Deborah and Barak
Judges 4:1-10
SS Lesson for 06/04/2017

Devotional Scripture: Heb 11:29-40

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson reviews how God called and used Deborah and Barak. The study's aim is to learn that God often directs us through the words of other people. The study's application is to set our hearts on hearing the call of God and responding appropriately.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Judges 4:9

Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the Ark of the Covenant stood; and they are there to this day.

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The focus of attention switches to the Northern tribes (cf. 4:6; 5:14-15, 18) who were oppressed by a coalition of Canaanites united under Jabin of Hazor (4:2), apparently a descendant of King Hazor who was conquered by Joshua (Josh. 11:1-13). Unlike the preceding oppressions by foreign invaders, this one was instigated at the hands of the Canaanite population of the land, some of the same people that the Israelites had failed to drive out of northern Canaan (cf. Judges 1:30-33).

4:1. That the Israelites once again did evil indicated their continuing tailspin into the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites (cf. 2:19; 3:7, 12). This defection seems to have reappeared only after Ehud died, indicating his positive influence in leading the people as judge. The dating of this chapter with the judgeship of Ehud suggests that Shamgar’s deliverance of Israel (3:31) occurred during rather than after Ehud’s period of leadership.

4:2-3. About 200 years earlier the Lord had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Now, in contrast, He sold them into the hands of the Canaanites as punishment for their sins (cf. 2:14; 3:8; 1 Sam. 12:9). Jabin was probably a hereditary title (cf. a different Jabin in Josh. 11:1-13). Hazor (Tell el-Qedah) was the most important northern Canaanite stronghold in northern Galilee about 8-1/2 miles north of the Sea of Kinnereth (Galilee). Neither Hazor nor its king Jabin play an active role in the narrative in Judges 4-5, for attention is centered on Sisera, the Canaanite commander from Harosheth Hagoyim (cf. 4:13, 16) sometimes identified with Tell el-‘Amar (located by a narrow gorge where the Kishon River enters the Plain of Acre about 10 miles northwest of Megiddo). The Canaanite oppression was severe because of their superior military force, spearheaded by 900 iron chariots (cf. v. 13). The oppression lasted for 20 years, so that the Israelites again cried to the Lord for help.

4:4-5. Deborah (whose name means “honeybee”) was both a prophetess and a judge (she was leading Israel). She first functioned as a judge in deciding disputes at her court, located about 8 or 10 miles north of Jerusalem between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim. She was apparently an Ephraimitic though some have linked her with the tribe of Issachar (cf. 5:15). Nothing else is known about her husband Lappidoth (meaning “torch,” not to be identified with Barak, meaning “lightning”).

4:6-7. Deborah summoned Barak who was from the town of Kedesh in Naphtali, a city of refuge (Josh. 20:7), usually identified as Tel Qadesh, five miles west by northwest of Lake Huleh, close to the Canaanite oppressors in Galilee. An alternate site, Khirbet el-Kidish on the eastern edge of the Jabneel Valley, about a mile from the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, is more closely located to Mount Tabor where the army of Israel was mustered by Barak. Deborah, speaking as the Lord’s prophetess, commanded Barak to
muster 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them to Mount Tabor. Conical Mount Tabor rises to 1,300 feet and was strategically located at the juncture of the tribes of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar in the northeast part of the Jezreel Valley. (Issachar, not mentioned in this chapter, is mentioned in Judges 5:15.) Mount Tabor was a place of relative safety from the Canaanite chariots and a launching ground from which to attack the enemy below. The message from God informed Barak that He would be in sovereign control of the battle (I will lure Sisera... and give him into your hands).

4:8-9. Regardless of his motivation, Barak’s conditional reply to Deborah (if you don’t go with me, I won’t go) was an unfitting response to a command from God. Perhaps Barak simply wanted to be assured of the divine presence in battle, represented by His prophetess-judge Deborah. It is noteworthy that Barak is listed among the heroes of faith (Heb. 11:32). Deborah agreed to go but said that Barak’s conditional response to the divine command (the way you are going about this) was the basis for withholding the honor of victory over Sisera from Barak (the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman). Barak no doubt thought she meant herself, but the statement was prophetic, anticipating the role of Jael (Judges 4:21).

4:10-13. Accompanied by Deborah, Barak led 10,000 men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali... to Mount Tabor. Parenthetically (in anticipation of vv. 17-22), an explanation is given that the nomad, Heber the Kenite, had left his clan in southern Judah (cf. 1:16) and pitched his tent... near Kedesh. On Hobab as Moses’ brother-in-law (or father-in-law, NIV marg.), see Numbers 10:29. When Sisera heard of Barak’s action, he positioned his army with its 900 iron chariots (cf. Judges 4:3) near the Kishon River, probably in the vicinity of Megiddo or Taanach (cf. 5:19) in the Jezreel Valley.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

The period of the judges was a tumultuous time in Israel’s history. In disobedience to God, the Israelites had failed to fully displace the peoples of Canaan when they conquered the land, and the Lord used these pagan people to punish Israel when they turned away from the true God. In the particular case in Judges 4, the oppressors of Israel were the Canaanites, who, under their king Jabin and his military commander Sisera, gained control over Israel’s northern territories around the Sea of Galilee. After twenty years of oppression, the people of Israel finally cried out to the Lord, and He mercifully sent them help. The Lord first spoke to the Prophetess Deborah, telling her to inform a man named Barak to gather together ten thousand men at Mount Tabor so that the Lord could deliver Sisera into his hand. Barak’s response was that he would do as the Lord commanded him but only if Deborah accompanied him (Judg. 4:8). Deborah’s reply is found in our text. She agreed to go with Barak. But speaking prophetically, she declared that while he would be victorious, he would not receive all the glory for the victory, for Sisera ultimately would be killed by a woman. Deborah’s words seem to be a bit of a rebuke to Barak. And, in fact, Barak’s immediate obedience without conditions certainly would have demonstrated the kind of faith God wanted in His chosen deliverer. However, Barak was not without faith. We need to understand that Barak did not receive his instructions directly from the Lord but from the Lord’s prophetess. He probably wanted to make sure his source of divine guidance was not far from him during the battle. Deborah’s presence no doubt bolstered Barak’s faith. Yes, his faith should have been stronger, but if he had no faith at all, Deborah’s presence alone would not have been enough to move him to go to Kedesh to gather an army and meet the enemy.

We should also remember that, in spite of Barak’s shortcomings, the author of Hebrews lists him among the great Old Testament people of faith (11:32). And Hebrews offers no criticisms of him or the other flawed men and women of faith it lists in chapter 11. Did Barak have faith in God? Yes. He demonstrated this by going with Deborah, calling together an army, and waiting for the Lord to bring the enemy to him. The Lord gave him and Israel a great victory over Sisera and Jabin’s army, as well as deliverance from oppression (Judg. 4:10-24). Was Barak’s faith all that it should have been? No. That is why, in the end, it was a woman named Jael, not Barak, who ended Sisera’s life. God chooses men and women of faith to serve Him. He does not choose people whose faith is perfect, for there are no such people. But He knows that those who have chosen to follow Christ are capable of great things through faith in the Lord. Their faith may need to be encouraged. They may need a brother or sister to walk beside them. Yet they can trust the Lord, knowing that the power to do so comes from Him and that the glory that is achieved is all for Him.
Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Some are leaders by position. Others are leaders by their very natures. (And, of course, some are both.) A church’s official leaders demonstrate wisdom when they recognize what has been called “leadership from below” and seek to learn from others. Today’s lesson will help us better understand the importance of leadership skills as we examine how a leader of Israel, known as a judge, led her nation through a trying time.

Joshua had been appointed by God and commissioned by Moses to lead Israel in conquering Canaan (Deuteronomy 31). But something was different when Joshua passed off the scene in about 1370 BC: no one was appointed to succeed him! The solution was very simple. God was in charge, and each tribe or unit would obey God and take care of its area. In Joshua’s farewell addresses (Joshua 23, 24), he warned the Israelites again, just as Moses had done, of what they would experience if they served other gods. But they did serve such gods, and Judges 2:10 explains why: “another generation grew up who knew [not] the Lord.” What followed was disaster after disaster. If one generation does not teach the next generation about God, then tragedies follow. The book of Judges is concerned primarily with the sin-cycles that Israel experienced during the period of the Judges. To date that era with precision is difficult. By one calculation, there were 330 years between the appearance of the first judge (Judges 3:9) and the passing of the last (1 Samuel 25:1). But depending on the interpretation of Acts 13:20 and other factors, some calculate the period to span 450 years. Regarding the sin-cycles themselves, these have been summarized in terms of four stages: sin, sorrow (or servitude), supplication, and salvation. A different way of stating this cycle is rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration. When the Israelites worshipped other gods, they suffered. When the people eventually repented, the Lord would send a deliverer, known as a judge. Then the cycle repeated itself (see Judges 2:10-19). The lessons in this unit are biographical studies of 4 of the 12 judges recorded in the book of Judges: Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. These 4 plus Othniel and Ehud are traditionally said to be the 6 “major judges” in light of all that is recorded about them. They were military deliverers; thus the word judge should not cause us to think exclusively in terms of civil magistrates.

The longest period of peace recorded within the book of Judges is the one of 80 years between Ehud and Deborah (Judges 3:30). Today’s lesson takes us back to about 1225 BC as that period of peace comes to an end.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Profile of Deborah

Deborah - prophetess, "the wife of Lappidoth," who judged Israel (Judg 4:4) in connection with Barak, about 1120 B.C. After the death of Ehud the children of Israel fell away from the Lord and were given into the hands of "Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor." He oppressed them severely for twenty years. This remarkable ode contained in Judg 5 is a poetic version of the same material contained in prose in chap. 4. It is universally acclaimed an early masterpiece of Heb. poetry. Critics laud it as one of the first songs in Heb. literature. Deborah has been widely acclaimed as its author. It is remarkable for its vividness of imagery, preserved archaizms, and insight into the rude, barbaric life of the twelfth century B.C. (From The New Unger's Bible Dictionary)

Deborah - A prophetess, fourth in the order of the "judges." Like the rest of the "judges" she became a leader of her people in times of national distress. Thus runs the story in Judg 4. It is on the whole substantiated by the ode in chapter 5 which is ascribed jointly to Deborah and Barak. The song is spoken of as one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew literature. Great difficulties meet the exegete. Nevertheless the general substance is clear. The Lord is described as having come from Sinai near the "field of Edom" to take part in the battle; 'for from heaven they fought, the very stars from their courses fought against Sisera' (verse 20). The nation was in a sad plight, oppressed by a mighty king, and the tribes loth to submerge their separatist tendencies. Some, like Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher remained away. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

PROFILE: DEBORAH (From Life Application Notes)

Wise leaders are rare. They accomplish great amounts of work without direct involvement because they know how to work through other people. They are able to see the big picture that often escapes...
those directly involved, so they make good mediators, advisers, and planners. Deborah fit this description perfectly. She had all these leadership skills, and she had a remarkable relationship with God. The insight and confidence God gave this woman placed her in a unique position in the Old Testament. Deborah is among the outstanding women of history. Her story shows that she was not power hungry. She wanted to serve God. Whenever praise came her way, she gave God the credit. She didn’t deny or resist her position in the culture as a woman and wife, but she never allowed herself to be hindered by it either. Her story shows that God can accomplish great things through people who are willing to be led by him. Deborah’s life challenges us in several ways. She reminds us of the need to be available both to God and to others. She encourages us to spend our efforts on what we can do rather than on worrying about what we can’t do. Deborah challenges us to be wise leaders. She demonstrates what a person can accomplish when God is in control.

**Strengths and accomplishments:**
- Fourth and only female judge of Israel
- Special abilities as a mediator, adviser, and counselor
- When called on to lead, was able to plan, direct, and delegate
- Known for her prophetic power
- A writer of songs

**Lessons from her life:**
- God chooses leaders by his standards, not ours
- Wise leaders choose good helpers

**Vital statistics:**
- Where: Canaan
- Occupations: Prophetess and judge
- Relative: Husband: Lappidoth
- Contemporaries: Barak, Jael, Jabin of Hazor, Sisera

**Key verse:**
“Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time” (Judges 4:4). Her story is told in Judges 4 and Judges 5.

**The Background and Situation (Judges 4:1-3)**

1 When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord.
2 So the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Haroseth Hagoyim.
3 And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel.

**Doing evil in God's eyes (1) [Potential Examples]**

*Filled with every kind of wickedness (Rom 1:29-31)*

29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

*Offered parts of body as instruments of wickedness (Rom 6:13)*

13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

*Had bitterness, rage, anger and every form of malice (Eph 4:31)*

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.
Life was filled with things that belonged to earthly nature - sinful nature (Col 3:5)

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Lovers of self, money and pleasure (2 Tim 3:2-5)

2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God-- 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Consequences of evil (2)

Given over to stubborn hearts and allowed to follow own devices (Ps 81:11-12)

11 "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.

Separation from a life for God (Eph 4:18-19)

18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

Storing up God's wrath (Rom 2:5)

5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Wrath of government (Rom 13:4)

4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Calling upon God for help (3)

Results in getting deliverance from God (Ps 50:15)

15 and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

Results in God's protection and rescue (Ps 91:14-15)

14 "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. 15 He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.

Results in relief of troubles (James 5:13)

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Should be done continually (1Thes 5:17)

17 pray continually;

To be effective and powerful, should be done with a righteous spirit (James 5:16)

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Should be done with a clear mind and self-controlled (1 Pet 4:7)

7 The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.

Should be done with a built up holy faith (Jude 1:20)

20 But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.
Deborah’s Encouragement to Obey God (Judges 4:4-10)

4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time.
5 And 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.
6 Then she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, 'Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun;
7 and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand?'"
8 And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!"
9 So she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.
10 And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his command, and Deborah went up with him.

Deborah’s qualifications to offer advice and encouragement (4-5)

Leadership

She spoke the word of God (Heb 13:7)

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

She had to give an account of her leadership because she was a judge (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

She was held in high regard because Berak asked for her to accompany (1Thes 5:12-13)

12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Judgment

Good judgment because of having a discerning heart to judge and govern people (1 Kings 3:9)

9 So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

Good judgment because of not taking advantage of people (1Thes 4:6)

6 and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.

Good judgment because of detesting wrongdoing (Prov 16:12)

12 Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.

Good judgment because of managing own household well (1 Tim 3:4-5)

4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

Deborah’s communication of God's commands (6-7)

When God gives His word, it must be proclaimed (Ps 68:11)

11 The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it:
Communication cannot be held in by those who must speak it (Jer 20:9)
9 But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

What has been seen and heard of God must be spoken (Acts 4:20)
20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Barak's fear of proceeding alone (8)

Fear God, not man, because God can destroy the body and soul (Matt 10:28)
28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Don't fear, be ready to die if necessary and pray for God's will to be done (Acts 21:13-14)
13 Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Don't fear or worry but keep the faith (2 Tim 4:6-8)
6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Don't fear, just be faithful and the reward is the crown of life (Rev 2:10)
10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Don't fear, trust God (John 14:1)
14 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.

Condemnation must never be applied when dealing with different levels of faith (Rom 14:1-3)
1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. 2 One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

Deborah's encouragement in agreeing to go with Barak (9-10)

There are different gifts, and all are to be used according to the grace given us (Rom 12:6-8)
6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

There must always be the building up of one another through encouragement (1Thes 5:11)
11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Encouragement of the timid is always needed (1Thes 5:14)
14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.
Sound doctrine must be the base of all encouragement (Titus 1:9)

9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Encourage to defeat sin’s deceitfulness (Heb 3:13)

13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

We know that the events which are now described occurred after the death of Ehud, whom we considered in the last chapter. Israel sins once again, following the pattern which the author has already outlined in his introduction. And, once again, the sins to which the author refers are evil “in the Lord’s sight” (verse 1). It is very likely that the Israelites did not conceive of their actions as sin, not unlike those in our own time. After all, the Israelites of that day “did what was right in their own eyes.” In such a culture – a culture very similar to our own – something is wrong only if you think it is, and there isn’t much these days which is considered wrong.

As a result of Israel’s sin, God acts consistently with His covenant, disciplining His people with those consequences He had indicated earlier on several occasions (Joshua 23:11-16).

God sold the Israelites into the hands of Jabin, a Canaanite king who reigned in Hazor, a city located approximately 12 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was once a major Canaanite city that was defeated and destroyed (by fire) at the hand of Joshua. Later on, the Canaanites returned and rebuilt the city, making it a royal city. Hazor was located in the territory of Naphtali, which explains why Barak was commanded to gather troops from Naphtali and Zebulun (verse 6). It also should be noted that “Jabin” is a dynastic title, like “Pharaoh” and “Abimelech.” This explains why the name “Jabin” can occur earlier in Joshua 11 and then again in our text, years later.

Sisera was the commander of Jabin’s military forces, and thus he becomes more prominent in our text. He is said to live in Haroseth Haggoyim, a place whose location is uncertain. (We do know that the word “Haggoyim” means “of the Gentiles,” which is thus translated in some versions.) It appears that he carried out his task with the kind of zeal which justified cruel oppression. The reader should bear this in mind when he or she is tempted to react to the “cruelty and violence” of Jael. And here, once again, we encounter the dreaded iron chariots of the enemy. Sisera’s army had 900 such chariots to employ against the Israelites. I am told that these chariots were used to run down the opponent, and I have little doubt that Sisera had made use of his chariots in this manner on previous occasions. No wonder the Israelites were terrified. Sisera had terrorized the Israelites for 20 years, prompting them to finally cry out to the Lord for help. For some reason, the author does not say that God “raised up” either Deborah or Barak, or both, yet it seems apparent that He did so.

We should note one more piece of background information which is not found in chapter 4, but is described for us in the song of Deborah in chapter 5:

6 In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael caravans disappeared; travelers had to go on winding side roads.

7 Warriors were scarce, they were scarce in Israel, until you arose, Deborah, until you arose as a motherly protector in Israel.

8 God chose new leaders, then fighters appeared in the city gates; but, I swear, not a shield or spear could be found, among forty military units in Israel (Judges 5:6-8, emphasis mine).

This is very helpful information. It describes conditions in northern Israel under Jabin, before God raised up Deborah and Barak (and Jael). It was hazardous for an Israelite to travel on the main thoroughfares, and so they moved about on the lesser traveled side roads. And rather than settle in villages, the people avoided village life. Villages must have been tempting “spoils” for the cruel Canaanite forces. And on top of this, we are informed that the Israelites were not well armed. “Not a sword or a shield could be found” (5:8). That is not good news if one were contemplating taking on a large army equipped with many swords and iron chariots. Israel’s situation looked hopeless, but God. . . .
Deborah is introduced to us first as a prophetess and then as the wife of Lappidoth, a man about whom we know nothing. As indicated above, I do not believe it is accurate to say that Deborah was “leading” Israel as one of the judges like Othniel led. The point made by our author is that she was both a wife and a mother who “judged” in some sense. I believe that Deborah “judged” in the same way that Moses and other “judges” (outside the Book of Judges) judged the Israelites. They helped people understand and apply God’s law to their particular circumstances. In a day when men were “doing what was right in their own eyes,” it is encouraging to find those who sought to know what was right in God’s eyes.

I think it would be safe to refer to Deborah as a “shade tree prophetess.” Deborah did her judging underneath the “Date Palm Tree of Deborah,” somewhere in the hills between Ramah and Bethel. Her prophetic ministry must almost certainly have been an indictment against the formal religious leadership (namely the priests) in Israel. We know that at this time, the Ark of the Covenant was kept in Bethel. The priesthood would have been carrying out their duties there. Deborah’s place of business was some distance away, in a rather remote location. People had to seek her out to obtain judgment.

In her role as a prophetess, Deborah summons Barak and conveys God’s instructions to him. These instructions are not presented as Deborah’s thoughts, not even as her interpretation of God’s revelation, but rather as God’s direct command to Barak. Surely Barak knew (“Is it not true . . .?”) that God was commanding him to lead the Israelites in battle. He was instructed to assemble 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them to Mount Tabor. God promised that He would draw Sisera to the Kishon River, along with his army and his 900 chariots, where He would give them into Barak’s hands.

Defeating Sisera, with his large and well equipped army (including his 900 chariots), seemed like an impossible task, and indeed it was. God had Barak and his men assemble for battle on Mount Tabor. This “mountain” has an “ice cream cone” shape and is a little over 1800 feet high. It is located northeast of the Esdraelon Plain, roughly half way between Nazareth (6-8 miles to the west) and the Sea of Galilee (approximately 12 miles to the east).

Looking at pictures of Mount Tabor, one can readily understand how Sisera would be “drawn” to the valley at the base of Mount Tabor, and thus to the Kishon River, which runs through that valley. That plain surrounding Mount Tabor was the perfect place to employ his 900 chariots. He could encircle the mountain like he was besieging a city. And whenever any Israelites sought to escape, Sisera’s chariots could easily overtake them and run them down. The army that Barak gathered would look like “easy pickings” to Sisera, and thus he would be drawn there to suppress this uprising.

That Barak would be apprehensive is not too surprising. After all, he was commanded to take on a large, well-armed force with 10,000 poorly equipped men (see 5:8). But mere cowardice isn’t really what we find here. Barak makes his obedience to God’s command contingent upon Deborah’s presence with him when he takes on Sisera and his men. He will do as God commanded if she goes with him; but if she does not accompany Barak, he will not go.

Surely we would have to agree that Barak is not merely seeking to add one more warrior to the 10,000 who will gather with him. No, I believe that Barak’s request is similar to that of Moses when God told him to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land (Exodus 33:1-3, 15-16).

The reason that Barak wanted Deborah (a “mother in Israel,” 5:7) to accompany him was because she was a prophetess. I believe Barak was convinced that God would go with him if Deborah accompanied him. In a way, it was good for Barak to want to be assured that God was with him. But in another way it was sad, sad because he had no assurance of God’s presence with him apart from Deborah. Yes, Deborah spoke for the Lord, but he was not content to act on what she said; Barak wanted her with him as well. No Deborah, no battle.

Deborah agreed to accompany Barak, but she made it very clear that this arrangement was not ideal. Indeed, although Barak would win the battle, as promised, he would not get the glory (or honor) for this victory. Instead, the glory would go to “a woman.” No doubt Barak assumed that the “woman” Deborah referred to was herself, but it was not, as our text will soon disclose. It will be Jael who is honored for killing Sisera.

(I know that we must respect the silence of Scripture, but I still have to wonder . . . . What did Deborah’s husband, Lappidoth, think of all this? I can just see her writing him a note and leaving it on the kitchen table: “Gone for a while with Barak. Back in a couple of weeks or so. Don’t forget to feed the kids.” That must have left Lappidoth scratching his head. But then he was married to a prophetess. It is not my impression that this “mother in Israel” was a young mother. She may well have been older.)

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/5-strong-women-weak-kneed-wimpy-men-judges-41-24)
Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

A counselor asked his client to think of the people he knew whom he admired. Then he was asked to consider what those people had ever done that was worthwhile. The client replied, “As I think about it, all they have ever done is to complain. They never do anything else.” He was advised to evaluate what he had said, and then to find some new heroes. The account of Deborah and Barak illustrates that each respected the other. It also suggests that the soldiers in Barak’s army trusted his leadership. The combination of interpersonal respect and God’s help were the ingredients for success. And so it is yet today. Hebrews 11 encourages us to pick our heroes carefully! If their lives are not godly, how can they be our heroes?

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. God has the authority to use the ungodly to chasten His children (Judg. 4:1-2)
2. God issues judgment, but He still has mercy on His children (vs. 3)
3. God can anoint anyone He chooses for leadership, regardless of gender (vss. 4-5)
4. God’s assignments come with clear direction (vs. 6)
5. God promises blessings on those who trust and obey Him (vss. 7-8)
6. When we place restrictions on our obedience to God, He may bestow His honor on someone else (vss. 9-10)