

Deborah and Barak

Bible Background • [Judges 4-5](#)
Printed Text • [Judges 4:1-10](#)
Devotional Reading • [Hebrews 11:29-40](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: GRASP the changing leadership dynamics during the time of Deborah; EMPATHIZE with Barak’s sense of inadequacy and Deborah’s sense of confidence; and WELCOME godly counsel and be willing to share such wisdom with others.



Placing his dinner on the dinner table, Reggie mechanically mumbled his grace while filling his mouth and checking email. He was feeling pretty beat up after his first week teaching. The kids had given him a run for his money as they challenged his authority and made things hard for the other students. Reggie was beginning to wonder whether he had made the right decision to teach kids in the inner city. Was this his idea or God’s? After a day like this, he was beginning to think it was his idea. Maybe he had bitten off more than he could chew. As he looked through his email, he noticed a message from his granddad, with the subject line “Stand and see.”

Curious, he opened the mail and read: “You are teaching today’s youth like your granddad. I couldn’t be more proud of you if I tried. But teaching has changed, and I’m guessing New Bern, North Carolina is very different from the Bronx. I’m sure the last few days in your own classroom has taught you this much (ha ha). Know that I’m praying for you, son. I’m guessing right now you might have some questions and concerns of your own. I’m imagining that you’re wondering if you are in God’s will. Right?”

“Well, I have a word from the Lord— ‘Stand still, and see.’ That’s all, ‘Stand, and see.’”

God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things so that He might receive the glory. When has God challenged you to do something out of your comfort zone?

Keep in Mind

“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”
(from [Judges 4:9](#)).

KJV

Judges 4:1 And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead.

2 And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in Harosheth of the Gentiles.

3 And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.

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 com-manded, 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.

NLT

Judges 4:1 After Ehud's death the Israelites again did evil in the Lord's sight.

2 So the LORD turned them over to King Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-haggoyim.

3 Sisera, who had 900 iron chariots, ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help.

4 Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet who was judging Israel at that time.

5 She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment.

6 One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. She said to him, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: Call out 10,000 warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor.

7 And I will call out Sisera, commander of Jabin’s army, along with his chariots and war-riors, to the Kishon River. There I will give you victory over him.”

8 Barak told her, “I will go, but only if you go with me.”

9 “Very well,” she replied, “I will go with you. But you will receive no honor in this venture, for the LORD’s victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

10 At Kedesh, Barak called together the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, and 10,000 warriors went up with him. Deborah also went with him.

The People, Places, and Times

Deborah. Deborah, whose name means “honeybee,” was a leader, wife, prophetess, and poet. Her responsibilities included settling disputes and offering advice and guidance to leaders like Barak. She was a woman of influence and power, whose decision- making was a marked contrast to that of Jephthah and Samson, who judged Israel after her. Jephthah made a vow in an attempt to manipulate God ([Judges 11:29–40](#)); Samson struggled with lust and devoted himself to a prostitute ([Judges 16:1](#)). As a woman, Deborah demonstrated fidelity to her husband and to those whom she led. Perhaps she heard disputes under her palm tree because it was inappropriate for a man to visit a woman in her house.

Barak. Barak, whose name means “lightning,” initially hesitated to accept his call to fight against Sisera. He later led ten thousand warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun into battle against the Canaanites. However, he accepted Deborah’s call to battle only after she agreed to accompany him. Regardless, he is listed in [Hebrews 11:32](#) as a hero of faith.

Sisera. Sisera was the general of the Canaanite king Jabin’s soldiers. He was possibly a Hurrian, a people known as expert chariot fighters in the Late Bronze Age. Well-prepared and equipped, he relied on his nine hundred chariots of iron and a host of soldiers.

Background

Israel lived comfortably in peace after Ehud’s triumph over Moab ([Judges 3:12–30](#)). Then they were forced into survival mode by Canaanite troops. Cities previously destroyed by Joshua had been rebuilt as the Canaanites grew stronger. People previously conquered by the Israelites now ruled and demanded tribute.

Deborah stood to speak for God during challenging times. Without a similar model or mentor, she assumed a role generally filled by men, and rose up to initiate a fight, motivate an army, and encourage a leader.

Barak did not allow Deborah's gender to cloud his response. He answered the call and partnered with Deborah to lead the army.

In Depth

1. Sisera's Oppression ([Judges 4:1-3](#))

Once again, after a brief time of peace and safety, the Israelites had gone back to worshipping the gods of their neighbors. This would result in their being oppressed by those same people. God would not tolerate their idolatry and unfaithfulness. They were His people, and He expected them to be loyal to Him.

After Ehud died, the Israelites fell into the hands of Jabin, the king of Canaan. He oppressed the Israelites through his general Sisera, who had nine hundred iron chariots at his command. This definitely placed him at an advantage as the Israelites had no chariots or iron weapons. To go against Sisera would be suicide.

2. Deborah's Inspiration (vv. 4-7)

The Lord would not break His covenant with His people. He raises up an unlikely leader in Deborah. Considering the patriarchal culture of the time, Deborah's leadership as a woman is unusual. She is a prophetess and a judge, speaking God's Word and enforcing His laws and wisdom. Deborah was a formidable leader during this time of oppression and chaos.

Deborah receives inspiration from God, and calls out Barak to lead Israel against Sisera. Not only does she challenge him to fight for Israel's freedom, she also commits to join him in battle, leading Sisera right into Barak's hands.

3. Barak's Hesitation (vv. 8-10)

Barak is not as confident as Deborah. His response shows that he doesn't believe the Lord has really chosen him to lead. He is hesitant to join Deborah in her plan against Sisera. What he doesn't realize is that the plan is not just Deborah's, but God's.

Barak lets Deborah know that he will go only if she does. His faith is not in God, but Deborah's leadership. He doesn't realize that God is the deciding factor; his advantage over Sisera is not Deborah, but that God will be with him. As a result, Deborah informs him that because of his hesitation and fear, the honor of victory will go to a woman, not to him. His personal lack of faith resulted in being dishonored by God and not receiving personal victory.

Search the Scriptures

1. How did having iron chariots help Sisera and his army dominate the Israelites in warfare ([Judges 4:3](#))?
2. What feeling motivated the response Barak gave to Deborah after she challenged him to lead Israel into battle (v. 8)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What things in our lives can make us feel inadequate to respond to God's call?
2. What are the differences between confidence in God and self-reliance?

Lesson in Our Society

Like the Israelites, Christians engaged in spiritual warfare can sometimes follow a cycle of apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance. The cycle occurs when Christians value their own strength and capabilities over dependence on God. Doubt and over-reliance on something other than God will eventually cause Christians to fall, becoming ensnared in bondage.

Times for courage can be instances where we have to deliver bad news, such as: you did not get the job, you are fired, I'm taking away your cell phone for a week. Focusing on our-selves or the situation rather than God's prom-ises can lead to anxiety, doubt, and even panic. Instead, choose to believe God's message, reach out for fellowship, and accept good advice when it is offered.

Make It Happen

Christian leadership begins with a call—a sense that God has a specific role or task for each Christian to accomplish (Romans 12). God prepared Barak for his battle with Sisera and raised him up to be a general. Similarly, He prepares each believer to accomplish specific tasks. What role has God prepared you for?

The call originates with God, and confidence to accomplish the task begins in us. We grow in confidence by making time to meditate on the Bible's promises, even just by repeating them over and over to ourselves.

More Light on the Text

1 John 4:1-10

1 And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead. 2 And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in the Harosheth of the Gentiles.

God "sold" Israel, or handed Israel over as one would a slave, because of their disobedience. The word translated "sold" (Heb. *makar*, **mah-KAR**) is a common word, also used for selling things like oxen or slaves. Thus the people became merchandise, liable to be sold if no longer useful to their owner. This could also be read to mean that God surrendered them to the enemy, or sent them away from His presence. He sold them "into the hand" of a human being, implying dominion, forced fellowship, or labor joined with pain caused by misuse of power. Note the progression: They left the hand of God, were sold or transferred into a human hand, and were given over into the hands of the nations. In other words, God would allow Jabin and his people to

oppress Israel as punishment for sin. This action is the essence of what the Bible means by reaping what you sow ([Galatians 6:7–8](#)). Whenever we disobey God, we voluntarily place ourselves outside of His will. Thus, without God’s protection, we will suffer from harmful situations as natural consequences or from His punishment (see [Hebrews 12:5–7](#)).

The city of Hazor was located within the land of the tribe of Naphtali. Hazor was near the eastern border of the territory of Naphtali west of the Jordan River. The land of the tribe of Zebulun was adjacent to the southwest border of Naphtali. Both of these tribal territories were in the northern area of the promised land. Obviously, non-Hebrew people lived on the land which had been captured by Israel under Joshua. Therefore, Sisera’s base of operations in Harosheth was located among the northern tribes of Israel, and he could easily reach out to torment them. The king named Jabin in this text is a descendant of another king, also named Jabin, who had previously been defeated by Joshua (see [Joshua 11:1, 10](#)). This passage is a continuation of the cycle of rebellion, punishment, and restoration recurring throughout the book of Judges.

3 And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.

Sisera had a great advantage in battle; he commanded many iron chariots. His men could drive through a swarm of Israelite foot soldiers and kill them with swords or trample them with their horses. They also had sharp blades attached to the wheels to injure their enemies. Sisera’s men were therefore less vulnerable because of their iron protection. The mismatch in weaponry evidently favored Sisera greatly, because for “twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.”

Seeing their plight, Israel begged the God whom they had rejected to help them. One might wonder if they tacked a familiar refrain onto their plea, something like, “Lord, if You help us out of this jam, we’ll never disobey You again.” Many Christians have said those words only to repeat the same destructive behavior again and again. Some things never change.

We see the reaction that will become a dominant theme of the book of Judges: “the children of Israel cried unto the LORD.” The word “cry” here is more than shedding tears of regret. The Hebrew for “they cried” has as its root the word tsa’ak (tsaw-AK), which means “to shriek or cry out in pain.” The contextual use of this word shows that this kind of proclamation of hurt often calls others’ attention. One could read this verse as “they cried out bitterly” or “with a bitter cry.”

Note that the reason for the Israelites’ mighty cry—this shrieking, deep sobbing, convulsion of the whole body of Israel that shook heaven’s door—was the enemy’s might (Heb. khozkah, khoze-KAH), which was grounded in technological superiority. However, their power was not actually due to their technology, but because the Lord had allowed them to prevail over Israel. Israel was so overwhelmed by the war machine of Jabin and Sisera that they had to cry out to the Lord. As the passage suggests, after they had walked out of God’s hand into the hand of their enemy, they found themselves without a place to stand.

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.

Deborah is introduced to us right away as a “prophetess” (Heb. *’ishshah nebi’ah*, ish-SHAH ne-vee-YAH), literally “a woman prophet.” A prophet spoke on behalf of God to the people (cf. [Deuteronomy 18:15–22](#)). Up to this point in Israel’s history, Moses was the most eminent of the prophets. Joshua was never referred to as a prophet, since his work was not to reveal new words from the Lord but to lead Israel in obedience to what the Lord had commanded through Moses. By reading that the Lord is speaking again to His people through a human spokesperson, the reader’s hopes are raised that perhaps once again the Lord will do something great to deliver His people, just as when He revealed Himself through Moses.

At the time this story takes place, Deborah was already in a position of leadership. Her work is described as “judging” (Heb. *shafat*, shah-FOT), which could include acting as a lawgiver, arbiter, or governor.

Deborah is unique among the judges in that she is identified not as the one whom God chose to be a deliverer, but the messenger to that deliverer (Barak). The reference to Deborah’s location under the palm tree could mean several different things. Her home might have been located at that certain spot, or she could have held court outdoors there. The Hebrew word translated “dwelt” (*yashab*, **yah-SHAV**) can mean either “to sit” or “to dwell.” Essentially the narrative is saying that she spent a lot of time under that particular tree.

The passage tells us that the Israelites came to Deborah for “judgment” (Heb. *mishpat*, **mish-POT**). The Hebrew wording has led many commentators to assume that Deborah was known as a judge in the legal sense. However, the story emphasizes her role as God’s spokesperson by calling her a prophetess and emphasizing the command for Barak that she received from the Lord.

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 cap-tain of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand.

Verse 6 contains all the biographical information we have on Barak. His father is not mentioned in any other context, but we do know that Kedeshnaphtali was in the north of Israel and most likely would have been under the oppression of Jabin.

The word rendered “Hath not” (Heb. *halo*, ha-LOH) is probably better understood as “behold” or “indeed.” Deborah is not assuming that Barak has already heard from God about what he is supposed to do. By every indication, this is the first time Barak has received this message. Deborah gives him the message, however, in a way that prophets commonly gave messages from God: with words that carry authority and demand a resolute answer.

Mount Tabor rises steeply 1,843 feet above sea level at the northeast corner of the Jezreel Valley, and forces stationed on it could easily control one of the most important crossroads in the region. Tabor also offered the advantage of being a prominent landmark, and the forces Barak summoned would have no confusion about where to make their stand. Essentially, God was

telling Barak to use his forces to defiantly take control of the strategic high ground, forcing the enemy to come to him. Note that God provided the leader as well as the strategy.

Naphtali and Zebulun were regions subject to the oppressive rule of Jabin, king of Canaan. Hazor (Jabin's capital city) and Harosheth (Sisera's home city) straddled these two areas—Hazor to the northeast of Naphtali, and Harosheth to the southwest of Zebulun.

God tells Barak that He will draw Sisera and his army to the Kishon River. Evidently, Sisera will hear that the Israelites have taken control of Mount Tabor and move to put down their uprising. The key to Sisera's military power is his possession of 900 iron chariots, something the Israelites had encountered before and found to be intimidating (cf. [Joshua 17:16](#); [Judges 1:19](#)). These chariots were seen as so threatening that the Israelites had lived under Jabin's domination for twenty years (4:3). Chariots were state-of-the-art technology at the time, and the thought of opposing a chariot was understandably terrifying to the ordinary infantryman—not that different, perhaps, from an infantryman of our time opposing a tank. A chariot had the advantage in speed, weight, armor, and height.

The Kishon River flows through the Jezreel Valley, a wide plain known for its extremely fertile soil. For most of the year, the Kishon is fed only by springs, and its waters are too minimal to be used for irrigation. During the winter rains, however, the Kishon can become a raging torrent, and large sections of the plain turn to mud.

The Lord not only called Barak to lead the people of Israel against Jabin, but promised to accomplish the task for him—literally, “give” or “deliver” (Heb. *natan*, **nah-TAHN**) him into Barak's hands. Of course, the Lord had already promised to fight for His people if they were faithful to drive out the other peoples living in the Promised Land. Ironically, God had used the same language in His promise to give the enemy over to the Israelites when Joshua had contemplated his assault on Hazor ([Joshua 11:8–13](#)). God had been faithful then, and Joshua had completely destroyed Hazor and burned it to the ground.

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 hesitated at the task given to him. Even with 10,000 men in his army, the Canaanite force was clearly superior. Barak was not the first or last leader God chose for Israel who hesitated to obey: recall Moses ([Exodus 3:11](#)) and Gideon ([Judges 6:15](#)).

We must not be too quick to judge Barak for his reluctance. [Hebrews 11:32–33](#) includes Barak and Gideon in a list of courageous men and women who acted in great faith, trusting God to do miraculous things to deliver His people. And we must remember that Barak was not asking any ordinary woman to accompany him. As a prophetess, Deborah was a representative of God Himself. Perhaps Barak's request was rooted in his recognition that mere military might would not suffice to win the battle that lay ahead. He knew that victory would require God's direct intervention. In other words, he was willing to step out in faith, but not sign up for a suicide mission.

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's promise to go with Barak at this place in the story is astounding because it comes at the point when God normally promises His presence with the leader He is sending (cf. [Exodus 3:12](#); [Joshua 1:5](#); [Judges 6:16](#)). It seems best to understand the promise of her presence as the promise of God's presence, given to help Barak in his weakness. God has repeatedly shown that He is willing to accommodate the weakness of His chosen instruments (cf. [Deuteronomy 7:7](#), [9:4–6](#)). Nevertheless, Barak should have known that God had promised to drive out the Canaanites for the Israelites if only they were faithful to continue to fight (cf. [Joshua 13:6](#), [23:5](#)).

Deborah's displeasure with Barak's hesitation is obvious in her prediction that Barak will not gain glory on this mission. In a touch of beautiful irony, since he has refused to go unless a woman accompanies him, a yet unnamed and unknown woman will gain the glory.

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.

Ten thousand might sound like a large number of troops to the modern reader. By comparison, however, the Canaanite army had 900 chariots, each manned by two soldiers, and most likely an infantry to boot. The implication is that the Canaanite army was vast—several times the size of Barak's force. Indeed, when Joshua first conquered Hazor, its king conscripted troops from the many outlying cities and villages in his realm. He succeeded in assembling an army “like the sand on the sea-shore” ([Joshua 11:1–5](#)). Note also that Gideon was able to muster 32,000 men—three times more than Barak—when he prepared for his attack on the armies of Midian ([Judges 7:3](#)). From this we can surmise that more people could have joined in the fight against Sisera, but God made it a point that He only called for a force of 10,000 against a technologically superior force—and He won.

Say It Correctly

Sisera. **SI**-sur-ah.

Harosheth. kha-**ROW**-sheth.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

An Angel Rebukes Israel's Faithlessness

[\(Judges 2:1-5\)](#)

TUESDAY

Joshua's Death Ends an Era

[\(Judges 2:6-10\)](#)

WEDNESDAY

The People Lose God's Protection

[\(Judges 2:16-23\)](#)

THURSDAY

Ode to Israel's Faithful Judges

[\(Hebrews 11:29-40\)](#)

FRIDAY

Victory Song of the Divine Warrior

[\(Judges 5:1-5\)](#)

SATURDAY

Jael Defeats the Enemy Leader, Sisera

[\(Judges 5:24-27\)](#)

SUNDAY

Deborah, Prophetess, Judge, and Commander

[\(Judges 4:1-10\)](#)