

June 7, 2026

“Deborah, the Dutiful Judge”
Lesson 1

Judges 4:4-10, 14, 21-22

Intro

At the beginning of Judges, Joshua has just died, and the period of time of the Judges begins. For this phase, there will not be just one leader, as with Moses and Joshua. Before the tribes went to their respective portions of land, they agreed to serve God. But that didn't happen. The Israelites' commitment to God faded as the generation that conquered the Promised Land died. The new generation worshipped false Canaanite gods and “did as they saw fit” (17:6, 21:25). Because of this idolatry, God handed His people over to their enemies.

A cyclical pattern is present in Judges. Obedience to God brings peace and stability to Israel, but the people's resolve weakens and they fail to keep God's covenant. Spiritual well-being breaks down, causing problems in the Israelite people. This makes the people vulnerable to attacks and repression from enemies. This oppression and suffering triggers repentance, and God mercifully raises a leader to deliver them from their enemies.

We tend to think of a “judge” as someone in a court room giving legal decisions. But the term here has a broader meaning. It's used to describe officials who make decisions for the nation. So the term could apply to someone making court rulings, or a prophet, or a military commander, or even God Himself. In every case, the “judge” was to lead in accordance with the will of God.

Read Judges 4:4-10

Deborah succeeds Ehud as a judge. The people were in the cycle noted above, doing “evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Because of their actions, God allows Jabin, the king of Canaan, to oppress Israel for 20 years.

1. vs. 4: This verse formally shows that Deborah is Israel's civic leader
She is called a prophet, one who hears from God and relays His message to the people
She is “the wife of Lappidoth”—the only time he is mentioned in Scripture
2. vs. 5: Ramah and Bethel are about 5 and 10 miles north of Jerusalem respectively
Trees were often used in idol worship, but Deborah uses one as her place of meeting
This must be a familiar landmark / place to be included in this passage
Her role as a civil judge is shown in that they people “went up to her to have their disputes settled”
3. vs. 6: Barak is mentioned a dozen times in Scripture, showing his relative importance
One of the mentions is in Hebrews 11, the “Faith Hall of Fame”
The fact that his father and his hometown are mentioned also shows his importance
Deborah tells him what God has told her—go to Mount Tabor with 10,000 men
Mount Tabor is about 50 miles north of where they are having this conference
This land between Naphtali and Zebulun is the “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt. 4:15)

4. vs. 7: This is a continuation of God's message to Barak through Deborah: He is the "I"
The Canaanite army is very powerful, having both more quantity and quality
Their chariots are made from iron, a huge technological advantage in that day
The Israelites have been defeated by chariots before (Josh. 17, Judges 1)
They have a choice before them—fix on the strength of the chariots, or God's strength?
God says he will lead Sisera and his army to the Kishon River for an ambush
This area contains mostly Canaanite villages—it's "home field" for Sisera
5. vs. 8: Barak isn't totally confident of this plan, and wants a big reassurance
If Deborah is willing to go with him, then she trusts God's plan, and he will go
If she isn't willing to go also, then she doesn't trust the plan, and he won't go
If she's willing to risk her life, then so will he
6. vs. 9: Deborah's answer is "Certainly I will go"
She is confident in what God is going to do to Sisera and his army
But she tells Barak that he won't receive honor for the victory
Sisera will be led to a woman who will kill him
The honor for the defeat of Sisera belongs to God
This happens "because of the course you are taking"
Because he was doubting God's plan, he won't gain any greater glory
7. vs. 10: Barak gets the 10,000 total men from the two tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun
These two tribes are the closest to where this fight will happen
King Jabin of the Canaanites has his headquarters in Hazor
Hazor is within the tribal boundaries of Naphtali
With the men assembled, Deborah goes with the army as she said she would
8. vs. 14: Deborah tells Barak to take the fight to Sisera
She commands him—"Go!"
She reminds him that God has gone ahead of him
She reminds him that God will deliver Sisera's army into his hands
This is a guaranteed victory
All Barak has to do is go; God has done the rest
They are standing on top of Mount Tabor when she tells him to go
A mountaintop is a great place in a battle
It is easy to defend, and the other army has a disadvantage in going up the hill
God tells Barak through Deborah to go *down* the mountain
Sisera's army is on the plains, with their chariots
Humanly speaking, this is giving away a battle advantage
But this is part of God's plan—He will deliver victory when it doesn't seem possible

Between vs. 14 and our next verses (21-22), Sisera's army was destroyed by Barak and his army. Sisera manages to escape into the tent of an ally, Heber the Kenite. He is invited into the tent by Jael, Heber's wife. Sisera is exhausted by the battle and the long distance he has traveled. He rests.

9. vs. 21: Sisera feels safe in the tent and falls asleep

Jael takes advantage of this situation

She picks up a tent peg and drives it through Sisera's temple

She doesn't hit the peg just once

She hits the peg until it goes into the ground

This fulfills Deborah's prophecy that Sisera will die "at the hands of a woman"

Jael has committed treason—her husband is an ally of Sisera

Perhaps she does this to ensure her own safety (see vs. 22)

10. vs. 22: Just after Jael kills Sisera, Barak shows up

It says he was "in pursuit" of Sisera

This is enemy territory for Barak

The Kenites actively worked against the Israelites earlier

They told Sisera the location of the Israelite army

Jael may be looking at her actions now as a way to protect both herself and her people

She is very active in these two verses

She takes action against Sisera and kills him

She goes out to meet Barak, rather than waiting for him to come to her

She knows Barak is looking for Sisera, and she gives him what he wants

"I will show you the man you are looking for"

Barak goes with Jael into the tent and sees Sisera with the tent peg in his head

Deborah's words to him in vs. 9 are confirmed

Sisera was delivered into the hands of a woman

Barak will not get the honor of defeating the army; it goes to Jael instead

Application: Deborah delivered God's words to Barak. She boldly went with him to the battle. She spoke with faithful confidence about what God was going to do. She encouraged Barak in what God had planned. In chapter 5 (after this event), she leads the people in praise. "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD!" (5:2). Deborah is a dutiful deliverer for Israel, and gives all the glory and honor to God.

When the word of God prompted Deborah, she responded with obedience. Her example serves to inspire us toward both confident submission to God's instructions, and joyful praise at what results. Like Deborah, we are to encourage others to take God at His word.

Prayer: Father God, help us to remember that our victories are all from You. Thank You for using people of all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and skills to implement Your will. Help us to have the boldness to answer Your call whenever and however it comes. In Jesus' name, Amen.