

Barak

The Point: Your service to God is valuable, no matter who gets the credit.

Session Passages: Judges 4:4-8,12-16; 5:1-5

Judges 4:4-8

Connection to The Point: Deborah called Barak to a specific role of leadership, but he did not want to do it alone.

The Setting. Between Joshua's conquest of Canaan and Israel's first king, judges provided guidance for Israel. The judges, more properly understood as magistrates or rulers rather than ones who judged in the sense of trying a case, provided leadership to Israel during this period of general anarchy and confusion. God would raise up a judge to authority during times when enemies invaded and oppressed Israel, and his or her authority extended only over those tribes who acknowledged it.

Judges 4 begins with the death of Ehud, the left-handed assassin judge, who had freed Israel by stabbing Eglon, the king of Moab (3:15-30). This brought about an eighty-year period of peace in Israel. However, the Israelites returned to wickedness. God sold His disobedient people to King Jabin and the Canaanites who oppressed them for the next twenty years. Finally, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

Deborah, a prophetess (v. 4). God used a courageous woman to rally Israel from its spiritual lethargy and lead them as the only female judge of His people. While not seen as radical in today's climate, such an idea would have been unthinkable in a male dominated society like that of ancient Israel. Identified as a *prophetess*, Deborah filled a role not exclusively reserved to men. Prophets of the Old Testament served to speak for God to the people. Therefore, the writer of Judges deliberately placed her in the succession of Moses (Deut. 18:15-22) and alongside three other Old Testament women (Miriam, Ex. 15:20; Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14; and Isaiah's unnamed wife, Isa. 8:3). The biblical accounts of these four prophetesses reflect positive images.

The wife of Lappidoth (v. 4). *Lappidoth* means flames or torches, which has led some to describe Deborah as a woman of splendor or lights, alluding to her prophetic office. However, most concur that *Lappidoth* was Deborah's husband's name.

Judging/Leading/Judged Israel (v. 4). Hearing that Deborah acted as God's spokesperson, having her described as judging/leading Israel might catch the reader off guard. No other woman served Israel in such a role.

Sit under the palm tree/Held court under the Palm of Deborah/Dwelt under the palm tree (v. 5). Deborah held court beneath a palm tree. This might conjure an image of a lightweight leader. However, sitting (the verb translated "dwelt" frequently is translated "sit"; Gen. 18:1; 27:19; Judg. 3:20) suggested the formal sense of performing professional duties as judge or leader of Israel.

Between Ramah and Bethel (v. 5). Pinpointing the exact location of the palm tree of Deborah can come no closer than somewhere in the hill country of Ephraim. This would have made her accessible to the entire nation while still situated far enough away from the eventual battle area with the Canaanites.

The Israelites went up to her to settle disputes/have their disputes decided/The children of Israel came up to her for judgment (v. 5). In a way similar to Moses, Deborah probably would not have settled every matter in the nation but would have had community elders handle the more routine matters at a local level. She would have dealt with the more difficult issues. However since she is identified as a prophetess, the Israelites might have come to her for spiritual direction and answers as well.

Barak (v. 6). Deborah, likely in response to the Israelite cries for help, summonsed Barak, whose name meant "lightning," to recruit troops from Zebulun and Naphtali to engage in a campaign against the Canaanites. Interestingly, Canaanite mythology saw Baal as riding on storm clouds. Often in depictions, he held a spear of lightning in one hand; in the other, a club of thunder. God would completely destroy the Canaanite's god in the ensuing attack. Surprisingly, the writer of Hebrews commended Barak's faith without mentioning Deborah (Heb. 11:32).

"Go, deploy the troops/Go, take with you ten thousand men' "Go and . . . take with thee ten thousand men (v. 6). Although the text does not mention that Deborah had received any explicit orders from the Lord, we understand she was delivering His message when she faced Barak with a rhetorical question/His instructions in prophetic language: "Hasn't the

*LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you*Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded?The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you.” Her words were intended to encourage Barak to carry out the attack without question. The command also included the strategy: ten thousands troops from Naphtali and Zebulun were to be placed on Mount Tabor. This mountain gave Israel a strategic advantage of controlling one of the most important crossroads in the region and would have provided a place of relative safety from the Canaanite chariots.

“ I will lurelead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army’ ”I will draw unto thee . . . Sisera, the captain of Jabin’s army (v. 7). Deborah continued the Lord’s message to Barak with His promise that God would remain in sovereign control of the battle by luring all the enemy’s forces into a trap at the **Wadiriver Kishon River**. While normally a dry flat plain, this wadi or gullyriver exploded when the rains fell. God’s strategy included sending heavy rains (5:20-21), muddying the battlefield and bogging down the Canaanite chariots.

“ I will hand him over to you. . . give him into your hands’ ”I will deliver him into thine hand (v. 7). The Lord promised victory to Barak and his army. Even with God’s assurance that He would defeat Sisera, Barak would still have to respond in obedience.

“If you will go with me, I will go”If thou wilt go with me, then I will go (v. 8). Despite the Lord’s guarantee of victory, Barak resisted. He hemmed and hawed by saying he would not go unless Deborah accompanied him, possibly mistrusting his ability to carry out the command of God. He wanted the presence of the prophetess to infuse him with spiritual confidence.

Judges 4:12-16

Connection to The Point. Deborah encouraged Barak to move forward, reminding him that God’s hand was with him.

It was reported to SiseraWhen they told Sisera**They shewed Sisera (v. 12).** Although the writer of Judges did not include a spy narrative, someone had scoped out information on Barak’s movements and reported it to Sisera.

Sisera summoned all his nine hundred iron chariots and all the troopsSisera summoned . . . **all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron**Sisera gathered together **all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people that were with him (v. 13).** Sisera responded immediately by rounding up his chariots and men to prepare for battle. Iron chariots were sometimes armed with iron scythes, projecting from the axle on either side, that would have easily cut down opposing warriors. However, Sisera had no way of knowing that God had prearranged this showdown (v. 7) and that it would end in his defeat.

Harosheth of the NationsGentile**Haggoyim (v. 13).** Sisera mustered his army from his hometown (v. 2). The name means “forest land of the Gentiles.”

“Go! This is the day the LORD has handed Sisera over to yougiven **Sisera into your hands”Up; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand (v. 14).** Deborah ordered Barak to carry out their Commanding Officer’s instructions and move out in battle, for the Lord had already secured the victory. The full contingent of ten thousand troops dutifully followed Barak down from Mount Tabor to the valley below. Descending to the valley required a wonderful act of faith on the part of Barak as he marched his greatly disadvantaged army against the enemy’s chariots.

The LORD threw Sisera, all his charioteers, and all his army into a panicThe LORD routed **Sisera and all his chariots and army**The LORD **discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host (v. 15).** Even before Barak and his ten thousand troops could begin their assault, the Lord launched His attack on Israel’s enemy. Had Sisera suspected any kind of bad weather, he would not have taken his chariots to the fields. The Canaanites’ tactical advantage went down the drain as God threw Sisera and all his army into a panicked confusion by sending an unseasonable and violent downpour just as Barak’s infantry charged down from Mount Tabor. The fierce rainstorm caused the Wadiriver Kishon River to overflow and turned the battlefield into a sea of mud crippling the chariots and their ability to mow down the Israelites. Considering that the Canaanite god Baal was the god of the thunderstorm, the sudden storm would have increased the superstitious Canaanite warriors’ panic. They likely would have surmised that Baal, whom they worshiped and believed controlled the storms, had been overcome by the God of Israel.

The Hebrew verb translated as “threw . . . into a panicrouteddiscomfited” means to bring into motion and confusion. Previously when the Egyptians attempted to follow the Israelites through the Red Sea, God caused their chariot wheels to swerve bringing about panic and confusion before the water covered them (Ex. 14:24-28).

Sisera left his chariot and fled on footSisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot**Sisera lighted down off his chariot, and fled away on his feet (v. 15).** With his chariot bogging down, Sisera had no choice but to jump and make a run

for it. Deserting his troops, he hotfooted it towards the tents of Heber the Kenite who had friendly relations with Jabin. However, Heber's wife, Jael, apparently did not share her husband's allegiance to Jabin. She kindly offered Sisera refuge in her tent, where he met his death (vv. 17-21).

Barak pursued (v. 16). Barak chased the broken and routed Canaanite troops westward, all the way to Sisera's home base in Harosheth of the NationsGentileHaggoyim. However, Sisera eluded capture and escaped the stampede by heading in a different direction that he hoped would be more friendly confines.

The whole army of Sisera fell by the sword; not a single man was leftAll Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was leftAll the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left (v. 16). So the battlefield now stretched over about fifteen miles from Mount Tabor toward Harosheth of the NationsGentileHaggoyim as the Israelites spilled Canaanite blood across the entire valley. Not even one enemy combatant survived, thus satisfying the call of holy war against the inhabitants of Canaan. This fulfilled God's promise as delivered to Barak through Deborah (v. 7). Therefore, she played an important role in the victory as she encouraged Barak, building up his faith and that of his men.

Judges 5:1-5

Connection to The Point. Although Barak won the battle with Deborah's support, they gave the credit to God.

Jewish poetic celebration. The Jewish people often expressed themselves in song to celebrate special occasions (Ex. 15:1-18; Deut. 31:30-32:43; 2 Sam. 1:17-27; as well as many of the psalms). Jewish poetic celebration often include hyperbole such as the stars fighting for the Israelites as in Judges 5:20. After reporting the gruesome details of the battle and Sisera's death, Judges shifts to a time of reflection and praise to the Lord. In essence, Judges 5 records an original historical hymn featuring a call to national unity to commemorate and celebrate the victory of the previous chapter. Like other Jewish celebration hymns, the emphasis focused on God Himself.

On that day Deborah and Barak . . . sangThen sang Deborah and Barak . . . on that day (v. 1). *On that day* suggests an extemporaneous celebratory response to God for the victory given to Israel. This day marked a new day of freedom from twenty years of Canaanite oppression. That should have made all of Israel ready to sing! By noting that Deborah and Barak *sang*, the writer distinguished it formally from the preceding narrative. The song bears the marks of typical Hebrew poetry. The writer reflected a lesser role for Barak by naming him after Deborah though he joined her in voicing its theme.

When the leaders lead . . . when the people volunteerWhen the princes . . . take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselvesWhen the people willingly offered themselves (v. 2). Deborah took the lead as did Barak after she urged him and agreed to go with him. When they led, ten thousand warriors followed. Deborah recognized the necessary involvement of the leadership. When leaders lead as they should, people will follow their lead even against impossible odds. The song commended the people for offering themselves freely to God in the holy war against the Canaanites. In so doing, they looked head-on at an enemy equipped with the latest weapons of modern technology, including almost one thousand iron chariots.

When the leaders leadWhen the princes . . . take the lead (v. 2). The phrase in the original language addresses the unbinding or loosing of hair and may point to the Nazirite practice of allowing the hair to grow long as an outward sign of dedication to the Lord. In other words, like Nazirites, leaders voluntarily set aside their normal life routines and dedicated themselves to serving the Lord.

Blessed bePraise ye the LORD (v. 2). Normally the superior one bestowed blessing on the lesser. When the Lord receives blessing from His people, they are acknowledging Him as the source of blessing. Deborah and Barak recognized the Lord's hand in the fact the people had willingly volunteered for battle.

Listen, kings! Pay attention, princes!Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes (v. 3). Since Israel had no kings or princes, Deborah and Barak addressed the rulers of the heathen nations (Ps. 2:2). They summoned neighboring kings and princes to listen in the sense of hearing and heeding how the Lord received the praise due His name. A command followed to listen carefully to what the song said. Both commands suggested the language of a teacher addressing students, urging them to discern the mighty acts of the Lord God of Israel and to fear Him. In this way, they might understand and take to heart what He had done for Israel and learn not to oppress God's people. Although obviously not present, the defeated Canaanites would hardly have relished in the jubilant message of this song. Rather, hearing these triumphant words would have felt like Deborah and Barak had continued the insult by rubbing salt in their wounds.

I will sing to the LORD; I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel, even I, will sing to the Lord; I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel (v. 3). Deborah and Barak's enthusiasm continued. The first person singular pronoun may indicate Deborah's authorship of at least this part of the song. These phrases indicate her challenge for Israel to bless God with the praise due Him by joining in her singing. Her focus on singing and making music to the Lord set the tone for the entire song. Later the song included scenes of Jael (vv. 6,24-27) and Sisera's mother (vv. 28-30), yet the focus pointed toward praising God, not any human hero.

LORD, when you came from Seir, when you marched from the fields of EdomWhen you, LORD, went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of EdomLORD, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom (v. 4). God is seen, not as their present deliverer, but as the God who had exerted His miraculous power by marching forth from Seir and Edom to deliver His people from Egypt and into the promised land. Seir identified an ancestor of an ethnic group associated with the Horites, who lived in the hill country of Seir (Gen. 14:6). By the time the Israelites came out of Egypt, the Edomites (descendants of Jacob's twin brother, Esau), had displaced the Horites and taken over the territory. This area extended along the south from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba. This tacit allusion to Moses and the exodus recalled its gracious significance in relation to the people of Israel. Deborah and Barak's poetic description focused on God renewing the commitment to help His people that He had promised to them generations before in the wilderness.

The earth trembled, the skies poured rain, and the clouds poured waterThe earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down waterThe earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water (v. 4). The song continued the poetic description of the Lord's descent to the earth as all nature convulsed as God acted. God made His presence known as He passed through the heavens with such strength that the earth shook and the clouds released their water. Again, such phenomena should have reminded the people of when God descended upon Sinai at the time of Moses. These descriptions gave powerful poetic expression to the belief that the miraculous storm that threw Sisera's army into panic and retreat was not a mere natural event. No, the same God who had rescued Israel in the past had come again to save His people.

The mountains melted before the LORD, even SinaiThe mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of SinaiThe mountains melted from before the Lord, even that Sinai (v. 5). Melting mountains alluded to the floods of water pouring out of the clouds and flowing in a mighty stream to the lower grounds, carrying part of the mountain with it. Nature knows its Creator and bows before Him. The psalmist said, "The mountains melt like wax at the presencebefore of the LORDThe hills melted like wax at the presence of the LORD" (Ps. 97:5). If Sinai could not bear the presence of God when Israel camped there, the mountains of the idolatrous Canaanites could only melt and tremble before Him.

Before the LORD, the God of Israel (v. 5). Israel, who entered into a covenant relationship with the Lord at Sinai, needed to know He would fulfill His promises to them in Canaan. The nation had become fascinated with Baal, which brought on their crisis. Even so, the Lord, not Baal, marched through the clouds to rescue His people.