead. Her example and faith led to a great moment in the life of Israel.

▶ **The Setting**

The Book of Judges covers the time in Israel's history from the settlement of Canaan and the death of Joshua through the time of Samuel. Deborah was the only woman among the twelve judges mentioned in this book. Deborah was both a prophetess who spoke for God and a judge who settled disputes. She used her influence for God's kingdom and for His honor.

What does the Bible say?

Harosheth-hagoyim (4:2)—Hebrew place name referring to the home city of Sisera, a general of the Canaanite King of Hazor, Jabin.

Judging (4:4)—referred to a legal activity by a man (usually) who applied God's laws to various situations of a legal, civil, or religious nature.

Judges 4:1-9; 5:1-5

^{4:1} And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. ² And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. ³ Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years. ⁴ Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.

⁶ She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. ⁷ And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?'" ⁸ Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." ⁹ And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

^{5:1} Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: ² "That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD! ³ "Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel. ⁴ "LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. ⁵ The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel."

Judges 4:1-5 Commentary

[Verses 1-2] The Book of Judges describes Israel's failure to follow God's commands by completely conquering the Canaanites. This led to Israel's worship of Canaanite gods and goddesses. We see also a pattern: the Lord raised up judges (2:16) but Israel refused to listen to them and followed other gods (v. 17). Judges 4–5 presents the story of Deborah and Barak in two distinct formats. Chapter 4 is narrative; chapter 5 is poetry. The story deals with the first major threat to Israel in the Book of Judges with the oppression and relief of six tribes. The opening words, And the people of Israel **again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD**, are found repeatedly in Judges (2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). This repetition indicates the pervasive cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, and obedience during this time of the judges. The writer explained that the Lord sold Israel to an oppressor, into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Elsewhere, Jabin is referred to as the King of Hazor (Josh. 11). Hazor was located in northern Israel and was the largest city of Canaan. **Sold** indicates Israel was Yahweh's possession to discipline as needed to bring them back to Him. **Sisera**, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim, was the commander of King Jabin's army. The word translated **hagoyim** here is also translated "Gentiles" and is a generic term for people.

[Verses 3-5] **Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD** reveals the repeated cycle of sin, judgment, oppression, repentance, rescue, and obedience so prominent in the Book of Judges. This verse gives two reasons for the Israelite's distress. First, King **Jabin** had **900 chariots of iron** under his control. From a military standpoint, these iron chariots were vastly superior to Israel's weapons (bows, spears, swords, etc.). However, Israel had Almighty God, the Lord of Hosts (armies) on their side. Second, Jabin oppressed . . . cruelly the Israelites for half a generation, **twenty years**. From verse 4, we know three things about **Deborah**. First, she was a **prophetess**; she spoke God's message to Israel. Second, Deborah was also the **wife of Lappidoth**, a name that means "fire" or "torches." Since biblical names represented a person's character, this word may have described Deborah and her husband. Third, Deborah was **judging Israel** at that time. In ancient Israel, a judge was more than a legal authority. Usually men, judges exercised leadership in the areas of religious questions, political matters, legal disputes, and even, as we see in our next Scripture passage, military matters. Specifically, Deborah led Barak, the Israelite general, to "man up." Deborah certainly used her influence for God's kingdom and His honor. The Israelites went up to Deborah for judgment as she sat **under the palm of Deborah** in the **hill country of Ephraim** located between **Ramah and Bethel**. This central location provided Israel with a place they could come to receive God's judgment from Deborah. The people of Israel knew who she was, what she did, and where they could find her. As she lived out her calling from God, she was able to influence others.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Judges 4:6-9

⁶ She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun.' ⁷ And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?" ⁸ Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." ⁹ And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Judges 4:6-9 on page 24 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 25 of the PSG: "When has God used someone else to encourage you to step into a ministry opportunity?"

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from pages 24-25 of the PSG. We see Deborah's confidence in the specific instructions she gave to Barak:

- ▶ **A specific place:** "Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor" (v. 6).
- ▶ **A specific number:** "Taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun (v. 6).
- ▶ **A specific outcome:** "I will give him into your hand (v. 7).

RECAP: Deborah didn't abandon Barak. She "gladly" (CSB) went with him and gave him strength to accomplish God's purpose, but not without one final prophetic word. The honor of the battle, she forewarned, would belong to a woman. At this point, we might assume that this honor would go to Deborah, but instead, it would go to a nomadic Gentile tent-dweller named Jael (Judg. 4:17). God often uses the most unlikely of people to fulfill His ultimate plan and purposes.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that God is honored when we live out what He leads us to do.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

In what ways did Deborah demonstrate strong leadership?

Judges 4:6-9 Commentary

[Verse 6] Deborah summoned **Barak**; his name means “lightening.” He lived in **Kedesh-naphtali**. Along with the tribe of Naphtali, the tribe of Zebulun came from the territory oppressed most by the Canaanites. Other Israelite tribes joined in the battle (Judg. 5). We see Deborah more in her role as **prophetess** than in her role as judge. Likely Deborah’s reputation resulted in people coming to her to explain the oppression suffered by these Israelite tribes. Deborah’s words **“Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you . . .”** indicate God had already spoken to Barak. Deborah’s role as a prophetess was to declare God’s will to people. God’s words through Deborah helped encourage Barak to “man up,” to say yes to God and His message, though verse 8 reveals Barak’s reluctance remained a driving force for him. Deborah repeated God’s command: Go, deploy ten thousand troops from Naphtali and Zebulun at Mt. Tabor. This number of troops was a significant number for the tribes but likely a far lower number than the soldiers they faced. This reinforced the idea God and His power would provide victory.

[Verses 7-8] Draw out points to God’s personal activity in bringing about victory. The size of King Jabin’s forces under General Sisera would have included both chariots and infantry. God specified where the battle would take place, the river **Kishon**. Most “rivers” were dry stream beds which usually flowed with water only during the rainy season. The end of verse 7 reveals God’s promise: **I will give him [Sisera] into your hand**. Perhaps more than any other verse in this section, verse 8 focuses on the truth that strong leadership is willing to let others lead when called upon, encouraging others to live out their God-given tasks. Barak told Deborah, **“If you will go with me, I will go.”** Giving Barak the benefit of doubt, perhaps Barak had recognized Deborah’s leadership in her role as prophetess and judge. Perhaps he was being a cautious military tactician. However, when we examine the remainder of the verse, Barak’s mindset becomes obvious: **“But if you will not go with me, I will not go.”** Deborah had encouraged Barak to live out his God-given tasks; nevertheless, Barak refused to go without her. Deborah had used her influence for God’s kingdom and His honor but Barak remained unconvinced.

[Verse 9] Deborah confidently announced her willingness to serve as a representative of God. She would gladly go with Barak. To see God’s representative going with them likely gave encouragement to Barak and his troops. Yet in what must have been a disappointment to Barak, Deborah added: **“Nevertheless, the road . . . will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”** Likely Barak thought this woman deliverer would be Deborah; we know from verses 17-22 the woman was Jael. Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh reflects more than Deborah’s following through on her promise. At this point in other Old Testament calls from God to Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, and others, God frequently promised His presence. Deborah’s action here assured Barak of God’s promised presence.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

Judges 5:1-5

¹ Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day:² “That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD!³ “Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.⁴ “LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.⁵ The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel.”

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Judges 5:1-5 on page 26 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 26 of the PSG: “In what ways can we be an influence for God in the places where we live, work, attend school, or volunteer?”

RECAP: We read in Judges 5:2 that God is blessed when godly leaders lead and people freely and willingly step up to be used by God. God was praised as the creator of everything and His purposes will not be overcome. The Israelites were victorious over the Canaanites, who were known for worshiping Baal, the god of the storm. But when “the LORD, the God of Israel” stepped in, “The earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the LORD.” Clearly, the false god of the storm was no match for the Lord of the universe.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 26 of the PSG: “How can our group use our influence to further God’s kingdom?”

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What do you appreciate about Deborah’s leadership in this situation?

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity, “Influencing Others” on page 27 of the PSG to help them.



Choose the image of a person influencing others that most inspires you. [PSG shows four images from which to choose.] Then answer the questions.

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: “Use your influence for God’s kingdom and for His honor.”

Judges 5:1-5 Commentary

[Verse 1] Our focus in Judges 5:1-5 is that God is honored when we live out what He leads us to do. Deborah's primary aim was to express praise for what God had done in defeating Sisera and his army. This poem could be titled "A Hymn of Praise to Yahweh." The **LORD** caused the victory (vv. 4-5) and the praise is directed toward Him (v. 3). Deborah is often identified as the writer of this song/poem. Verse 1 reveals that Deborah both composed this victory song and sang it **on that day**, the day the Lord gave Israel victory over Sisera and the Canaanites. That **Deborah** is mentioned prior to **Barak** downplays his role. This may be due to Barak's reluctance to follow God's call (Judg. 4:6,8).

[Verses 2-3] Though it appears last in the verse, the main part of this verse is **bless the LORD**. This use of God's covenant name, *Yahweh*—six times in these five verses—reveals the song's focus. Old Testament scholar Daniel Block wrote "when someone lesser 'blesses' a superior, it means 'to acknowledge that person as the source of special power/benefactions.'"¹ In this case "bless the Lord" means to praise Him. The two phrases that begin **that** are problematic to translate. Hebrew poetry sometimes uses multiple words with similar meanings; this makes translation difficult. Further, some words used in poetry are little known so the meaning may be unclear. The word **that** followed by an infinitive, as here, can be translated "given this fact." The two phrases, **that the leaders took the lead in Israel** and **that the people offered themselves willingly** are parallel, suggesting both leaders and people should praise the Lord for His actions. **Leaders** refers to Deborah first, Barak second; the **people** may refer not only to the Israelite army but perhaps to all Israel, particularly those whom God had freed from oppression. Both **kings** and **princes** (or rulers) are asked to listen and pay attention. Since Israel did not yet have kings and princes, these words address other nations. Likely Deborah's goal was to influence them by telling them of God's kingdom and His honor. The parallelism continues. **Sing** and **make melody** are parallel as are **LORD** and **LORD . . . God of Israel** with the second line more fully explaining the first line.

[Verses 4-5] Instead of talking about the Lord, verse 4 addresses Him, pointing out Israel's reasons to praise Him. Again, the clauses regarding **Seir** and **Edom** are in parallel form. Additionally, the reference to **Sinai** in verse 5 adds to this parallelism. Israel went from a group of former slaves to a nation in covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). Judges 5:4-5 traces Israel's covenant relationship with God from **Sinai**, through **Seir**, into **Edom**. Deborah's recounting of Israel's journey into Canaan was likely for the benefit of surrounding kings. Deborah offered other parallels. First, **the earth trembled** and **the mountains quaked**. Next, **the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water**. God's actions pointed to His superiority over the Canaanite god, Baal. This song demonstrates that God is honored when we live out what He leads us to do. God desires His people to use their influence for God's kingdom and His honor.

1. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 1999) 220.

Read the article "It Happened at Mount Tabor" in the Summer 2019 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*." Other articles that relate to this lesson can be purchased at www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.

