

DEBORAH, DUTIFUL JUDGE

Danica set a cup of ripe fruit beside her computer. She reached around to turn on a small fan and enjoyed the cool rush of air. She was cozy, content, and cheerful. Only a few years prior, she wouldn't have felt nearly as settled.

As a media relations specialist for the local community college, her job was to write about the school and its community. She loved to tell compelling stories. But for years, her joy was sapped by the unwelcoming culture of her department. She felt locked out of any career advancement and couldn't help but notice that she was the only Black employee in the office. Her supervisor in those days wanted her to push out new content at a breathless pace.

In the evenings, she was on her knees in prayer, pleading with God for a new opportunity and a new place to work. But with diminishing college budgets, she struggled to find a new position doing what she loved. A few interviews hadn't led to any job offers.

Then gradually, her department began to change. With a new college president came a renewed focus. After a few people retired, she found herself working on a completely new team with a healthy culture. She smiled as she thought to herself about what would have happened if she had gotten another job offer years earlier. *I wouldn't have been here, she thought, seeing what a healthy office can be.*

She picked up an index card she had written in those days and stared at it. It was from Psalm 27:13, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living."

1 When has a difficult season prepared you for the next chapter?

2 How do you respond when God's timing doesn't match expectations?

⁴ And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

⁵ And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. ⁶ And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? ⁷ And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand.

⁸ And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go.

⁹ And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him.

¹⁴ And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee? So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

⁸ Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

⁹ "Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him.

God's Rescue Plan

The setting is a period of upheaval during the era of judges. God was with Moses during the wilderness journey and with Joshua as Israel came into the land of promise. But Joshua's death left a vacuum of spiritual and military leadership. The book of Judges describes Israel's habit of doing what is "right" in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Despite their religious compromises and rampant idolatry, God does not stop responding to their prayers and sending deliverers to rescue them from the hand of enemies.

The chapter begins by noting that Israel has been oppressed by the Canaanites for two decades. Sisera commands an army of nine hundred ironclad chariots and makes a fearsome foe (Judg. 4:1–3). The leader of Israel at this time is a woman: a prophet named Deborah. The Hebrew text says that she "sits" beneath a palm tree, where she settles conflicts (v. 5). Like other prophets, she is able to share God's perspective on current events and acts as Israel's judge, as Moses had first done (see Ex. 18:13).

As the Lord's representative and mouthpiece, Deborah commands a man named Barak to assemble the army that shall defeat Sisera's powerful chariots: God shall give the victory (vv. 6–7). Instead of showing courage, Barak agrees *only* if Deborah accompanies him and risks her own life (v. 8). Deborah does go, but she prophesies that "the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman" (v. 9). Since women at the time do not fight in the army, this is an unexpected or even shameful twist: a woman showing courage where a man is not. Thus together, Barak and Deborah gather the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali and prepare ten thousand men for battle (v. 10). Deborah reassures them that Yahweh shall be at the forefront of any battle, and victory over Sisera will be theirs (v. 14).

1 Why do you think the text emphasizes Deborah's leadership role, as a woman?

2 What would cause Barak to hesitate when commanded to assemble an army?

3 When have you struggled to follow through on something that God asks?

²¹ Then Jael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

²² And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will shew thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples.

²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

²² Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

An Unlikely Champion

Readers might expect that Deborah will be heralded a victor over Sisera, as fulfillment of deliverance through “the hands of a woman” (v. 9). But Deborah isn't mentioned in the account of the battle. Sisera—arrogant and eager to face rebel leaders—amasses his force to oppose Barak, taking all of his chariots to Mount Tabor where they are camped (vv. 12–13). Instead of holding the higher ground, Deborah sends Barak and his ten thousand foot soldiers down the mountainside to attack the ironclad chariots.

The description of fighting is short, but the text says that God sent the Canaanite chariots into confusion (v. 15). Later, Deborah taunts their defeat: “swept away” in the river (Judg. 5:21). This is similar to the way that Pharaoh's army was lost (see Ex. 14–15). God is true to His word, and the chariot riders are defeated. Sisera has to climb down from his chariot to flee on foot, with danger close behind. He tries to escape to the neighboring territory controlled by a clan of Kenites, his allies (Judg. 4:17).

Right before the reading picks up again, we meet a second woman in the story: Jael, wife to the leader of this family of Kenites. These are Sisera's allies: non-Israelites who Sisera fully expects to shield and hide him from the pursuit. But Judges tells us that Moses' father-in-law was a Kenite (Judg. 1:16). At least some Kenites have been on

friendly terms with Israel in the past. We soon realize that Jael is not the ally she appears to be.

Sisera is glad to have safety and shelter, as Jael invites him to enter her tent. She gives him milk to drink, invites him to lie down beneath a thick blanket (vv. 18–19). Sisera falls asleep, thinking that this woman is standing guard to protect him.

Jael does the unexpected. She has no weapons and is clearly not a soldier. She reaches for what tools are at hand: a hammer and tent pegs. While the mighty Sisera slumbers, she drives a spike through his sleeping head and puts an end to this haughty leader who oppressed Israel. Just as Deborah prophesied, he is overcome by the hands of a woman. Barak soon arrives, too late to claim a captive (v. 22).

Later, in Judges 5, both Deborah and Barak sing of the Lord’s unexpected plan for His deliverance. They marvel at Jael’s victory, calling her blessed among women (Judg. 5:24). We learn from this song that, if Sisera and his army been the victorious, they would have taken “a woman or two for each man” as spoils of war (Judg. 5:30). Instead, it was two women—Deborah and Jael—whom God used to save His people.

1 Why are Jael’s actions surprising?

2 Why would the text emphasize that women overcame Sisera?

3 What does this show us about God?



This mallet of petrified wood was found in Egypt and comes from the same era as the setting of Judges. It’s the kind of tool that might have been used to drive tent stakes.

Museo Egizio

Clues Point Back to God

The biblical text tells us that Deborah is a prophet. We readers are waiting to see her words proved true, since this is the mark of valid prophecy (see Deut. 18:21–22). But imagine the suspense from her perspective, which we only see in bits and pieces! Deborah was courageous enough to call God’s people to the defense of their territory against the superior foe. And when the confidence of Barak wavered, Deborah’s word remained the same.

She was willing to risk her safety to accompany the army, and she gave the word for the attack. Before that day, no one would have predicted strong chariots becoming useless, or that the arrogant Canaanite commander would die by tent peg. Perhaps you have played a murder mystery game where you have tried to guess the circumstances of a person’s death. Would anyone following the clues guess, “The woman *Jael*, in a *tent*, with a *tent peg*”?

But God uses the unlikely and improbable circumstances to drive the message: victory belongs to Him. Without relying on God’s miraculous intervention, the scattered tribes of Israelites would never control or manage the important land they were possessing. It calls to mind the words of Moses to his successors: “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; . . . Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deut. 31:8).

Sometimes we need the unexpected to wake us up to our inability to save ourselves. If Barak had summarily marched the army to a conventional victory, there would be songs written in *his* honor. Instead, the song of Deborah and Barak praises God and the people who answered His call (Judg. 5:1–31). The conclusion of God’s mighty work is this: “The land had peace forty years” (v. 31).

1 What feels different about resolving a problem with God’s help instead of on your own?

2 Where and when are you tempted to credit your own ingenuity or work ethic for success?

3 Where do you recognize the faith and courage of others who are following God into risky situations?

Following when I'm Afraid

Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to act in the midst of fear. Deborah and Jael were not fearless, but God was able to use them to bring deliverance. The invitation for this week is to journal about an example of God's provision in your own life.

Begin by describing a time that you stepped into an uncomfortable or risky situation, even if you were afraid. How did God provide? How did He build your faith?

Key Text

And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. —Judges 4:4–5 KJV

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. —Judges 4:4–5 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of June 8 through June 13

Mon. Ezekiel 18:5–9—Living a Righteous Life.

Tue. Genesis 16:1, 4–16—Trusting a God Who Sees.

Wed. Proverbs 6:20–22—Keeping Wise Counsel.

Thu. Psalm 113—Praising the Lord.

Fri. Isaiah 66:9–13—Comforting like a Mother.

Sat. Luke 1:46–55—Rejoicing in God's Deliverance.

Next Week: 1 Samuel 1:9–20, 25

We will talk about taking our concerns to God in prayer. This week, tell a friend about a time when you were desperate for an answer to prayer.