

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 4:1-5:31**

To learn about Deborah and Barak.

## A Song to Remember

Songs have served a lot of purposes throughout history, but more often than anything else they were written to commemorate some special event. Songs memorialize important moments. Think of your favorite hymn; it memorializes the work of Christ on the cross, redemption, forgiveness, or some other aspect of God's interaction with us. Consider *The Star-Spangled Banner*; it is Francis Scott Key's account of the bombardment of Fort McHenry by British ships of the Royal Navy in Baltimore Harbor during the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812. Songs remind us of the details or significance of special events in human history.

In today's study we will cover Deborah, the only female judge in the book of Judges. Her story includes several other key characters as well, and covers the span of not one, but two chapters. However, the division of chapters makes a lot more when you understand how they are organized. Chapter 4 is the narrative of her story with key details of how the events unfolded, whereas chapter 5 is a song, "sung by Deborah and Barak" (Jdg. 5:1), commemorating the work of God through her as a judge. It calls to memory other aspects of these events that help inform the larger story.

## Deborah

Deborah's narrative begins in the same way as Othniel and Ehud: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died" (Jdg. 4:1). The repeated pattern of sin, repentance, saving, and restoration continues. This time, "the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned

in Hazor” (Jdg. 4:2a). We are also introduced to another important figure in this story connected to Jabin: “The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim” (Jdg. 4:2b). Below is a breakdown of the important figures and events.

### **DEBORAH**

Deborah (Heb. “Wasp, Hornet, Honeybee”) is the third or fourth judge (depending on whether or not you consider Shamgar a legitimate judge) in the book of Judges. Little is known about her other than that she is described as a, “prophetess, and the wife of Lapidoth” (Jdg. 4:4). She is, incidentally, the only judge described as a prophet, possibly because of her song she sings in chapter 5. It is also contested that she is, “the wife of Lapidoth.” The Hebrew can also be translated as, “fiery woman,” and given that the name Lapidoth is not a known Hebrew name and that Deborah is a prophetess and military force is sufficient reason to think she is more likely being called fiery, and not signified by her marriage. While very uncommon, it was not unlawful for a woman to be in the position that Deborah was in. It was, however, rare, which makes Deborah stand out in a class of her own in the story of the judges.

Judges presents a decline in judges as time passes, and one question that arises centers around Deborah. How can she be seen as, “less than?” It’s important to point out that Deborah’s presence in a declining line of judges is more of an indictment on Israel than her. Israel is seen as incapable of producing strong, Godly male leadership, and thus Deborah has to save them. It’s not that she is incapable or weak; by all accounts she seems to be one of if not the most qualified to judge. Israel is seen lacking, not her. This also speaks to the presence of women in leadership in general. Several New Testament passages are often weaponized to remove women from places of leadership, and proponents of these weak arguments fail to reckon with Deborah. How can God be against women leaders and simultaneously raise them up? Deborah’s role should shake our traditional notions of male and female leadership to the core.

### **BARAK**

Barak is a military leader (Jdg. 4:6-10), and under the direction of Deborah. Beyond that, he seems very committed to Deborah in that when she commands him to attack Jabin and Sisera, he is unwilling to go unless she accompanies him. His unwillingness is often viewed as an act of cowardice, but that should not be read into this passage. That Deborah is a prophetess is meaningful, and it would not be uncommon for a military leader to want the divine aid thought to be with the presence of a prophet. Interestingly (and puzzlingly), the list of the faithful heroes in Hebrews 11 includes Barak (Heb. 11:32), but omits Deborah.

### **JABIN**

Jabin was a Canaanite king, and an antagonist in the Deborah narrative. His name is apparently a Canaanite familial name since there are at least two different Jabin’s accounted for in the Old Testament, and both of them were kings in Canaan. The first Jabin shows up in opposition to Joshua in Joshua 11:1, while the Judges’ Jabin appears over a century later in opposition to Deborah.

### **SISERA**

While Jabin is king, the primary antagonist in the Deborah narrative is Sisera, Jabin’s commander of the Canaanite forces. Little is known of him other than that he is the commander of Jabin’s army, and he is from Harosheth-hagoyim, which likely means something like, “cultivated field of the Gentiles.” Interestingly, the “Sons of Sisera” appear much later in Old Testament history as temple servants returning from exile (Ezra 2:53; Neh. 7:55). They were perhaps descendants of Sisera who stayed and began lives with the Israelites.

**JAEL**

Jael is another unlikely hero of the story; she is a seemingly innocent woman who takes out a Canaanite commander! Jael is mentioned as, “the wife of Heber the Kenite.” The Kenite clan is introduced in Judges 1:16, when, “the descendants of the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah.” This is, yet again, another example of how the first 2 chapters of Judges is setting the stage for the events that will unfold in the main narrative of the book.

Jael’s position in this story is fascinating for more reasons than one. She is apart of a family that has made an alliance with Jabin: “For there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite” (Jdg. 4:17). The Kenites were actually an ally with Israel, and so that Heber has made an alliance with Canaan suggests not only that he has separated himself from the rest of his people, but has treated with the enemy. This would have invited hostility from both the Kenites and the Israelites, and so his alliance with the Canaanites was important for protection. Sisera, upon arriving in Heber’s camp, should have felt a sense of safety after being chased around by Barak, and it appears that he did; he lets his guard down completely. Jael woos Jabin into her tent, allows him to recline, covers him with a rug, and gives him milk to drink (Jdg. 4:18-20). The story takes a drastic turn, however, when Sisera falls asleep: “But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness, and so he died” (Jdg. 4:21).

Jael also fulfills an important role in the story set in motion by Deborah. When Barak refuses to go out against Sisera without Deborah, Deborah prophesies and says, “I will surely go with you, but nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Jdg. 4:9). The reader expects that woman to be Deborah given her role as prophetess and judge, but it is in fact a reference to Jael! The events of this story climax with the death of Sisera, and are followed by continued military success which eventually resulted in the destruction of the Canaanite king Jabin as well (Jdg. 4:24).

## The Song Explains A Lot

The song in chapter 5 is mostly declarative of the wonders of God in military might and power. Deborah and Barak recall what life was like, “In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael” (Jdg. 5:6). The song gives praise to God for His display of strength and dominion in a way not too unlike some of the Psalms. One of the details that is quite helpful for making sense of chapter 4, however, comes in verses 4 and 5. One of the things that made Sisera so powerful was the fact that he had at his disposal roughly, “900 chariots of iron” (Jdg. 4:13), which gave him a considerable tactical advantage against Israel. How did Israel manage to beat them given these circumstances? Judges 5:4 says, “LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.” It apparently rained, rendering the iron chariots useless! Beyond that, verse 5 goes on to say, “The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel.” It appears there were earthquakes as well, which would have made driving the chariots unpredictable. Chapter 5 helps us understand practically how God intervened and aided Israel in battle against a formidable foe. The result of Deborah’s intervention as judge was 40 years of rest (Jdg. 5:31).

## What About Now?

What can we take away from this story? For one, the call to bold leadership is not strictly a male call. While there are specific male restrictions to the position of elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). However, there are

various other leadership aspects in the church that include administration, teaching, hospitality, and evangelism, and those roles should remain open to both men and women. It's very difficult to make a case that God does not want women leaders without arguing that he's changed His mind, and that's a *very* bad argument to make. Another lesson we can glean from this story is that God will sometimes use natural causes to bring about divine plans. Sisera's army included 900 iron chariots, and so God simply caused rain and earthquakes. We talk a lot in Christian circles about how God will bring about His purposes, but rarely consider *how* He does it. Often it's through seemingly unsupernatural events.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Judges 4:1-10. Who are the central figures in this story? How long were the people oppressed by Jabin, king of Canaan? What did Deborah say to Barak? What was Barak's response? What was Deborah's warning to Barak?

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2. Read Judges 4:11-16. Who is Heber the Kenite, and according to the notes, what is unique about him? How did the events unfold between Barak and the Israelites and the Sisera and the Canaanites?

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### Day Two

1. Read Judges 4:17-22. To where did Sisera flee? Who is Jael? In your own words, describe the events that take place in Jael's tent.

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2. Read Judges 4:23-24. How does the conflict between Jabin and Israel end?

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### Day Three

1. Read Judges 5:1-5. Who sang the song in chapter 5? Why is the description of rain and earthquakes substantial to understanding chapter 4?

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2. Read Judges 5:6-11. Who is, "Shamgar, son of Anath?" (Hint: Session 3) What kind of things were happening during the days being described in this passage?

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## Day Four

1. Read Judges 5:12-22. What tribes are mentioned in this passage?

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2. Read Judges 5:23-31. How is Jael described in this passage? How does verse 31 summarize the grander picture of Israel and the people of God in general?

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## Week 4 Discussion: Unsupernatural Miracles

In chapter 5, we learned that God simply made it rain and caused earthquakes in order to render Jabin's 900 iron chariots useless. Often, when God intervenes with humanity to accomplish His plan, He does so in seemingly normal ways. Talk as a group about times when God has answered prayers of yours by simple, unordinary means (i.e. weather, traffic, interruptions, etc.).

1. Icebreaker: Has God ever answered a prayer of yours by proverbially causing it to rain? If so, talk about that experience, and how it strengthened your faith.
2. How often do you think God answers prayer through ordinary means and we don't even realize it or give Him credit for it?
3. How often do you pray for God to meet your needs in a supernatural way?
4. How often do you pray for God to meet your needs in an unsupernatural way?
5. Do you believe God operates more in the natural or supernatural arena? Why?
6. How can you better focus your attention on the seemingly normal things more regularly in order to be better in tune with the work of God?

## Takeaways:

1. The people of Israel fell under the judgment of Jabin, king of Canaan, and his army commander Sisera.
2. God raised up Deborah, and she enlisted her army commander Barak to fight them.
3. Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, is ultimately the one God used to destroy Sisera.

### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**