



Adult Sunday School Lesson for October 8, 2006

Released on October 4, 2006

"God Leads Through Deborah"

Printed Text: Judges 4:4-10, 12-16

Background Scripture: Judges 4

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91

Judges 4:4-10, 12-16

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 Beth-el 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 honor; 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.

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12 And they showed Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam was gone up to mount Tabor.

13 And Sisera gathered together all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people that were with him, from Harosheth of the Gentiles unto the river of Kishon.

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.

15 And the Lord discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the sword before Barak; so that Sisera lighted down off his chariot, and fled away on his feet.

16 But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the host, unto Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man.

INTRODUCTION

Joshua had fought with King Jabin of Hazor and defeated him (Josh. 11:1-10). In the time of the judges, another King Jabin from Hazor oppressed Israel for twenty years. He was assisted by Sisera of Harosheth (Judg. 4:1-3). Interestingly, in the song of Deborah and Barak, recorded in Judges 5, Jabin, a king, is not mentioned once, while Sisera, a captain, is mentioned four times (vs. 20, 26, 28, 30).

Deborah is the only woman among the judges raised up by God to deliver Israel. She was already a prophetess in Mount Ephraim when she motivated Barak to take action against the Canaanites and ended up joining him in order to get the job done.

Deborah was already held in high esteem for her work as a settler of civil disputes. Perhaps that is why fearful Barak found it acceptable to insist that Deborah go with him to battle.

Another woman involved in the drama of that day was Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Inviting the fleeing Sisera into her tent, she hid him under a mantle while he rested from exhaustion. Then she dispatched him with a hammer and a long nail while he slept.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Last week's lesson presented the destructive cycle of Israel that is found repeatedly in Judges: apostasy, crisis, repentance, and then deliverance by a judge raised up by God. After the death of the judge, this cycle began again and grew worse with each repetition (Judges 2:19).

While many women can be identified as examples of faith in action in the Old Testament, today's lesson is about one of the most famous of them all: the prophetess, judge, and warrior named Deborah.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to see how God chooses leaders when they are needed.

Principle: to emphasize willingness to be led by God.

Application: to prepare students to be leaders.

How to Say It

ABINOAM. Uh-*bin*-o-am.

BARAK. *Bair*-uk.

EPHRAIM. *Ee*-fray-im.

HAZOR. *Hay*-zor.

JAEL. *Jay*-ul.

LAPIDOTH. *Lap*-ih-doth

SISERA. *Sis*-er-uh.

Deborah the Judge (Judges 4:4, 5)

1. What two ministries did Deborah perform (Judges 4:4)?

Deborah was the wife of Lapidoth, a Hebrew name meaning "torches" or "lightning flashes." Her name means "bee." She may have been so named due to the custom in some cultures of naming children after some phenomenon occurring at the time of birth.

We are not told whether there was a direct connection between Deborah's role as a prophetess and her role as a judge in Israel. We assume that people came to her to settle disputes because they knew she had special help from the Lord to do that kind of work.

We usually think of a prophet as one who has divine insight into future events, but this is only part of a prophet's function. Old Testament prophets are God's

mouthpieces. As such, they are inspired by God to keep Israel on track in religious and moral matters. Deborah, then, is presented as more than a wise judge. She is an inspired judge, used by God to guide the development of the young nation.

2. Why did people from all over Israel come to Deborah in the territory of Ephraim (v. 5)?

Deborah and Lapidoth live in a rural area less than a dozen miles north of Jerusalem. This is in the tribal territory of *Ephraim*. It is a semi-mountainous region. Deborah uses an outdoor courtroom under a famous *palm tree* also called *Deborah*.

In stating that the children of Israel came up to her for judgment, it is implied that her fair settlement of disputes through divinely imparted wisdom had spread her reputation far and wide. People were willing to make journeys from all over the nation of Israel to come before her.

Deborah the Organizer (Judges 4:6–10)

3. What message did Deborah send to Barak in Kedesh-naphtali (vs. 6, 7)?

We do not know how Deborah learned of God's command for Barak to take ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and go to Mount Tabor. Since she was a prophetess, it is likely that God spoke to her directly.

Barak, whose Hebrew name, much like that of Lapidoth, means "lightning," was the son of Abinoam of Kedesh-naphtali. This community was about eighteen miles north of the Sea of Galilee.

Mount Tabor was the place where territories of the tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali came together. It was east of Nazareth, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Deborah said that God had designated Mount Tabor as the rallying place for the ten thousand soldiers who would make up Barak's army when it went to face Sisera's forces (Judg. 4:14).

God had said that He would draw Si-sera, the captain of King Jabin's army, with its nine hundred chariots of iron and a multitude of infantrymen, to the river Kishon.

Sisera's large army and powerful chariots no doubt struck terror into the hearts of opponents (vs. 3, 7, 13). It is no wonder that Barak was apprehensive about going up against them with only ten thousand infantry-men and no mention of chariots to counterbalance those belonging to Sisera.

4. How did Barak react to Deborah's message (v. 8)?

Barak sent a reply back to Deborah that must have startled her— "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go." Men, of course, traditionally led military campaigns. Why, then, would Barak insist that Deborah go with him before he agreed to go?

Surely Barak considered himself more suited to feats of strength, hard-ship, and military

combat than any woman, but apparently he was willing to be embarrassed by his proposal because he realized that a supernatural factor was involved. Knowing that Deborah was a prophetess on good terms with God, Barak wanted to make sure that she went along with him to assure victory.

5. How did Deborah respond to Barak's proposal (v. 9)?

We can well imagine that Deborah did some serious thinking about Barak's proposal and that she prayed about it to determine the will of God in this matter. It would mean leaving her regular ministry and involving her-self in something for which she had no previous experience.

Deborah replied to Barak that she would surely go with him. However, this military journey would not produce honor for Barak himself. Deborah said that the Lord would give Sisera into the hand of a woman.

She did not say she was referring to herself. As it turned out, the woman would be Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. More will be said about her later in this lesson.

Deborah left Mount Ephraim and traveled up to Kedesh in the tribal territory of Naphtali in order to join Barak. From Kedesh Barak sent out calls to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to come to him (v. 10).

When the volunteers arrived at Kedesh, they were met by Barak and Deborah. Ten thousand men followed at their heels as they moved toward Mount Tabor, as the Lord had directed (v. 6).

6. How is a partnership like the one Deborah and Barak had a model for us today?

Barak apparently was not a "glory hog." He recognized that Deborah's presence would give him confidence. Not only did he trust her judgment for civil affairs, he apparently relied on her for military strategy, mutual prayer, and accountability.

Since Deborah was a prophetess, we can assume that God somehow spoke through her. This would be a great comfort to Barak. Thus the moral, godly strength of one person assisted another through a difficult time. Encouraging Christians to draw upon the moral strength of one another is still a good practice to emulate.

Deborah the Warrior (Judges 4:12–16)

7. How did Sisera learn that Barak was at Mount Tabor (v. 12)?

The Bible does not say who they were, but some individuals, probably spies, told Sisera that Barak was at Mount Tabor. Sisera immediately gathered together all of his iron chariots, numbering nine hundred.

The chariots, along with a multitude of accompanying foot soldiers, moved out from

Harosheth of the Gentiles (v. 13). This city was located in northern Palestine near the Kishon River. The term "Gentiles" probably indicated that it was populated by mixed races.

8. What advantage did Deborah indicate that Israel had over Sisera (v. 14)?

Barak's army probably arrived at Mount Tabor in time to set up camp for the night and get some rest from the long march. But the men needed more than rest if they were to be ready for battle. In order to inspire confidence and courage for what was to come, Deborah told Barak that this was the day in which the Lord would deliver Sisera into his hand. Indeed, she said that the Lord had already gone out to do battle for Israel. It is interesting to speculate on what this meant. Perhaps it had something to do with God causing the enemy soldiers to be afraid.

Barak mustered his forces into marching order and headed down from Mount Tabor.

9. What did God use to help Israel defeat the Canaanites (vs. 15, 16)?

It says here that "the Lord discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the sword before Barak." When telling Barak that the Lord had gone out before him, Deborah had pointed out the fact that God Himself was leading Barak and his army into battle against Sisera and the Canaanites (v. 14). The Lord was not wielding a literal sword Himself, but He aided the soldiers of Israel, who wielded their swords, terrorizing the enemy soldiers. We are not told what exactly was involved in this psychological warfare.

We pick up another clue about how God helped Barak's army that day from the song of Deborah and Barak, which was sung following the battle. Judges 5:21 says that the river Kishon swept many enemy soldiers away. Apparently the Lord used a sudden storm and flooding in defeating the Canaanites.

Sisera saw that things were going against him and his men. Obviously consumed by cowardly self-interest, he jumped out of his chariot and fled on foot. It is interesting how quickly a person's true character is shown when the tide turns against him.

Exhilarated by his victory on the battlefield, Barak might have stopped, celebrated with his troops, and headed home; instead, he pursued the charioteers and the foot soldiers all the way to Harosheth of the Gentiles. He thoroughly dealt with the enemies of Israel by hunting down and killing every Canaanite. This may seem cruel to us, but God had instructed Joshua and the Israelites to wipe out the pagans in Canaan before this—and that had not been done. It is not up to us to question a sovereign decision made by God. He had His ways of dealing with paganism.

There was one individual who managed to escape the carnage, and that was Sisera. We

must go beyond our printed text for this lesson to Judges 4:17-21 and 5:24-27 to see what happened to him.

10. How did Jael fulfill the prophecy made in Judges 4:9?

Heber the Kenite, who is first mentioned in Judges 4:11, had a wife named Jael. She was in her tent when Sisera came running by, and she invited him to come in and not be afraid. She implied that she would protect him from the pursuing Israelites. Jael covered him with a mantle (blanket). He asked her for water to drink, but she gave him milk and butter (milk curds) before covering him again.

Sisera told Jael to stand in the door of the tent. If anyone asked whether any man was inside, she was to say no. As exhausted Sisera slept, however, Jael sneaked up on him and used a hammer and a long spike to pin his skull to the ground and thus kill him.

This fulfilled Deborah's words: "the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judg. 4:9). Barak may have assumed that Deborah was referring to herself, but he was soon to learn that she was referring to Jael instead. As he chased after the fleeing Sisera, Barak was met by Jael and told to come in and find the man he was pursuing. It was then that Barak saw what had happened to Sisera.

Most biblical exploits seem to be concerned with what men have done, but this episode in ancient Israel centered on what two women were able to do. Although the Holy Scriptures make it clear that men are expected to assume positions of leadership and responsibility, there are adequate references to show that God uses dedicated women as well. Development of God's work requires both.

CONCLUSION:

Faithful Women Today

Are there lessons for the church in this Old Testament story? Is Deborah a model for women today? These are good questions, and there are thorny problems of interpretation regarding the the role of women in church leadership (see 1 Timothy 2:12). Perhaps, however, this story can give us at least partial insight into how God views these issues.

First, we see that God is not opposed to using women to help His people. Deborah enjoyed God's blessings in her work as a righteous judge, in her voice as a prophetess, and in her planning as a military strategist. The judges of Israel are overwhelmingly male but not exclusively.

Second, we see that capable women can earn the respect of the people of God. It would be fascinating to learn exactly how Deborah developed her reputation as a judge, but we meet her after this had been accomplished. Undoubtedly, this did not happen overnight. It probably took many years of consistent excellence as a judge for Deborah to achieve her position of authority.

Third, we should understand that it is unnecessary for men to deny women credit for effective service. Barak didn't seem to have a problem with this. The wisest players are those who sometimes step aside to let someone else carry the ball and hear the roar of the crowd.

Prayer:

Holy God, we are in Your hands. We pray that You will provide our church with leaders who are brave and strong, yet humble and obedient. Give those called to leadership the wisdom to trust You fully. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember:

Tough times require strong leaders.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson:

In our next lesson, we will explore how God answered the prayer of the Prophet Samuel. **"God Answers Samuel's Prayer"** Study 1 Samuel 7:3-13.

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