

Deborah: Prophetess, Judge, and Mother in Israel

Passages: Judges 4–5

Memory Verse

“Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?’” (Judges 4:14a)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
1. God drove out the Canaanites before Israel. 2. Because of Barak’s hesitation, the honor of Sisera’s death went to Jael instead.	1. God is all-powerful. 2. God will give us strength and power.	1. Put God first in our lives. 2. Seek God’s power and strength. 3. Support each other and work together in unity.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. Deborah: Prophetess and Judge
Life Application: Putting God First in Our Lives
- B. Barak: A Skeptical and Reluctant Warrior
Life Application: Be Filled with Power and Strength from God
Life Application: Encouraging and Supporting Our Brethren
- C. The Lord Goes Before Barak
Life Application: Working Effectively with Others
- D. Jael: The Unexpected Heroine

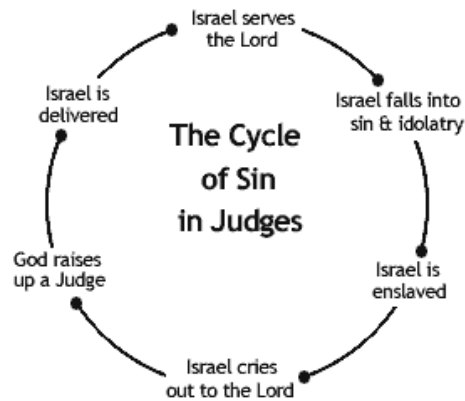
Life Application: One Body of Christ

Memory Verse

Conclusion: We should always put God first in our lives and learn to commit ourselves to His service. It is also important to encourage our brethren through our actions, as well as to learn how to humbly work together with others in peace and unity.

Introduction

After Joshua died, the Israelites began intermarrying with Gentiles, despite God’s explicit command not to do so (Deut 7:3). Because the Israelites failed to completely remove the Canaanites, they were also led astray and began worshipping idols. The Israelites’ idol-worshipping incurred God’s wrath, and His punishment led the Israelites to repent and cry out for help. Out of mercy, God sent a judge to deliver them. However, after years of peace, the Israelites would repeat the same vicious cycle.



Deborah was one of many judges sent by God during this cycle of sin. The name “Deborah” means “bee.” Her name doesn’t have a particularly deep meaning, but bees have many admirable characteristics that we can learn from! They are hard-working insects who live in well-organized colonies that are led by a mighty queen bee. They become incredibly defensive when intruders are near. Coincidentally, Deborah can be likened to the queen bee in a time when the Israelites were being oppressed by their enemies. Perhaps this is because it was highly unusual for a woman to lead a nation at the time. Today, we’ll be taking a closer look at this rare judge and what she did for Israel.

A. Deborah: Prophetess and Judge

The Israelites had once again begun to worship idols, so the Lord handed them over to Jabin, the king of Canaan (Judg 4:1–2). It was during this time that Deborah served as judge. The wife of Lapidoth, Deborah was the fourth judge to rule Israel, and aside from judge, she was also a prophetess.

When the Bible introduces Deborah, it says that “she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment” (Judg 4:5). It is clear that she had gained the confidence and trust of the Israelites as a prophetess and a judge.

Life Application: Putting God First in Our Lives

Although this is quite a short introduction to Deborah, we can already glean a fairly important teaching regarding her character. Deborah was a wife, meaning she had a family and likely had all of the same obligations any spouse would have. It is not easy for a woman to take on as many roles as Deborah did, especially at the time. Despite this, she remained a prophet and judge to the people of Israel, as God had appointed her. This means that she put God first in her life above all else. In fact, she was so dedicated to the role God gave her that she described herself as a “mother” to Israel (Judg 5:7).

We all have many different roles in our lives. We aren't only students with all manner of schoolwork, but also sons and daughters with responsibilities at home, perhaps employees at part-time jobs, or members of a sports team or a club that requires our time and dedication. With so many roles to play, we often give ourselves the excuse that we are too busy, and that church work needs to take the back seat in our lives. If we haven't been given any responsibilities, we never actively step forward to take them on.

Why do we do this? It is easy to put God's work far down on our list of priorities because we feel no obligation to do it. Church work is voluntary. We don't get paid for it, we aren't under threat of failing to graduate if we don't do it well, and our parents don't nag us if we don't complete our church work. No one can force us to do it, or to take it seriously.

If we think these thoughts, it's because we don't see that God's work is the most important of all responsibilities that we have in our lives. We owe everything to God, so we must learn to give everything to Him. Jesus teaches us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt 6:33). Do we put God first in our lives? Do we offer our best sacrifice to Him? Others may not be watching us when we skim over God's work, but the Lord will one day evaluate the quality of our service to Him.

For Deborah, her service to God was a lifelong commitment, not just something that she did in her spare time. Her work as God's prophetess and judge was the most important thing in her life. We should also learn to adopt the same attitude. If we do, then as the Bible has promised, "all these things shall be added to [us]" (Mt 6:33).

B. Barak: A Skeptical and Reluctant Warrior

During Deborah's time, the Israelites had once again fallen into sin, and God allowed them to be harassed by the Canaanite king, Jabin, and his commander Sisera. The Bible says that "Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel" (Judg 4:3). Jabin reigned in Hazor, north of Israel, while Sisera dwelled in a place called Harosheth Hagoyim, which was south-west of Hazor. (*Teachers: See Figure 1: Army movements in the Battle of Deborah.*) With the city of Hazor to give him military reinforcement from the north, Sisera could easily launch attacks on Israel from Harosheth Hagoyim.

Let's read Judges 4:6–10. The Lord was ready to make a counterattack against Jabin and Sisera, and He had chosen Barak, the son of Abinoam to lead the charge. But what was Barak's response to Deborah's call to action? "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!" (v. 8).

Barak had not been given an easy assignment, but it was a great one. With 10,000 Israelites at his back, he was to fight Sisera's army and his 900 iron chariots. The numbers may seem balanced, but the chariots were swift and agile weapons of war. They had been the tools of Jabin's oppression over Israel for the last twenty years, and Barak had been ordered to fight them head on. Barak hesitated, despite God's assurance of victory.

In the end, because of Barak's hesitation, Deborah agreed to accompany Barak to battle, a rather unconventional decision as a woman in that day and age. However, she also informed him that God would hand Sisera over to a woman. When first reading the story, we may automatically assume that woman would be Deborah. But if we continue reading, we will see that it actually wasn't! But before we move on in the story, let's first see what we can learn from Barak and his hesitation.

Life Application: Be Filled with Power and Strength from God

We don't know the exact reason Barak hesitated. Perhaps he thought that as God's prophet, Deborah would have more success than he. Perhaps he was simply scared, so he wanted a visual sign of God's presence. Or perhaps he simply expected Deborah to go along with him and was surprised when she was going to send him off alone. Whatever the case, it is clear that he thought he wasn't enough by himself.

Does Barak's reaction seem familiar to you? Do we sometimes only want to do certain work when someone else does it together with us? The root of this reaction often lies in uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Perhaps we're not sure if we'll do the job properly, or whether we'll embarrass ourselves. Perhaps we believe that we don't have enough skill or think that we are unsuited for the job despite never having tried it before. Regardless, our lack of confidence leads to fear, uncertainty, and doubt.

Let's read Isaiah 41:10. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." Whatever we're uncertain of, whether we are about to take a test at school or perform at a recital, as God's children we can rely entirely on His strength. It is, however, especially important that we rely on God's strength for any holy work.

Life Application: Encouraging and Supporting Our Brethren

From Deborah's response to Barak, we can see that she didn't let Barak's lack of trust affect her own faith, but simply went with him. Later, when it was time for the battle, she told Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" (Judg 4:14). She didn't do the work for Barak, showing her faith in his ability to carry out his role, but encouraged him with God's words so that he had the strength to rally forth. She supported him when his own faith wasn't enough.

It is easy for us to brush someone off, to give excuses, or to try to help without actually putting forth any effort when we are asked to help. We should learn from Deborah how to be a supportive brother or sister in Christ. Sometimes, our friends around us may be weak in spirit, so we should be like Deborah and encourage them instead of ignoring their problems or pushing them down further. Deborah didn't only encourage Barak – she agreed to go to battle with him. We must do the same and join our brethren in their spiritual battles, not just in prayer, but also in person.

It is important for us to learn how to support our brethren when they are feeling weak in their faith. If we want to help them, we should not stop at prayer. Let our actions prove our intentions, and let us willingly help them through the task or the trial that they are facing.

In the end, with Deborah's support, Barak was able to serve the Lord; he was even mentioned centuries later in Hebrews 11:32–34. Let's read the passage together. Barak may have been hesitant at first, but this passage says that he, along with David and Samuel, "through faith subdued kingdoms." He "out of weakness [was] made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of aliens." Deborah's encouragement and support turned Barak into a faithful and valiant worker of God.

C. The Lord Goes Before Barak

Although we do not know who it was specifically, someone informed Sisera that the Israelite army was on the move. In response, Sisera gathered his iron chariots and his men, and they set out from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon. Let's read Judges 4:13–16. The description of the battle is very

brief, but Deborah told Barak, “Has not the LORD gone out before you?”, and the Bible also says that “the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak” (vv. 14–15). Throughout the entire battle, the Lord had everything well in hand. But what exactly did He do?

Let’s turn to Judges 5:20–21. These verses give us a hint as to what happened. It seems that the River Kishon flooded over and swept away Sisera and his troops. Their chariots, once vaunted weapons of war, became incapacitated in the mud and water of the overflowing river. God’s power made their very strength their greatest weakness! This is how God went ahead of Barak and brought victory to the Israelites. From this, it is clear that God works in incredibly unexpected ways, so we should never try to anticipate what God will do to help us. All we need to do is place our trust in Him, just as Deborah encouraged Barak to do.

Life Application: Working Effectively with Others

Although God spoke through Deborah, she didn’t take on all of the responsibilities in going up against the Canaanites. As God instructed, she humbly handed the task over to Barak, and even when Barak asked her to come with him, she didn’t take over his work. She played her role, but also helped Barak perform his work for God without subverting his authority or taking command.

Have you ever gotten impatient watching others struggle with a seemingly simple task, or felt that you could do a better job than them? It is always a temptation to show off our skills and simply take over a job because we think we can do better, or because we don’t trust others to do it. But working effectively with others means learning to stay in our own lane! Deborah may have been a more effective commander than Barak, but she knew that Barak had his own role to play. Barak, for his part, accepted his responsibilities and didn’t attempt to make Deborah do all the work. They both understood their own roles, and neither of them struggled for power or tried to unload all their responsibilities on someone else.

Any divine work that we do is better accomplished with a group of fellow workers rather than by ourselves. We shouldn’t try to shoulder all of the responsibilities ourselves but divide the load so that we don’t become overburdened. God’s work isn’t a short 100-meter dash. It’s a marathon that we must learn to run with good and supportive teammates.

Let’s read 1 Corinthians 12:20–26. As Paul teaches, we all have our own purpose as different parts of the church’s body. We should accept the role given to us, while also accepting that others have different parts to play according to the gifts that God has given to them. This is what it means to work effectively with others as one body in Christ.

D. Jael: The Unexpected Heroine

Let’s continue with the chapter. Sisera’s army was defeated, but he managed to flee on foot. Let’s read what happened to him in Judges 4:17–24. Jael’s treatment of Sisera gave no indication of her intent. By covering him with a blanket and giving him milk instead of water to drink, she was showing him hospitality that was reserved for important guests. This made the unwitting man lower his defenses and fall asleep. As a result, an army general who had cruelly harassed the Israelites for twenty years died at the hands of a woman, while he was sleeping.

As we mentioned earlier, when Deborah told Barak that Sisera would die at the hands of a woman, we probably expected it to be Deborah, not a woman whose house was at peace with the Canaanite king!

We don't know the reason Jael chose to do this – perhaps she saw the plight of the Israelites and sympathized with them, or perhaps she had witnessed Sisera's cruelty. Whatever the case, Deborah praised her actions, and in her song, called Jael "[most] blessed among women" (Judg 5:24). After Sisera's death, from that point onwards, God gave the Israelites strength until they finally subdued Jabin.

Check for Understanding

- 1. Why did God allow the Israelites to be oppressed by their enemies?** They failed to completely remove the Canaanites, and they intermarried with Gentiles. As a result, they were led astray and began worshipping idols, incurring God's wrath and punishment.
- 2. What important teaching can we learn from the Bible's introduction of Deborah?** Despite her many roles and responsibilities, she continued to put God first in her life above all else. Her service to God was a lifelong commitment, not just something that she did in her spare time.
- 3. What is important about the way Deborah supported Barak?** She didn't brush off his concerns or attempt to assume his responsibilities. Instead, she went with him to battle and encouraged him with God's words so that he was able to fulfill the task that God gave him.
- 4. In what way had the Lord "gone out before" Barak?** He sent a great rain and flooded the River Kishon, immobilizing the 900 iron chariots of Sisera so that Barak and the 10,000 men of Israel could defeat them.
- 5. Why is it important that we learn to work effectively with others when serving the Lord?** Because any divine work is better accomplished with a group of fellow workers. God's work isn't a 100-meter dash. It's a marathon that we must learn to run with good and supportive teammates. Moreover, Paul teaches us that we all have our own purpose as different parts of the church's body. We should accept the role given to us, while also accepting that others also have their own parts to play.

Life Application

Activity: One Body of Christ

(Teachers: This is an optional activity, time permitting. Some preparation may be required on your part, including finding a large piece of poster paper, markers, and perhaps preparing a list of members and their responsibilities ahead of time. You may also use smaller, individual pieces of paper for each student instead of a large-sized piece, perhaps with a silhouette already drawn on it.)

We learned from Deborah and Barak the importance of sticking to our own responsibilities and of learning how to work with others effectively. Paul taught us that each member is one part of the whole body of Christ, and each of us have our own different roles to play. But what roles are needed for Christ's body that is the church? What kinds of different roles are needed, and what kinds of roles can we fulfill? Try to think about that as we go through this activity!

Instructions

1. As a class, brainstorm all the different roles that are required to run a church. To start, think of all the weekly duties that are assigned, such as cooking, hymn leading, or cleaning, then branch out from there. Think of board members and their duties if you're uncertain of where to continue. For example, someone needs to keep track of finances, issue checks, make the cleaning and service schedules, buy supplies for the church, water the plants, or run the A/V systems, if any. It might help to mentally go room by room throughout the church, and list any responsibilities related to each room.

2. Once you have a solid list, on a large piece of craft paper, draw a silhouette of a body. At the top, you may write: "The Body of Christ." *(Teachers: If it is large enough, perhaps you can have one student lie down so that others can roughly trace their silhouette. Make sure sisters do it if a sister is being outlined, and brothers for a brother.)*
3. Draw lines that point to different parts of the body, such as the legs, hands, or head, and assign different roles based on the list that you brainstormed together. For example, the hands might have roles such as cleaning or general affairs, while the feet might be different financial duties, and the head might be the RE teacher or minister. You may assign several roles to one part of the body.
4. OPTIONAL: Beside each role, using a different color, write down the name(s) of who does this in your church! Write as many as you can, including your own names. You may need to go out and interview different members for this part, to see what they do for the church! *(Teachers: This is a good optional step for your students to get to know who does what in the church, and to learn the names of different church members who they may or may not already know. It can also help them to gain a greater appreciation for the many different jobs that are required to run a church.)*

Memory Verse

"Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?'" (Judges 4:14a)

Meanings

1. God fights for us

For Barak, the hardest part of the fight may very well have been plucking up the courage to go into the battle. This is because when he got there, the Lord had already done the hard work for him! Every day is a spiritual battle for us, but we can take comfort in the fact that God has already gone out before us. When we are weak, we can rely on His strength.

2. Encourage each other in Christ

Barak may have been hesitant at first, but Deborah's words encouraged him to take up his weapons and fight as the Lord commanded. We should also learn how to encourage our brethren when they are feeling weak or down in their faith, not just with our words, but also with our actions. Just as Deborah went into battle with Barak to support him, we also need to help our brothers and sisters by supporting them in their own spiritual battles.

Conclusion

Deborah has set an example for how we should treat our service to God. We should always put God first in our lives and learn to commit ourselves to His service. Deborah also teaches us some very good lessons about how we should treat our co-workers. To encourage them, we shouldn't just stop at our words, but show our care through our actions. In addition, when serving the Lord, we should learn how to humbly work together with others in peace and unity, without jostling for power or trying to give our responsibilities to someone else. With God's strength and power, the holy work we do will make both ourselves and the church grow in Christ.



Figure 1: Army movements in the Battle of Deborah.¹

¹ Logos Bible Software, 2007

Lesson 2 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What does the memory verse teach us about our spiritual battles?
We can take comfort in God's strength and power. When we are weak, we can rely on Him.
2. " _____ not, for I am with you; be not _____, for I am your God. I will _____ you, yes, I will _____ you, I will _____ you with My righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)
Fear, dismayed, strengthen, help, uphold.
3. "But now God has set the _____, each one of them, in the _____ just as He pleased. But now indeed there are _____, yet _____."
(1 Corinthians 12:18, 20)
members, body, many members, one body
4. How should we encourage our brethren when they are weak in spirit or fighting a spiritual battle?
Like Deborah, we should join them in their spiritual battles, not just in our prayers or in words, but let our actions prove our intentions and willingly help them through the task or trial that they are facing.
5. Explain in your own words what Deborah and Barak teach us about working effectively with others.
See Life Application: Working Effectively with Others.
6. If you had a dispute with a co-worker in church, how would you resolve it?
Personal answers.