

Deborah, the Dutiful Judge

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 20:20-28](#)

Background Scripture: [Judges 4-5](#)

[Judges 4:4-10, 14, 21-22](#)

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 Kedeshnaphtali, 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.

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.

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

p 346 The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 1: Faithful Witnesses Model God's Fidelity

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Deborah's role in the defeat of Sisera.
2. Explain how Deborah demonstrated faithfulness in difficult circumstances.
3. State one way to follow Deborah's example of heeding God's call to serve others.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Supportive Greatness

B. Lesson Context

I. Deborah's Plan (Judges 4:4–10, 14)

A. The Setting (vv. 4–5)

B. The Task (vv. 6–7)

God Still Speaks

C. The Prophecy (vv. 8–10)

You' ll Bring Honor

D. The Action (v. 14)

II. Jael's Action (Judges 4:21–22)

A. Violent Response (v. 21)

B. Prophetic Fulfillment (v. 22)

Conclusion

A. Emboldened Leader

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

p 347 How to Say It

Harosheth Huh-roe-sheth.

Kedesh Kee-desh.

Lapidoth Lap-ih-doth.

Naphtali Naf-tuh-lye.

Zebulun Zeb-you-lun.

p 346 Introduction

A. Supportive Greatness

Numerous world records were broken during the 2024 Olympic Games. One was for sport climbing, set by Sam Watson (USA). Sam claimed the climbing record by completing the course in just 4.74 seconds! Amazingly, Sam also held the previous record of 4.75 seconds. He beat his own record by .01 second! Sometimes, the smallest victories require the most extraordinary dedication.

Sam is a fantastic athlete, but like anyone attempting an audacious goal, he needed help and support. Enter the role of a coach! Sam's coach enabled his growth capacity through knowledge, confidence, and courage. He emboldened Sam toward consistent training and offered encouragement when doubts crept in. Coaches are rarely seen or noticed, but their impact is esteemed when their students succeed. As you ponder today's lesson, consider the out-in-front and behind-the-scenes roles of Deborah and

Jael in Israel's victory. Leadership comes in many forms.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Judges opens with the news that Joshua, Moses' successor, has died. His death signals a transition to what we now call "the period of the judges" (about 1373–1043 BC). The firm, centralized leadership that nomadic Israel knew under Moses and Joshua is gone. A theocracy remains in its place—a rule by God.

Before the tribes of Israel went to their respective portions of land, they agreed to serve God ([Joshua 24:14–28](#)). But that didn't happen; the Israelites' commitment to God faded as the generation of the conquest died. The new generation worshiped fictitious Canaanite gods such as Baal and Ashtoreth ([Judges 2:10–13](#)) as "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" ([17:6](#); [21:25](#)). Because of their idolatry, God handed His people over to their enemies. Oppression and hardship resulted ([2:14–15](#)).

A cyclical pattern characterizes the book of Judges: (1) obedience to God brings peace and stability to Israel; (2) the people's resolve weakens, and faithfulness to God's covenant falters; (3) a [p 347](#) disintegration of spiritual well-being breaks down the community, leaving God's people vulnerable to repression and attacks from external enemies; (4) oppression and suffering trigger repentance; and (5) God mercifully raises a leader to deliver them from their enemies.

Typically, when we hear the noun *judge*, we think of a magistrate who renders legal decisions in a court of law. The Old Testament use of the term is much broader, however. The book of Judges uses the word *judge* to describe a leader who renders decisions for the nation. As such, the word is used to describe officials who make legal decisions in civil and criminal cases (example: [Deuteronomy 25:1–2](#)), prophets ([Judges 4:4](#)), military commanders ([2:18](#)), and even the Lord Himself ([11:27](#)). In all instances, the "judge" was to lead in accordance with the will of God.

Today's text takes us to approximately 1225 BC, where we consider the fourth of Israel's judges.

I. Deborah's Plan ([Judges 4:4–10, 14](#))

When Deborah succeeded Ehud as judge, she found herself in the same situation as

her predecessor: “The children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord” (Judges 4:1). Because of their desire to do evil, God allowed Jabin, the king of Canaan, to oppress Israel for 20 years (4:2–3).

A. The Setting (vv. 4–5)

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

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; and 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.

This verse formally identifies Deborah as Israel’s civil leader (*judge*).

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.

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* (compare Exodus 18:13).

B. The Task (vv. 6–7)

6. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, 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?

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 ([Joshua p 348 20:7; 21:32](#)). *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*. A helpful New Testament title for the tribal lands at hand is “Galilee of the Gentiles” ([Matthew 4:15](#), quoting [Isaiah 9:1–2](#)).

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.

What Do You Think?

Consider [Judges 4; 7](#), and [13–16](#). Why does God sometimes use “a cast of thousands” to accomplish His will but at other times He uses many fewer?

Digging Deeper

When have you participated in serving others with a large group? Small group? Independently?

God Still Speaks

Deborah wasn’t just a judge; she was also a prophet. She had a unique advantage when defending against Israel’s enemies: she heard God’s voice. Therefore, she knew what to do and how to do it. If only all leaders had such an advantage!

While God may not call me to battle, I often find myself in tense circumstances with high stakes. Sometimes a particular decision feels like life or death. I often find myself desperate for God to speak clearly about what I should do and how to do it, especially if I am to lead others and care for their well-being.

It is easy to forget that while God may not speak in a loud, booming voice to give me obvious and specific directions about each step, I can access His will through the Holy

Spirit and the study of Scripture. The more I walk with the Spirit through prayer, the more I discern His will—and perhaps most importantly, my heart desires to follow Him. Have you invited the wisdom and guidance of God into the significant decisions of your life? How are you allowing God to work through you as a leader for the sake of serving others well?

—N. M. H.

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.

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 ([Judges 4:3](#)). 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 (about 1225 BC; see [Lesson Context](#)) is a huge technological advantage.

Bronze chariots have defeated the Israelites in other, previous contexts ([Joshua 17:16–18](#); [Judges 1:19](#); [4:3](#)). The Israelites (and Barak) have a choice: on what will they focus? Will they fixate on the strength of iron chariots or remember the strength of God ([Deuteronomy 20:1](#))?

The Kishon River, the site of the mentioned ambush, is southwest of Mount Tabor and flows along the Jezreel Valley. *Sisera*’s military base is Harosheth 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” (consider [Judges 1:27](#)).

What Do You Think?

- What is the role of fear in our lives?
- How does it protect, guide, or assist us?
- Is fear ever a good thing?

Digging Deeper

- What role does God play in overcoming our fears? How might the Christian community assist?

p 349 C. The Prophecy (vv. 8–10)

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.

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. 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.

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.

Variations of the Hebrew word underneath the translation *shall sell* appear five times in Judges ([2:9](#), [14](#); [3:8](#); [4:2](#), [9](#)). The phrase’s use in these passages is illustrated by poetic parallelism in [Deuteronomy 32:30](#): “Except their Rock had sold them, and the Lord had shut them up?” The parallel with “sold them” (the same Hebrew word as this verse’s “shall sell”) is the phrase “shut them up.” It means God will “confine them.” In other words, Sisera’s destiny is not in his hands!

You’ll Bring Honor

The children’s film, *Mulan*, tells the story of a young woman named Fa Mulan who wants more than anything to bring honor to her family. The Chinese Imperial Army calls Mulan’s father to serve in the war against invaders from the north. Mulan’s father is a war veteran with old injuries that make the rigors of combat inadvisable. But he believes upholding the family’s reputation and honor is more important than his health. To avoid shame, Fa Zhou answers the call to war.

In response, Mulan feels compelled to protect him. She disguises herself as a man and joins the Imperial Army. Mulan defies traditional gender roles and societal expectations. She faces adversity with creativity, courage, and strength. Mulan sets aside the customary ways a young woman might merit her family. A song in the film

explains the traditional expectations: “We all must serve our Emperor/Who guards us from the Huns/A man by bearing arms/A girl by bearing sons.” She rejects demureness and embraces physical strength, surprising everyone. Ultimately, the emperor voices gratitude for Mulan’s service and bows to her in honor.

Today’s texts also showcase honor given and received in unexpected places. By using unanticipated characters, God keeps the honor for Himself. In what ways does honor drive you? What is your reaction to honor deflected from yourself and conveyed to others?

—B. R. T.

What Do You Think?

How does the concept of honor motivate you?

Digging Deeper

How does your life honor God?

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.

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 (see [1 Chronicles 6:72](#)). 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.

Deborah accompanies Barak just as she said she would.

p 350 D. The Action (v. 14)

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.

The time comes for battle. Barak advances the army when Deborah gives the command. The term *Up* is a call to action (also [Judges 5:12](#)). The Lord uses the same Hebrew word later to prod Gideon to take initiative ([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 (compare [Deuteronomy 9:3](#); [Psalm 68:7–8](#)).

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 (compare [Exodus 14:23–25](#)).

What Do You Think?

How did Deborah utilize discernment?

Digging Deeper

What does discernment look like in your spiritual walk? Your day-to-day life?

II. Jael’s Action

([Judges 4:21–22](#))

In the verses between today’s lesson texts, 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 ([4:17](#)). Heber’s wife, Jael, invites Sisera in and offers him respite ([4:18–19](#)). Exhausted by the battle and 17-mile retreat to Harosheth, Sisera is grateful for the chance to rest safely ([4:20](#)).

Jael makes bold decisions and takes the role of leading actor in this segment. She deals with Sisera swiftly and shrewdly.

A. Violent Response (v. 21)

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.

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](#); see above).

Modern ethics and law make it difficult to discern the motivation for Jael’s actions. She commits treason by assisting Israelite forces (compare Rahab’s story in [Joshua 2](#)). Jael is sharp-witted, clever, and cunning. By offering Sisera hospitality, gaining his trust, and then turning on him, Jael ensures her safety (see next verse).

B. Prophetic Fulfillment (v. 22)

22a. 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.

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 ([Judges 4:11–12](#)). Therefore, it is easy to imagine that Jael fears the shift in power dynamics following Israel’s conquest ([4:15–16](#)). Jael is proactive—just like she was with Sisera ([4:18](#))—and preemptively goes out to *meet* Barak. She confidently informs him that she p 351 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.

What Do You Think?

How do you react to the violence in this story? The whole of Scripture?

Digging Deeper

Consider [Matthew 5:7](#) and [James 2:13](#).

How do you reconcile this story with the New Testament call to mercy?

22b. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples.

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 (see [Judges 5:24–27](#)).

Conclusion

A. Emboldened Leader

When a prophet's words demonstrate truth and accuracy, they confirm the prophet's calling and legitimacy. God proves Deborah's predictions and faithfulness throughout the narrative. Judge Deborah is an emboldened witness of God's fidelity and integrity.

As prophetess, Deborah called Barak to her palm tree to relay God's commands. She boldly informed him he was to go into battle and that God would bring about victory. Her initiative set Barak into action. Deborah remained steadfast despite Barak's doubts and courageously followed him into the war, taking her place in military leadership for the sake of her people. She reminded Barak along the way that God planned their success, serving him through exhortation. She also assisted in discerning the correct timing and movement of the army (the role of both prophet and strategist). After their victory, Deborah led God's people in praise: "Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves" ([Judges 5:2](#)). She proved herself a loyal and dutiful deliverer for Israel, continually giving all glory and honor to the Lord.

How might God use your influence?



Visual for [Lesson 1](#). Display the visual in a prominent place. Invite students to spend one minute silently reflecting on their answer to the question.

When the word of the Lord prompted Deborah, she responded with obedience. May her example inspire us all toward deferential submission to God’s instructions. Like Deborah, may we encourage others to take God at His word.

B. Prayer

Almighty God, help us remember that the victory is Yours. Thank You for using people of all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and skills to implement Your will. May You embolden us to answer Your call whenever and however it comes. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God spoke a faithful word through Deborah.

p 352 Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Form your class into small groups of about six members each. Ask the groups to brainstorm examples of leaders whose egos got in the way of their mission. These may come from politics or government, sports, religion, education, or business and may be current or historical. Ask groups to name specific examples rather than give summaries of the lives or careers of those they choose. After six to eight minutes, call time and ask the groups to share their examples.

Lead into Bible study saying, “Today we will look at a leader who humbly and assertively led her people to accomplish God’s mission. We’ll consider how to serve Him in obedience like she did.”

Into the Word

Prepare a handout containing each of the following statements. (Each sentence is false; the verses noted are for your reference; therefore, do not include them on the handout.)

1. Deborah said, “God has called me to defeat our enemies.” [vv. 6–7]
2. Deborah said, “Our enemies are too powerful. God doesn’t want us to risk bloodshed by going into battle with them.” [v. 7]
3. God hid the enemy of the Israelites from them because He knew the search would make them stronger. [v. 7]
4. Barak had little respect for Deborah, but his only choice was to obey her. [v. 8]
5. Deborah prophesied that her actions would win the battle. [vv. 6–7, 9]
6. Deborah told Barak he’d win because of his great military prowess and strong army. [v. 14]
7. The death of Sisera came about because of Barak’s military prowess. [vv. 21–22]

Distribute a pen and handout to every student. Ask students to work within the same groups as above to decide whether each statement is true or false. Ask them to include a

verse reference from today's text to support their answers.

Call time after eight to ten minutes, and then lead a discussion comparing each group's answers.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Look at the Whole Chapter" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Ask your class to return to whole-group discussion and answer these questions: 1—What was God's role in the military victory? 2—What was Deborah's role in the victory? 3—What was Barak's role? Then challenge learners to complete the following sentences with a partner: 1—"Deborah showed her submission to God by ..." 2—"God showed His power through Deborah by ..." 3—"Deborah served her people by ..."

After a few minutes, lead into the next section of the lesson by saying, "Let's also consider how Deborah can be an example for each one of us."

Into Life

Write these sentences on the board. Ask volunteers to read each one aloud.

1. *God is honored through humble leadership.*
2. *God's discernment helps us fight our battles best.*
3. *Leadership comes in all shapes and sizes.*

Send your students back to their original small groups to decide how today's Bible story illustrates these truths. Then ask class members, "What's one way that you can follow Deborah's example of heeding God's call to serve others?"

If there's time, let learners share their thoughts in small groups before calling on volunteers to share with the whole class.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "God Is Calling" exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing their conclusions in a small group.

Close your classroom time with prayer: "God, help us lead and serve with confidence and grace."

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create

a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

Activity Page (June 7: Deborah, the Dutiful Judge)
