Deborah, the Dutiful Judge

Judges 4:4-10, 14, 21-22
SS Lesson for 06/07/2026

Devotional Scriptures: Deut 17:8-12

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The book of Judges opens with the news that Joshua, Moses' successor, has died. His death signals a transition to what we now call "the period of the judges" (about 1373-1043 BC). The firm, centralized leadership that nomadic Israel knew under Moses and Joshua is gone. A theocracy remains in its place—a rule by God. Before the tribes of Israel went to their respective portions of land, they agreed to serve God (Joshua 24:14-28). But that didn't happen; the Israelites' commitment to God faded as the generation of the conquest died. The new generation worshiped fictitious Canaanite gods such as Baal and Ashtoreth (Judges 2:10-13) as "everyone did as they saw fit" (17:6; 21:25). Because of their idolatry, God handed his people over to their enemies. Oppression and hardship resulted (2:14-15). A cyclical pattern characterizes the book of Judges: (1) obedience to God brings peace and stability to Israel; (2) the people's resolve weakens, and faithfulness to God's covenant falters; (3) a disintegration of spiritual well-being breaks down the community, leaving God's people vulnerable to repression and attacks from external enemies; (4) oppression and suffering trigger repentance; and (5) God mercifully raises a leader to deliver them from their enemies. Typically, when we hear the noun judge, we think of a magistrate who renders legal decisions in a court of law. The Old Testament use of the term is much broader, however. The book of Judges uses the word judge to describe a leader who renders decisions for the nation. As such, the word is used to describe officials who make legal decisions in civil and criminal cases (example: Deuteronomy 25:1-2), prophets (Judges 4:4), military commanders (2:18), and even the Lord himself (11:27). In all instances, the "judge" was to lead in accordance with the will of God. Today's text takes us to approximately 1225 BC, where we consider the fourth of Israel's judges.

Key Verse: Judges 4:4-5

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.

Major Theme Analysis

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

Deborah Introduced (Judges 4:4-5)

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.

Prophetess (4)

In Jesus there is no gender barrier (Gal 3:28-29)

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Anna was a prophetess (Luke 2:36)

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,

Philip's daughters were prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9)

8 Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. 9 He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

Huldah was a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14)

14 Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.

God used a virgin prophetess to bear a son as a sign (Isa 7:10-15; Isa 8:3)

> 7:10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." 13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 8:3 Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.

Judge (5)

Creation of the Judges (Exodus 18:13-19)

> 13 The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. 14 When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" 15 Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. 16 Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws." 17 Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. 19 Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him.

Reason for the Judges (Exodus 18:24-26)

> 24 Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. 25 He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves. 24 Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. 25 He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Duties of the Judges (Deut 17:6-8)

> 6 On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. 7 The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you. 8 If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge, whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults, take them to the place the Lord your God will choose.

Deborah Plan (Judges 4:6-10, 14)

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.
14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

Strategy delivered (6-7)

When God is with us, there should be no fear but courage (Josh 1:9)

> 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

When God gathers an army no nation can withstand it (Isa 13:3-4)

> 3 I have commanded my holy ones; I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath — those who rejoice in my triumph. 4 Listen, a noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together! The Lord Almighty is mustering an army for war.

When God promises deliverance it will be remembered (Heb 11:32-34)

> 32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Deborah's agreement to join battle (8-10)

Agreement to join but with fear (Judg 7:7-11)

> 7 The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place." 8 So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley. 9 During that night the Lord said to Gideon, "Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. 10 If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah 11 and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp.

Agreement to join but only with a spiritual leader (2 Kings 6:2-4)

> 2 Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to live." And he said, "Go." 3 Then one of them said, "Won't you please come with your servants?" "I will," Elisha replied. 4 And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees.

Agreement to join and support to save family (1 Sam 25:23-28)

> 23 When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. 24 She fell at his feet and said: "My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. 25 May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name, his name is Fool, and folly goes with him. But as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my master sent. 26 "Now since the Lord has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal. 27 And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master, be given to the men who follow you. 28 Please forgive your servant's offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord's battles. Let no wrongdoing be found in you as long as you live.

Deborah's faith in God's leadership (14)

Faith in God's leadership because He leads in the path of righteousness (Ps 23:1-4)

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Faith in God's leadership because Christians know His voice (John 10:1-5)

> 2 The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. 3 The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

Faith in God's leadership because He leads in triumph (2 Cor 2:14)

> 14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

Faith in God's leadership because of being children of God (Rom 8:12-15)

> 12 Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation — but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.

Faith in God's leadership because it leads to life and rest (Prov 19:23)

> 23 The fear of the Lord leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

Jael's Actions (Judges 4:21-22)

21 Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.
22 And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, I will show you the man whom you seek." And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.

Violent response (21)

Violence by Jael, wife of Heber (Judg 4:17-20)

> 17 Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. 18 Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him. 19 "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. 20 "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.'"

Violence caused by hatred (Gen 27:41)

> 41 Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

Threats of violence (Num 20:16-18)

> 16 but when we cried out to the Lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. "Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. 17 Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory." 18 But Edom answered: "You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword."

Violence caused by conspiracy (Ps 83:5-8)

> 5 With one mind they plot together; they form an alliance against you, 6 the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagrites, 7 Gebal, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre. 8 Even Assyria has joined them to lend strength to the descendants of Lot.

Violence caused by desiring vengeance (Ezek 25:12-13)

> 12 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because Edom took revenge on the house of Judah and became very guilty by doing so, 13 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill its men and their animals. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword.

Violence makes one in danger of judgment (Matt 5:22)

> 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Prophetic fulfillment (22)

Fulfillment through being ensnared by wickedness (Ps 9:16)

> 16 The Lord is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands. Higgaion. Selah

Fulfillment through being found out (Ps 37:10)

> 10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.

Fulfillment through the punishment of being destroyed (Ps 92:6-7)

> 6 The senseless man does not know, fools do not understand, 7 that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be forever destroyed.

Fulfillment through the cords of sin being their downfall (Prov 5:22)

> 22 The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Meet Deborah and Barak (Judges 4:4-10)

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.[10] I believe that Deborah "judged" in the same way that Moses and other "judges" (outside the Book of Judges) judged the Israelites.[11] 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.[12] 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[13] Sisera to the Kishon River,[14] 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:

1 The Lord said to Moses, "Go up from here, you and the people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' 2 I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite. 3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way." . . . 15 And Moses said to him, "If your presence does not go with us, do not take us up from here. 16 For how will it be known then that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not by your going with us, so that we will be distinguished, I and your people, from all the people who are on the face of the earth?" (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.)

Sisera's Dishonorable Death (Judges 4:17-22)

Sisera arrived at Heber's tent exhausted and desperate. Unfortunately (for Sisera), Heber was not home. (One has to wonder what Heber's decision would have been had he been forced to decide between Jabin and Israel.) Heber's wife, Jael, was home however. I'll bet this nomadic woman would not have been a candidate for the cover of a woman's magazine. First of all, she was taken by surprise and wasn't prepared to entertain guests. Indeed, she would not have entertained a man without her husband being home. In my mind's eye, I see a rather plain woman, simply dressed and tough as a boot. As the women usually were tasked with taking down and setting up the tents, her hands were probably rough and calloused.

There seems to be no hesitation on Jael's part. She goes out to welcome Sisera, just as he had hoped. She urged him to stop and rest and to not be afraid. Exhausted, he sank to the floor to get some rest, as Jael urged him to do. She covered him with a blanket of some kind, and when he asked her for water, she gave him milk instead. He was getting even more help than he could have hoped for. And so, encouraged to trust her, Sisera asked Jael to keep watch at her door and to deny that anyone was there in her tent, turning them away without discovering him in his weakened state. His mind at rest and his body exhausted, Sisera fell into a deep sleep. Jael had no weapons of warfare, but she did have the tools of her trade: a tent peg and a hammer. Little did she know until now that all those years of driving tent pegs would prepare her for this moment. She crept beside Sisera and with one powerful blow, penetrated his skull and drove the peg through it, and into the ground.

Later, Barak arrives, pursuing Sisera, and likely accompanied by many of his army. Jael likewise went out to greet Barak and to invite him into her tent. There she presented to Sisera the corpse of Israel's most powerful enemy, still stuck to the ground by Jael's tent peg. No, the honor of destroying public enemy number one was not Barak's, but Jael's. And this, just as Deborah had prophesied.

(*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

When a prophet's words demonstrate truth and accuracy, they confirm the prophet's calling and legitimacy. God proves Deborah's predictions and faithfulness throughout the narrative. Judge Deborah is an emboldened witness of God's fidelity and integrity. As prophetess, Deborah called Barak to her palm tree to relay God's commands. She boldly informed him he was to go into battle and that God would bring about victory. Her initiative set Barak into action. Deborah remained steadfast despite Barak's doubts and courageously followed him into the war, taking her place in military leadership for the sake of her people. She reminded Barak along the way that God planned their success, serving him through exhortation. She also assisted in discerning the correct timing and movement of the army (the role of both prophet and strategist). After their victory, Deborah led God's people in praise: "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD!" (Judges 5:2). She proved herself a loyal and dutiful deliverer for Israel, continually giving all glory and honor to God. When the word of the Lord prompted Deborah, she responded with obedience. May her example inspire us all toward deferential submission to God's instructions. Like Deborah, may we encourage others to take God at his word.