

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 4

JUDGES 4 & 5

INTRODUCTION

Someone has remarked that there are three kinds of people in the world. There are those who watch what is happening. Then there are those who do not know what is happening. And the third are those who make things happen. Of the third kind, the divine writer of Judges in chapter four gives a true account of an Israeli woman named Deborah. She was one of the women in the Bible—Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), Esther (Esther 4:10-17), Anna (Luke 2:36-38), and Priscilla (Acts 18:26)—who assumed leadership roles in Israel. However, Deborah was unique because she functioned both as a prophetess and a judge of Israel, whereas the other women did not have such a dual role. This dual role of Deborah was indeed unthinkable and unexpected as it was God's choice and calling of a woman to be both His spokesman and judge. The children of Israel again compromised and backslid into apostasy, and the cycle of rebellion, oppression, repentance and restoration happened again.

The two chapters form one unit. Chapter 4 is a historical and factual record, and chapter 5 is a poetical presentation of the experience which

Israel went through as accounted in the previous chapter. From this standpoint, the two chapters do not contradict each other but rather they complement each other. Chapter 4 informs and chapter 5 praises the LORD God of Israel for His acts of mercy. This is not the first time that the divine writer had employed this method of writing—one chapter gives an accurate and factual account and the next chapter renders what happened in a beautiful song of praise. The same style is used in Exodus 14 and 15. Chapter 14 accurately accounts for the stupendous actual crossing of the Red Sea, and the chapter that follows is a song of praise to the LORD God of Israel for His power and grace.

A suggested outline of Judges 4 and 5 is as follows:

1. The Children of Israel Sin Again in the Sight of the LORD (4:1-3),
2. Deborah the Prophetess Calls the Children of Israel to Arms (4:4-9),
3. Barak Defeats Sisera the Enemy at Megiddo (4:10-17),
4. Jael, a Kenite Woman Kills Sisera (4:18-24),
5. Deborah and Barak Sing a Song of Praise to the LORD (5:1-31).

STUDY THE WORD

The Children of Israel Sin Again in the Sight of the LORD

The children of Israel sinned *again* before the LORD when Ehud died. This strongly implies that when Ehud died, the children of Israel gradually went back to their old sinful ways. They *chose new gods*, meaning that they worshipped the gods of the

Canaanites and turned their backs to the LORD their God (5:8). When there is a decline of spiritual leadership, the people will turn to other things to fill that spiritual vacuum. Israel sinned and the LORD *sold them* to Jabin the king of the Canaanites, who reigned in Hazor. Hazor was a city in the north of the land. It had been conquered by Joshua some 150 years ago.¹ But the Canaanites returned and rebuilt the city, which had been destroyed. At that time the name of the king was “Jabin.” In this case, the name “Jabin” was not the personal name of the king but rather a title like that of “Pharaoh” the king of the Egyptians. Jabin’s army general was Sisera who lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles, a city which was near Hazor in Galilee. Sisera had war-machines—chariots of iron, nine hundred of them. In those days, such war-machines were considered powerful and formidable, and they contributed to the invincibility of the army of general Sisera. Israel on the other hand had no such chariots of iron at all. She was without a wise and strong “judge;” who could lead the nation. Sisera, therefore, severely oppressed the children of Israel for twenty long years.

God was not malevolent in allowing the enemy to subjugate His people. On the contrary, God was really benevolent for He desired that His people should repent and return to Him; obey His commands and receive His blessings. The oppression was so

great that the children of Israel could not take the terrible suffering any longer. So, they cried to the LORD for deliverance. The LORD heard their cry, and being ever merciful and forgiving when the people confessed and made a commitment to repent of their sins, the LORD responded and acted accordingly.

Deborah the Prophetess Calls the Children of Israel to Arms

The LORD chose and called Deborah (name means “honeybee”) to be His prophetess. A little is given about her background except that she was the wife of Lapidoth. This means that apart from being a prophetess, a spokes-person for God, she was also a wife and mother. An added work that she discharged was the work of a judge; one who hears and settles the problems and disputes of the people. She lived under *the palm tree of Deborah* a location which was between Ramah and Bethel in the hilly country of Ephraim. This place was central and easily accessible by most of the Israelites. The children of Israel would come to her on a personal and daily basis to settle their disputes and accept her judgments. Deborah was indeed an exceptional woman with special endowments of godly wisdom and leadership skills and knowledge. For some time, she had been serving her people Israel. The time was now right, and God raised her up and empowered her to be Israel’s deliverer and judge. She herself, as *a mother of Israel* (5:7b), had assessed the desperate circumstances of her people, and was determined to arouse her people to conquer the enemy, which was God’s plan initially.

¹ Joshua 11:10 And Joshua at that time turned back, and took Hazor, and smote the king thereof with the sword: for Hazor beforetime was the head of all those kingdoms.

Deborah realized that Israel needed to assemble an army of soldiers and a military captain to lead the army. In this regard, Deborah showed her wisdom and leadership quality in that she did not usurp the role of a man, and knowing her own limitations and capabilities, sent and called for Barak. Barak obviously had shown to be a warrior. His identity is given as the son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh-naphtali, a city on the border of Naphtali and Issachar which was near the Sea of Galilee. In sending for Barak, Deborah gave him the commandment of the LORD. Apparently, this was a direct divine revelation to the prophetess, and the command to Barak was that he should muster ten thousand men chosen from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. He should assemble them on mount Tabor. Then the LORD would cause Sisera to lead his army towards the river Kishon in the plains of Megiddo. Barak and his ten thousand soldiers would then descend on the enemy, and the LORD would deliver the enemy into his hand (4:6, 7). This was not Deborah's own idea but the strategy was given by the LORD Himself through her.

Barak conditionally accepted the commission which had been told to him by the LORD through Deborah. He required Deborah's presence with him in the battle field. He would not accept the assignment if Deborah rejected his request. Deborah agreed to accompany him and predicted that the LORD would *sell Sisera into the hand of a woman* (4:9). This means that the honour of killing Sisera would be accorded to a woman. Barak would naturally think that Deborah would be

that woman. Barak should not have given a condition in accepting this work which was given by the LORD. He should have responded in simple faith in the LORD. Barak displayed a flaw in his character and faith. He lacked confidence, and his faith did not match up with that of Deborah. He seemed to show to have more confidence in the presence of a woman than in the promise of the LORD. And it is not surprising that he was excluded from sharing the glory of victory.

Barak Defeats Sisera the Enemy at Megiddo

Accordingly, Barak recruited ten thousand men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Some neighbouring tribes were not called to contribute because the LORD knew their mind and hearts. Reuben and Gilead (the half-tribe of Manasseh) on the other side of Jordan probably would not be interested because the outcome of the war, win or lose, would not affect them directly. They were more interested in tending their sheep and cattle. There were Asher and Dan but these tribes were more interested in trading with the Phoenicians than to go to war (5:16, 17). The remainder of the tribes in the south was too far away. Nevertheless, with the LORD'S help and His word the victory over the enemy was assured. The men of Israel led by Barak assembled on Mount Tabor as the LORD had directed them. The LORD would then draw Sisera and his army of nine hundred chariots of iron to the Kishon valley where the river Kishon meanders on the plain of Megiddo. Now, Heber, the Kenite, who had defected to the enemy

informed Sisera where Israel would be pitching their tents in preparation for the battle (4:11). This information caused Sisera to move his armies to the valley below mount Tabor. This movement precisely fitted into the strategy which had been told by Deborah to Barak. Israel was outnumbered and out-manned by the enemy. The strategy given by the LORD gave the Israelites' army an advantage over Sisera and his army. The Israelites were on higher ground on mount Tabor, and it was easier to move down the slopes of the mountain and to attack the enemy. The LORD was on the side of His people, and that was enough power and strength.

When Sisera gathered all his nine hundred chariots of iron together and his men, Deborah gave the first shot. She called out to Barak to rise up and attack reassuring him with the promise of the LORD that He would defeat Sisera and that the LORD would go before him (4:14). The LORD discomfited Sisera's nine hundred chariots of iron. It happened that precisely at the right moment, there was a great downpour of rain on the valley causing the Kishon River to swell, and reducing the ground to become soft and difficult (a quagmire) to maneuver the chariots (5:20-22). The chariots were stuck in the muddy ground and rendered useless in such a condition. This caused disarray among the soldiers of the enemy, and it opened the way for the Israelites to descend on them and kill the enemies. The battle was won. On seeing that he was losing the battle, Sisera got down from his chariot and fled for his life on foot! He made his way to Heber's

tent, where he could expect protection and refuge, because Heber, the Kenite, was an ally of Jabin, the king of Sisera (4:11)..

Jael, a Kenite Woman Kills Sisera

In his flight for his life, Sisera ran to the nearest and safest place he knew. It was the house of Heber his informer and supporter. On seeing Sisera, Jael, Heber's wife, went out to meet him. She extended to him refuge in her house and assured him not to be afraid. Sisera, who was exhausted by now, having run for his life on foot, readily accepted Jael's hospitality. When Sisera entered her tent, Jael quickly got him to rest on a bed, covered him with a blanket thus hiding him. She even showed exceptional kindness to the army general. She brought a little water for him to drink because he was very thirsty after that run. In addition she opened a bottle of milk and gave it to him, and let him to rest. Sisera made sure he was absolutely safe by asking Jael to guard the entrance of the tent, and to stop any Israelite soldier from entering. If any Israelite soldier were to ask for him, she should deny that he was present in the tent.

Sisera fell *fast asleep* (4:21). Then Jael took a tent peg and a hammer. She drove the tent peg right through Sisera's temples with the hammer until it was embedded into the ground. Sisera died instantly. It was a treacherous and gruesome act. This indicates that Jael was not in tune with her husband in supporting Jabin and Sisera. She was still loyal to the Israelites and to the LORD God of Israel whom her forefathers had

worshipped and served. Deborah in her song praised Jael, and blessed her above all other women in Israel. Although it was a treacherous act on her part, she was praised because of her loyalty to the LORD God and to the nation Israel. She was the LORD'S instrument for fulfilling His purpose. Nevertheless her treachery should not be condoned.

Barak came shortly after to find out that Sisera had died. He was too late to execute the death blow on Sisera. That honour was Jael's. Barak surely remembered Deborah's prediction that the honour of killing Sisera would be given to a woman. The children of Israel prospered after that. They enjoyed rest and peace in the land for forty years (5:31)

Deborah and Barak Sing a Song of Praise to the LORD

This is a song of praise to the LORD God of Israel who handed victory against Jabin the king of the Canaanites and his army general Sisera over to His people, Israel. The enemy had severely oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years. It was a resounding victory and Deborah in an outburst of joy and jubilation composed this song which was sung by her and Barak (5:1).

God's people should always be quick to praise Him for His mercies and grace and for His wonderful works of deliverance. Arthur Lewis commented that this song of victory is among the most beautiful poems in the Old Testament. Most critics acknowledge its antiquity, and all of them admire its vivid, dramatic, and

rhythmic style.² It is presented in a song and can be divided into six beautiful stanzas. The first stanza (5:1-5) opens with a call to all people, kings and princes, even to the singer herself, to sing praises to the LORD for His deliverance of His people. Yea, the earth trembled, the heavens dropped, the clouds poured out the rain, the mountains melted before the LORD! In the second stanza (5:6-11), the singer describes the dire conditions of the children of Israel. They had no shield or spear. The highways were deserted of travellers for fear of being robbed or killed. And in a dramatic turn, the singer calls on the rich, the nobles, and the common people to sing praises to God for His deliverance. In the third stanza (5:12-18), the singer calls on herself and Barak to awake from their slumber and apathy into action. Those tribes, namely, Reuben, Gilead (the half tribe of Manasseh) who lived beyond Jordan, Dan and Asher, cared more of their own interest than for their oppressed brethren. Deborah chided them. The fourth stanza (5:19-23) expresses the resounding victory over the Canaanites. The LORD even intervened by calling on the forces of nature to cripple "the pransings of their mighty ones." The fifth stanza (5:24-30) praises the bravery of Jael whose daring method in killing Sisera is described repetitiously in slow motion: *At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down" at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead* (5:27). The final stanza (5:31) ends fittingly with a brief prayer: *So let*

² Arthur Lewis, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 39.

all thine enemies perish, O LORD: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might. ³

PRACTICAL VALUE

Deborah sets a good example of a balanced life for the role of woman in a family, church and the community. While the Bible puts men above women as the head of the family, and leaders in the church, yet it clearly affirms the equality of men and women as persons. In the Bible man is not superior to woman. The difference between a man and woman is in the function of their roles. Deborah recognized these differences. Although she was a prophetess and a judge who was chosen and called by God, and whom God endowed with special gifts, she did not usurp the leadership role of men. She sent for Barak and called on him to recruit the men of Israel to lead them against the enemy. When Barak required her presence with him in the battle field, she readily agreed. She maintained a position of encouraging and boosting the morale of Barak.

When the children of God forget their Father in Heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ their Redeemer, their spiritual life will surely take a downward slide. They will start by losing their appetite for His Word. They soon turn to other "gods", (not necessarily idols of metal, stone, or wood), and compromise their godly and lofty values for the temporal attractions of the world. They will be more interested in the things below than in the things above. They forget that they are saved to live for God

on earth, and ultimately to be with Him in the New Heaven and the New Earth which He will create, and this present heaven and earth will be burnt up and destroyed. However, when such a person is truly a born-again child of God, the Father in heaven has declared that He will chastise him. The chastisement may be severe and he will suffer for the moment but it is all for his own good. God is righteous and just to forgive our sins when we confess and repent. God has shown in the accounts in Judges that He is ever merciful and gracious; He will hear our cries of repentance and act to restore us back to Him.

As a prophetess, speaking on behalf of the LORD God, Deborah sternly rebuked Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh who lived on the eastern side of Jordan. They cared more for themselves tending their sheep than caring for their fellow brethren, Zebulun and Naphtali, who were being severely oppressed. The same stern rebuke was directed towards Dan and Asher who were more interested in trading with the Phoenicians than in helping their suffering brothers (5:15-18). This should not be so, particularly among Christians in their church. In the church we should be our brother's keeper. Those of us whom God has blessed should help those who are in dire need. It does not please or honour the Lord our God by only caring for ourselves and not for our fellow brethren. This is selfish living and is not what the Lord teaches us (Philippians 4:10).
AMEN

³ Donald K. Campbell, *Judges*, pp. 58-60.