

A Faithful God for a Faithless People: A Study of Judges
Session 2: “Deborah and Barak” (based on Judge 4-5)
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Summary of the lesson from Father Bryan:

Imagine, for a moment, a courageous person. What do they look like? Are they a man or a woman? Deborah, the only female Judge, shows great courage by encouraging the militia leader, Barak, to lead Israel into battle against the Canaanite commander, Sisera. Deborah speaks a prophetic word concerning the deliverance of Israel “by the hand of a woman,” which is unexpectedly fulfilled through Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. This story not only teaches us the importance of encouragement, but also the relationship between courage and faith.

Imagine a courageous person. We tend to think of “courage” or “fortitude” as something men do. The story of Deborah (Judges 4-5) gives us a different image of courage. An image that will help us understand the true meaning of faithfulness.

The story of Deborah is a literary masterpiece, filled with some of the most beautiful Hebrew in the Bible.

Judges 4:1-3

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

The consistent cycle of the book of Judges: God raises up a judge to deliver his people; when that judge dies the people of Israel reject God and worship idols; God hands his people over to foreign kings; the people cry out to God.

Judge Ehud has died and the people are oppressed by Jabin (King of Canaan). Jabin’s capital is at Hazor in the north of Israel near the sea of Galilee – in the heart of the tribe of Naphtali. Jabin has oppressed Israel for 20 years using his 900 chariots commanded by Sisera. This is a superior military force.

God remains faithful and raises up the Judge Deborah:

Judges 4:4-5

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Deborah is a different kind of Judge.

- 1) The only female Judge in the book of Judges. Her name means “bee.” Think of her as the “queen bee of Israel” – she is quite busy.
- 2) She stays in one place and people come to her for judgement. She doesn’t move around.
- 3) She is a “prophetess” and not a military leader. She leads God’s people with her words, by rendering judgements, and speaking the word of God.
- 4) She is the wife of Lappidoth. The Hebrew word for him means “fire” and that is probably a reflection on her character.

In order to deliver Israel, Deborah needs to light a fire under a local militia leader named Barak:

Judges 4:6-7

She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, “Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. 7 And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?’”

Barak is from the tribe of Naphtali and his name means “lightning.” But Barak has not obeyed the command of the Lord. He has not shown the courage to do what is necessary to deliver his suffering people.

Deborah sees Barak’s fear. She does not berate or dismiss him, but she encourages him. She reminds him of the word of the Lord.

“The Lord” is the subject – he will draw out Sisera and give him to Barak’s hand.

Fear can cause us to doubt the goodness and power of God. Fear can cloud our vision, blinding us to the work of God in our midst. But the most helpful thing in moments of fear can often be words of **encouragement**.

“Encouragement” literally means to “put courage into someone” (*en- + curage = from courage*)

This is what Deborah does – putting courage into the cowardly Barak.

Judges 4:8
Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”

Deborah responds with another prophetic word:

Judges 4:9
And she said, “I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

At this point in the story, the reader will assume that Deborah will receive the credit for delivering Israel. The true meaning of the prophecy will become clear at the end of chapter 4. Barak doesn’t care – he needs Deborah. By the grace of God, Barak and Deborah succeed (Judges 4:10-16).

Sisera flees to the nearby camp of Heber the Kenite (distant relative of Israel but now an ally with the Canaanites) and seeks refuge in the tent of Heber’s wife Jael.

Jael is the unlikely woman hero of the story. She seduces Sisera, inviting him into her tent. She urges him to “turn aside” (euphemism for sex). She gives him milk and he falls asleep. In verse 21, she strikes:

Judges 4:21
But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died.

The prophecy is true – Sisera is sold into the hand of a woman. But, unexpectedly, the woman is Jael.

This story is artfully recounted in the “Song of Deborah” in Judges 5.

Judges 5:24-27
Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked for water and she gave him milk; she brought him curds in a noble’s bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.

THE VIRTUE OF COURAGE

This story is about the virtue of courage. Following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas defines courage as “firmness of mind in the face of grave danger, especially death.”

The virtue of courage belongs to all human persons – both men and woman face grave danger and death.

Courage is the virtue that allows us to act in the face of danger.

In this story, Barak the coward becomes courageous through Deborah.

In the Hebrew imagination, courage was not about heroics in battle, but faith in the Lord.

It takes courage to have faith. Conversely, idolatry is an act of cowardice.

Idolatry is easy – it doesn't ask anything of us. Faith requires us to risk everything and to put our total trust in God.

Like Barak, we are all cowards. We fail to trust Jesus from time to time. When courage fails, we should seek out encouragers like Deborah.

Deborah showed her courage not by fighting in battle, but giving encouragement to Barak. She does not put him down, but stands by his side in faith.

Illustration from "Lord of the Rings": Sam Wise Ganji encouraging Frodo and eventually carrying him to his destination.

In two of his letters, St. Paul mentions the ministry of Tychicus. Like Deborah, he was an encourager. He was sent by Paul to churches in Ephesus and Colossae during times of great difficulty.

Ephesians 6:21-22

So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.

Colossians 4:7-8

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts.

Paul knew how critical it was for the church to find encouragement in difficult times in the face of danger and certain death.

All of us should and can practice encouragement.

In our everyday moments of fear and difficulty, when we are tempted to give up and lose faith, we must ask God for courage. If we can't find courage within ourselves, we should seek out faithful friends who, like Tychicus and Deborah, can put courage into us.

The life of faith is impossible without courage. We need the faith of others to encourage us and to carry us in times of doubt and danger.

Judges 4:1-9 "Deborah and Barak"

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For the next lesson, please read Judges 6-8.