

Lesson 9 | October 27, 2024

Deborah: Prophet and Judge

Study Text: Judges 4:1 through 5:31

Central Truth: The Lord anoints godly leaders to guide and encourage His people.

Key Verse: Judges 5:7

The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel (KJV).

There were few people left in the villages of Israel—until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize the dangers of listening to culture instead of listening to God.
- Students will affirm the role of godly leaders to help us hear God's voice and participate in His plan for the world.
- Students will encourage others to believe God's Word and walk in fellowship with Him.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Difficult challenges are more manageable when we have the support of someone we trust. Sometimes this person has a certain kind of expertise, like a marriage counselor or financial advisor. Or maybe they're a friend who provides accountability or a spiritual mentor who encourages faith and offers direction. Something as simple as being present—just sitting quietly with someone who's struggling—can help them remember that God is with them and is fighting for them.

Discussion Starter—Help Needed

Say: Tell us about a time when someone helped you get through a tough time or gave you the courage to step out of your comfort zone.

Say: Today, we're considering Deborah, a prophet and judge in Israel. Her guidance and godly presence helped deliver the Israelites during a time of great oppression. Her story is found in the Book of Judges, which covers a very dark time in Israel's history. As the last verse of the book says, "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (21:25).

The Book of Judges spans approximately three hundred years—from Joshua's death until Saul was anointed as Israel's first king. At last, the Israelites were dwelling in the land God had given them, but they were often unfaithful to Him. As Judges 2:10 explains, "After [Joshua's] generation died, another generation grew up who did not

acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel.” Instead of following God’s commands to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, the Israelites allowed some to remain. These pagan people and their gods became snares to the Israelites.

Part 1—Deborah Declares God’s Command A Cycle of Sin and Bondage

Judges 4:1–3

Say: Judges 4 begins with the death of Ehud, a judge who had led the Israelites to victory over the Moabites after eighteen years of servitude. Under Ehud and his successor Shamgar, Israel enjoyed peace for eighty years (3:30–31). But it would not last.

After Ehud died, the Israelites again fell into the cycle of apostasy (or willful disobedience) so often repeated throughout Judges. They forgot about God and did evil in His sight (Judges 4:1). In previous cycles, this had involved worshipping “the images of Baal and the Asherah poles” instead of the Lord (3:7). Because of their faithlessness, God allowed them to be conquered by the Canaanite king Jabin of Hazor (*JAY-bin* of *HAY-zawr*) and his ruthless army commander Sisera (*SIS-uh-ruh*; 4:2). Finally, after twenty years of oppression, the Israelites cried out to God for help (verse 3). He would answer their prayers with a prophet to lead Israel as judge: Deborah.

Notice that the cycle of apostasy began not with active rebellion but with passive forgetfulness (3:7). It is all too easy for us to fall into the same snare. When we forget God and all He has done for us, we start neglecting the things that strengthen our faith: corporate worship, private times of devotion, and attentiveness to His voice. This neglect can amplify the voices of our culture, causing them to have a greater influence over us than the Word of God.

Discuss

- Explain how forgetting God could start a cycle of sin and bondage.
- Why do you think it took twenty years of oppression for the Israelites to cry out to God?
- What can keep us from recognizing the bondage that sin is creating in our lives?

Resource Packet Item 1: Breaking the Cycle

This handout depicts the cycle of apostasy as it appears in the Book of Judges and encourages students to prayerfully apply scriptural principles to their own lives. For most classes, it would work best as a take-home page for personal reflection.

God’s Plan of Deliverance Revealed

Judges 4:4–9

Say: During the time of this oppression, God was already using Deborah as a prophet and judge. Although some have claimed that God only chose Deborah for leadership because no men were willing or available to lead, that viewpoint cannot be supported by the biblical text. Rather, Judges 4:4–9 depicts Deborah as a trustworthy prophetic voice and judge that God used to speak to the people and to lead them. Under God’s anointing and favor, she gained a reputation that drew the Israelites to the palm tree in the hills of Ephraim that bore her name. There, she would seek and share God’s direction.

God told Deborah His plan to deliver Israel using a general named Barak and ten thousand warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun (Judges 4:6). Parts of Deborah and Barak’s song of victory in Judges 5 describe how low Israelite morale had fallen near the end of Jabin’s oppression. Nevertheless, when Barak heard the battle plan, he believed Deborah was speaking on God’s behalf and was willing to engage the enemy. Regardless of the challenges ahead, God had promised victory. Barak agreed to go—but under one condition: “only if you [Deborah] go with me” (4:8).

At first glance, we might think Barak’s response is a sign of weakness. Why would a general as fierce as Barak need Deborah to go with him into battle? But it’s just as likely that Barak recognized the prophetic gift in Deborah that he himself did not possess. His desire for God to go before the Israelite army outweighed any sense of personal pride. Recall Moses’ request to God in Exodus 33:15–16: “If you don’t personally go with us, don’t make us leave this place . . . For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth.” Could it be that Barak didn’t care who got the credit as long as the Canaanites were defeated and God’s people were delivered?

Deborah agreed to accompany Barak, explaining that he would “receive no honor in this venture, for the Lord’s victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman” (Judges 4:9). They traveled to Kedesh (*KEE-desh*) to begin gathering their army.

Discuss

- God always responds to the repentant cries of His people. What does that teach us about His nature?
- What details about the character and ministry of Deborah can we learn from these verses?
- What do you think was Barak’s reason for asking Deborah to go into battle with him?

Part 2—God Gives Israel Victory

The Lord Is Marching Ahead of You

Judges 4:10–16

Say: As Deborah and Barak followed God’s instructions to the letter, He was at work on their behalf. From the fearless Canaanite warrior Sisera to Moses’ traitorous nephew

Heber the Kenite, God was placing every player on the board to ensure victory for the Israelites.

Deborah and Barak set up their military camp in Kedesh and began traveling among the surrounding territories, gathering their army. Before long, ten thousand soldiers had gathered near the Sea of Galilee, ready to engage in battle (Judges 4:10). At first glance, verse 11 seems out of place at this point in the chapter, but it will become clear in verse 17 that the author is using foreshadowing. Sisera's ultimate fate will be decided in the tent of Heber (*HEE-buhr*).

When Sisera heard Barak was gathering an army at Mount Tabor, he did exactly what God had said he would do (verse 7). "He called for all 900 of his iron chariots and all of his warriors, and they marched from Harosheth-haggoyim (*Huh-ROH-sheth-huh-GOY-ihm*) to the Kishon (*KIGH-shahn*) River" (verse 13). Instead of taking a smaller contingent to face the army of Israel at the Kishon, Sisera took every chariot and every soldier at his disposal.

With Sisera's army in place in the valley below Mount Tabor, Deborah advised Barak that it was time to attack. The sight of all the chariots and troops below may have seemed overwhelming to this Israelite army, but as Deborah assured Barak, God's people had an immeasurable unseen advantage: "The Lord is marching ahead of you" (verse 14). The time for victory had come, and that very day, the Israelites would defeat Sisera.

Sure enough, when Barak's army marched down Mount Tabor, God caused panic to break out among Sisera's army (verse 15). This supernatural disruption allowed Barak and his troops to completely destroy the Canaanites, chasing on foot the chariots that had once defeated them (verse 16). Meanwhile, Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled.

Deborah's role in this story is clear. She did not command the army; she simply proclaimed the word of the Lord—both the call to attack and the promise of victory. The godly leaders in our own lives help us understand God's Word and see how it applies specifically to us. They give us courage and help us recognize how God is working. They inspire us to trust His goodness and rest in His salvation.

Discuss

- How do godly leaders help us trust God's promises when we are facing battles?
- Is there someone in your life who needs to be encouraged with a promise from God's Word? How can you remind them to trust His faithfulness? His redemption? His comfort? His peace? His provision?

Resource Packet Item 2: He Fights for Us

There are many accounts in Scripture when God secured supernatural victory for His people, just as He did in Judges 4. Students will examine other Old Testament passages to see how God fought for His people and then apply those principles to their

own lives. For most classes, this would work best as a small-group project or take-home page for personal reflection.

An Unlikely Warrior

Judges 4:17–24

Say: Remember Heber the Kenite from Judges 4:11? God would use his seemingly unimportant choice of a campsite to bring about the end of one of Israel’s enemies.

When the tide turned against the Canaanite army, Sisera abandoned his troops and fled the battlefield. Instead of going back toward his home base, he ran instead toward the area that Barak and the Israelites had left, near the Sea of Galilee. He eventually reached the tent of Heber, “whose family was on friendly terms with King Jabin of Hazor” (Judges 4:17). Heber may have taken sides against Israel, but his wife Jael proved to have different loyalties.

When she saw Sisera approaching, Jael went out to meet him and convinced him to come inside with the assurance of safety. Covering the exhausted general with a blanket and giving him milk to encourage sleep, Jael was obviously planning to dispose of him (verses 18–19). For her, exacting the Lord’s vengeance against the enemy of Israel took precedence over traditions of hospitality. Jael’s actions seem extremely brutal, but she was fulfilling her role in the deliverance of God’s people (verses 20–22). And “on that day Israel saw God defeat Jabin” (verse 23).

Jael was not looking for a way to get involved in the battle, but she seized the opportunity when it came to her. She used what she had and what she knew to help put an end to the oppression of God’s people. We can also obey God by doing the tasks He puts in front of us to do. With His guidance and the skills and resources at our disposal, we can accomplish anything He commands.

While some scholars believe Jael was the fulfillment of Deborah’s prophecy in verse 9, others contend that Deborah herself was the woman whose leadership brought down the mighty general Sisera. The truth is, God used both Deborah and Jael in supernatural ways to end the ruthless oppression of the Canaanites. As we move into Judges 5, we will see that Deborah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, calls Jael “most blessed among women” (verse 24).

Discuss

- What is your reaction to Jael’s story?
- How can we reconcile these stories of God’s judgment in the Old Testament with the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament?
- How does this account challenge us to respond when presented with opportunities to speak or act on behalf of God?

Part 3—The Song of Deborah

Praise the Lord for His Presence!

Judges 5:1–3, 5, 7

Say: After Judges 4 explains the narrative history of this epic victory over the Canaanites, Judges 5 records a song Deborah and Barak sang to honor God for His deliverance. It's a beautiful reminder that we can see God's divine work through the people He chooses to use.

Deborah and Barak, appointed by God to lead Israel into battle, played vital roles in Israel's deliverance. What more could Israel ask of its leaders than to hear God's voice and obey His commands? But as we see in their song in Judges 5, Deborah and Barak clearly recognized that this victory was due to God's presence, not their leadership skills or tactical strength. This song is divided into two main sections: words of encouragement and victory (verses 1–11) and a description of battle and national triumph (12–31).

Note the leadership unity demonstrated by Deborah and Barak. Not only do they sing together (verse 1), but they shared the leadership of Israel so capably that "the people gladly followed" (verse 2). There is no evidence of jealousy between them. Barak depended on Deborah's leadership and prophetic gift while Deborah passed God's commands to Barak in complete trust, offering no additional advice beyond what God had told her. Because their common goal was so important and they were each so dedicated to obeying God, they were able to set aside human pride and show humility to God and to each other. We should learn from their example and do likewise. After all, what cause could be more important than the one Jesus gave all of us in the Great Commission?

Verse 5 reminds Israel of the power of God's presence. The same God who had appeared to His people in thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai was now waging battle to rescue them from their oppressors. Israel may have suffered oppression and danger when God judged them for their sin, but they were not so far gone that He would not act when they cried out to Him. The land had been dangerous for travelers and there weren't many people left in the villages of Israel "until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel" (verse 7). As the people began to "recount the righteous victories of the Lord" (verse 11), their courage rose and they marched to the city gates, full of faith and ready for battle.

Discuss

- We may not all be songwriters, but what are some other ways we can record our praise to God?
- What is the benefit of reflecting on the songs and psalms in Scripture?

Resource Packet Item 3: Knowing God through the Psalms

Songs and psalms in Scripture give us valuable and unique insights on God's character. Students will read Psalm 34 and reflect on what it reveals about God and how they can share those truths with others.

Praise the Lord for Peace!

Judges 5:12, 15, 31

Say: In the second half of their song, Deborah and Barak described how they responded to the voice of the Lord and led the Israelites into victory over their enemies. They believed God would keep His word. This faith compelled them to obey His commands. They were not fighting alone; the battle belonged to the Lord.

Led by God, Deborah and Barak rose to lead God's people into battle (Judges 5:12). Before they could march down from Mount Tabor, they had to gather their troops. Verses 14–18 describe which tribes responded to the call to battle and which tribes chose not to fight.

The remainder of the song describes how the battle unfolded and God brought about Israel's victory, using repeated imagery of rising (verses 12, 31) and sinking (verses 21, 27). Deborah and Barak's song concluded, "Lord, may all your enemies die like Sisera! But may those who love you rise like the sun in all its power!" (verse 31).

The author of Judges adds, "Then there was peace in the land for forty years." When a new generation grew up and the memories of Deborah and Barak's victory had faded, the cycle of apostasy continued. The people again fell into sin.

Thankfully, the peace we have through Jesus is not so fleeting. His redemptive work rescues us from sin once and for all, so we need not fall into a vicious cycle of sin and judgment. When our hearts and minds are fixed on God, we walk in obedience to His Word. Such obedience brings deep, lasting peace.

Discuss

- Read Philippians 4:6–9. Describe the peace available to us as followers of Jesus.
- How do the godly leaders in your life encourage you to trust God?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: By learning about the Israelites' cycle of apostasy, we can avoid falling into the same pattern. God calls us to a cycle of redemption. Instead of forgetting all about God, we can personally engage with Him. Instead of listening to our culture, we can listen to godly leaders who encourage us to trust His promises. Instead of experiencing judgment, we can rest in the knowledge that God is going before us and has provided everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Honestly evaluate whether you are in a cycle of sin or a cycle of redemption. Ask God to help you develop practices that draw you closer to Him.

- Identify godly leaders God has placed in your life. Express your gratitude to them this week for the ways they encourage you to trust and obey God.
- Whether you consider yourself a leader or not, you can positively influence others to experience God's love and trust His guidance. Ask God who you should encourage this week.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Chosen to Lead Israel Out.

Exodus 3:7–12

Tuesday:

Chosen to Lead Israel In.

Joshua 1:1–9

Wednesday:

Chosen to Lead in Rebuilding.

Nehemiah 2:11–18

Thursday:

Jesus' Example of Leadership.

John 13:1–15

Friday:

Opening the Door to Gentiles.

Acts 10:44–48

Saturday:

Leadership Gifts for the Church.

Ephesians 4:11–16