

WILLING SERVANTS

God restores His people to freedom using faithful and willing servants.

JUDGES 4:4-10,12-16

MEMORY VERSE: JUDGES 5:3

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Judges 3:7–5:31, First Thoughts (p. 94), and Understand the Context (pp. 94-95). Commit to memory this week's focal verse: Judges 5:3.
- **STUDY** Judges 4:4-10,12-16, using Explore the Text (pp. 95-99). Consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from *LifeWay.com*) for additional insight. As you study, look for the characters Deborah, Barak, and Sisera; watch for their roles in the events described in the passage.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100-101) and More Ideas (p. 102), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas available at *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible*.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (*MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible*).
- **GATHER** the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outlines of Joshua; Judges; Ruth*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Joshua; Judges; Ruth*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Judges*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Social Order

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Chariots: Their Development and Use," an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Winter 2016-17 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

BIBLE SKILL

Compare similar passages to gain a clearer understanding.

Read these passages in your Bible: Exodus 14:1-31; Judges 7:1-25; 2 Kings 18:13-19:37. Noting the similarities of the above passages, read Revelation 19:17-21 and 20:1-15. What central themes do you see present in each passage, if any? What do these passages teach about God's victory?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Running a marathon or half-marathon is a daunting challenge. The thought of pushing our bodies to endure the training is enough to keep most from giving it a second thought. It will hurt. You will need to train in nasty weather. If the weather is nasty the day of the run, you will not wait until the next perfect day. You will be sore the day after the event. You will wonder why you are doing it while running up the steepest hill in the race. Experts remind us that training with a group makes a difference. Knowing that someone else is willing to endure with you somehow lessens the pain. You are able to draw encouragement from one another because everyone is facing the same challenge.

(In PSG, p. 93) **Why does another person's willingness to serve motivate us to act? How does knowing someone else will work alongside us give us courage?**

In the Book of Judges, we find a soldier needing some encouragement. Deborah was a faithful and willing servant of God. She was the only female judge in the Book of Judges. Barak [BAY rak], the military leader, had been given orders to do battle with King Jabin [JAY bin], but he failed to act. Deborah's willingness to accompany Barak gave him the courage to face a formidable foe and allowed both of them to be a part of God's plan to deliver Israel.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JUDGES 3:7-5:31

In last week's session we examined the cycle of rebellion resulting in the oppression of God's people due to their sins. Only when the Israelites cried out to the Lord did He raise up a judge to liberate them. In Judges 3:7-5:31 we read of four judges the Lord raised up to deliver His people: Othniel [AHTH nih el], Ehud [EE huhd], Shamgar [SHAM gahr], and Deborah. Each of the first three judges led the military exercises themselves. In Deborah's case, Barak [BAY rak] was the military leader. The results of the judgeships of Othniel and Ehud were 40 years of peace (3:11) and 80 years of peace (3:30) respectively. The text only briefly mentions Shamgar in Judges 3:31, mentioning that he delivered Israel by striking down 600 Philistines.

Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar did the job God gave them to do. They delivered Israel from the oppression of their neighbors. However, when God commanded Barak to deliver Israel from Sisera's [SIS uh ruhs] army,

he was reluctant to perform his duties. We will explore this reluctance in the comments to follow, but one wonders if Israel's propensity to return to their rebellion after each deliverance sowed seeds of doubt in Barak's mind. Perhaps Barak's hesitancy stemmed from feelings of inadequacy for the task. Some scholars refer to Judges 4:4-10 as a "protested call" account. The Book of Judges also records Gideon's initial reluctance when God called him (6:12-40). Even Moses was reluctant to follow through on God's call on his life (Ex. 3-4). Only God's promise to be present with them enabled their success.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

AN UPDATED REQUEST (JUDG. 4:4-7)

VERSE 4

Deborah is identified as a **woman**, a **prophetess**, a **wife**, and a judge. Issues are often raised regarding the role of women as leaders. From a biblical perspective, God is free to use whomever He chooses to accomplish His goals.

Identifying Deborah as a woman might be nothing more than a reminder that most judges were men. The reference to Deborah as a prophetess is in keeping with other women of the Bible so identified: Miriam, Moses' older sister (Ex. 15:20); Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); and Noadiah (Neh. 6:14). Nothing is known about Deborah's husband **Lappidoth** [LAP ih dahth] since he is mentioned only here in Scripture.

Deborah also was identified as a judge, literally "one judging." The Hebrew participle derives from the verb *shaphat*, meaning "to decide" or "to get justice." Deborah's role was to discern the will of the Lord by studying the Law of Moses and through prayer. As she heard various people present their issues, she would rule in such a way as to uphold God's word.

VERSE 5

Deborah lived and judged in the territory of **Ephraim** [EE fra ihm], located northwest of the Dead Sea. From this central location, Deborah administered justice as she sat **under the palm tree** between **Ramah**, a city just north of Jerusalem, and **Bethel**, a city noted for being an important religious center throughout Israel's history.

The Israelites went up to her for judgment. The word *judgment* referred to a decisive declaration from the judge concerning a disputed matter. In every case, the judge was expected to deliver a decision that upheld and established justice based on the Torah.

One wonders how one woman could handle the caseload for the entire nation. Perhaps only the most difficult cases were brought to Deborah, a scenario first noted in the life of Moses (Ex. 18:13-27). Two features of Moses as judge are helpful for understanding Deborah's role as judge. First, when the people went to Moses, they were seeking to inquire of God (Ex. 18:15). Presumably this was the case in Deborah's day as well.

JUDGES 4:4

⁴ Deborah, a woman who was a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

JUDGES 4:5

⁵ It was her custom to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her for judgment.

JUDGES 4:6

⁶ She summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “Hasn’t the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you: ‘Go, deploy the troops on Mount Tabor, and take with you 10,000 men from the Naphtalites and Zebulunites?’

JUDGES 4:7

⁷ Then I will lure Sisera commander of Jabin’s forces, his chariots, and his army at the Wadi Kishon to fight against you, and I will hand him over to you.”

Second, through the decision rendered, the judge would teach the people God’s statutes and laws (Ex. 18:16).

However, in Deborah’s case, her judging might best be understood in the context of the impending national crisis of war. Oppressed by the Canaanites, led by King Jabin and his commander Sisera, the Israelites would have gone to Deborah for advice. Rather than administering justice in the typical sense of a judge, Deborah might have been the comforting voice of godliness, a scenario suggested by her title “mother in Israel” (Judg. 5:7).

VERSE 6

Deborah **summoned • Barak** [BAY rak] for an update as to why he had not obeyed God’s command to mobilize the Israelite forces at Mount Tabor. Her question regarding the Lord’s command is rhetorical, demanding an affirmative answer. God had **commanded** Barak, but he had not yet complied. The question identifies Deborah’s judgeship as one of spiritual leadership through her reference to **the LORD, the God of Israel**. She did not command Barak; God did. She served only to reinforce God’s command.

Barak becomes the center of focus after Deborah summoned him. He was **from Kedesh**, one of the six refuge cities. Kedesh was located in the tribal territory of **Naphtali** between six and seven miles northwest of Hazor. God’s command was for Barak to take **10,000 men from the Naphtalites** [NAF tuh lights] **and Zebulunites** [ZEB yoo luh nights]. These two tribes were located north of Ephraim, closest to Jabin’s fortified city of Hazor.

Mount Tabor rises 1,843 feet on the northeast boundary of the Jezreel Valley and served as a strategic location for monitoring Sisera’s troops. Since *the LORD, the God of Israel* commanded Barak to amass his troops on Tabor, He was the military strategist, not Barak or Deborah.

VERSE 7

This verse completes the divine instructions delineated in the previous verse. Thus, the Lord is the subject of the statements **I will lure Sisera commander of Jabin’s forces** and **I will hand him over**. God’s sovereignty is shown in His ability to lure and to hand over Sisera’s army just as He had done previously with Pharaoh and the Egyptian army (Ex. 14).

The Canaanite army was equipped with **chariots**, giving them a military advantage over the Israelites. The location of the battle was in the Jezreel Valley, near the **Wadi Kishon** [KIGH shahn] located at the northern base of Mount Carmel. The Wadi Kishon extended some 23 miles from the Mediterranean Sea eastward along the southern edge of the Jezreel Valley. The river could be as wide as 65 feet depending on the time of year and the amount of rainfall.

The statements **fight against you** and *I will hand him over to you* served to assure Barak that God knew the evil intent of the enemy and that the Lord Himself would intervene to guarantee victory. Yet, in spite of this assurance, Barak failed to comply until Deborah prompted him to deploy the troops.

How has God used you to nudge someone to act on His commands?
Conversely, how has God used others to prompt you to carry out some divine initiative?

A DEAL STRUCK (JUDG. 4:8-10)

VERSE 8

Barak told Deborah he would deploy only if she accompanied him. This condition revealed either a lack of faith on Barak's part or a deep-seated appreciation for Deborah's wisdom and rapport with the people. Either way, Barak's unwillingness to fulfill the divine command on his own revealed a spiritual weakness on his part. By twice stating **if**, he responded to God's direct command with a conditional reply. Often, the little words in our responses to God, like *if*, reveal big problems in our faith in the Lord.

Convinced he needed Deborah's support and authority, Barak insisted she go with him to muster the troops. He so strongly insisted on her cooperation that he refused to go without her. As the general of the army, Barak could have displayed his faith in the Lord by courageously gathering his army for battle. The Israelite soldiers would have been accustomed to their general taking such action. Was Barak afraid the size and strength of Sisera's army would dissuade the Hebrews from fighting? If so, Deborah's presence and verification of God's directive would suffice to calm the troops.

VERSE 9

In contrast to Barak's timid response to the Lord, Deborah readily agreed to Barak's terms. Her reply, ***I will go with you***, is emphatic in Hebrew. Deborah's faith in the Lord was so strong as to remove any hesitancy from her acting on the Lord's command.

However, Deborah's agreement to accompany Barak came with a warning of the price the reluctant general would pay. He would ***receive no honor on the road*** he was ***about to take***. In this case, *road* refers to the path of putting conditions on God's commands. The statement serves as a reminder to us to trust and obey the Lord rather than place conditions on our obedience. The term *honor* refers to the glory, distinction, and respect accompanying a military victory.

Deborah predicted the Lord would ***sell Sisera into a woman's hand***. As a result, the honor of victory after the battle would go to this woman. Though Barak was the general, others would speak of Sisera's defeat at the hands of a woman. Undaunted by her prediction, Barak insisted Deborah go with him. So the two of them went ***to Kedesh***, Barak's hometown.

VERSE 10

Barak wasted no time summoning ***Zebulun*** [ZEB yoo luhn] ***and Naphtali*** [NAF tuh ligh] ***to Kedesh***. An army of ***10,000 men followed*** Barak.

JUDGES 4:8

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."

JUDGES 4:9

⁹ "I will go with you," she said, "but you will receive no honor on the road you are about to take, because the LORD will sell Sisera into a woman's hand." So Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.

JUDGES 4:10

¹⁰ Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; 10,000 men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.

JUDGES 4:12-13

¹² It was reported to Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up Mount Tabor. ¹³ Sisera summoned all his 900 iron chariots and all the people who were with him from Harosheth of the Nations to the Wadi Kishon.

JUDGES 4:14

¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, “Move on, for this is the day the LORD has handed Sisera over to you. Hasn’t the LORD gone before you?” So Barak came down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him.

Additionally, Deborah accompanied Barak and the army to Mount Tabor. The rapid response by 10,000 men, possibly motivated by Deborah’s presence, alleviated Barak’s fears. However, King Jabin’s fortified city of Hazor was located in the tribal territory of Naphtali. Thus, the men of Naphtali and neighboring Zebulun had pragmatic reasons for wanting to throw off Jabin’s oppression. His subjugation of the Israelites was felt hardest closest to home. The enemy lived in their territory.

Have you ever made a deal with God to obey His commands as long as He or someone else met your conditions? Explain.

THE ORDERS ISSUED (JUDG. 4:12-14)

VERSES 12-13

With Deborah at his side, Barak led his troops from Kedesh to **Mount Tabor**, about 30 miles to the southwest. No details regarding troop movements are supplied, but given Kedesh’s close proximity to Hazor, Jabin’s fortress, Barak would have had to use great care to conceal his army from a preemptive attack. The hilly topography would have provided excellent cover for deploying Barak’s troops. Eventually, Barak’s forces were seen in the Jezreel Valley region, and Sisera was informed of Barak’s troops assembling on Mount Tabor.

The notice that **Sisera summoned all his 900 iron chariots** served the dual purpose of emphasizing Sisera’s overwhelming advantage in terms of military hardware and his determination to decimate Israel’s army. Sisera left nothing in reserve. The parallel is striking between Sisera’s actions and Pharaoh’s actions at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:5-7). Pharaoh mustered 600 choice chariots plus other chariots to destroy the Israelites at the Red Sea. Unfortunately for both Pharaoh and Sisera, no amount of chariots could surpass the awesome power of God directed against the enemies of His people, a truth all believers today can cherish.

In addition to his vast array of chariots, Sisera also took **all the people who were with him**. Though the size of his army is not explicitly listed, the implication is that Sisera had more troops than Barak’s 10,000-man army. From every appearance, the Israelites had little chance of winning the battle. The people were from **Harosheth** [huh ROH sheth] **of the Nations**, a city whose location is debated, with some scholars favoring a site near the base of Mount Carmel by the Wadi Kishon and others favoring a general reading of *Harosheth of the Nations* as “the woodlands of Galilee.”

VERSE 14

The two parts of this verse serve as a wonderful summary of God’s dealings with His people. First, Deborah reminded Barak of God’s promise to hand Sisera over to him. Then Deborah directed him to **move on**. She based her directive on God’s promise. She boldly claimed that **this is the day**

the LORD has handed Sisera over to you. Deborah's emphatic *this is the day* became a clarion call for immediate action. Deborah underscored her command with a rhetorical question: ***Hasn't the LORD gone before you?*** The question demanded an affirmative answer. Second, since God had gone out to the battle already, Barak had only to follow with his troops. So he led his 10,000-man army down from Mount Tabor.

(In PSG, p. 98) **How did Deborah's assurance of God's presence bolster Barak's willingness? How does the assurance of God's presence give a believer confidence?**

THE VICTORY WON (JUDG. 4:15-16)

VERSES 15-16

The most striking feature of the battle between the Israelites and the Canaanites is its depiction as a contest between ***the LORD*** and the Canaanites. Barak is mentioned only in passing. The statement that the Lord ***threw*** the entire Canaanite army ***into confusion*** marks the victory as being won by the Lord, as was the case at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:24).

The phrase ***with the sword*** indicates Barak and his army did indeed fight. They were the human instrumentality of God's victory, but the Lord alone was to be credited with the triumph over the Canaanites. God caused Sisera's army to become confused, and the warriors abandoned their chariots. The pride and strength of Sisera's army had been the 900 iron chariots. God rendered those chariots useless in the midst of the battle. Perhaps the river Kishon had overflowed its banks, flooding the Jezreel plain and causing the chariots to bog down. In any case, Sisera fled on foot, a defeated general, only to be killed by Jael [JAY uhl], the wife of Heber (Judg. 4:17-22).

Barak and his troops ***pursued*** Sisera's army until the Canaanite army was utterly defeated. Had Barak been distracted by chasing the fleeing Sisera, the Canaanite army would have survived to fight another day. Instead, the whole army of Sisera fell by the sword. The notice that ***not a single man was left*** underscores the totality of Israel's victory. Though the exact location of ***Harosheth of the Nations*** is uncertain, it is fitting that the Canaanite army was defeated and destroyed at Sisera's homeland (4:2).

How has God allowed you to participate in a victory He Himself won on your behalf or on behalf of someone close to you?

JUDGES 4:15-16

¹⁵ The LORD threw Sisera, all his charioteers, and all his army into confusion with the sword before Barak. Sisera left his chariot and fled on foot.

¹⁶ Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth of the Nations, and the whole army of Sisera fell by the sword; not a single man was left.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: After welcoming the group, call for volunteers to name tasks or jobs that are best accomplished when you have a partner working with you.

DISCUSS: *Why does another person's willingness to serve motivate us to act? How does knowing someone else will work alongside us give us courage?* (PSG, p. 93)

INTRODUCE: Remind the group of last week's study and the cycle of rebellion as the people of Israel abandoned God, suffered for their rebellion, and then returned to God during this Old Testament period of the judges. Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Joshua; Judges; Ruth*) and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Joshua; Judges; Ruth*). Share the information in Understand the Context (PSG, pp. 93-94) to explain how we continue to see this cycle of rebellion played out even as time passes. Note that in today's study we will meet Deborah, the only female judge among the 13 judges named in the book. Use **Pack Item 7** (*Chart: The Judges*) to help introduce Deborah.

TRANSITION: *Today as we look at Judges 4, watch for the ways God used Deborah and Barak to work together to accomplish His purposes.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Judges 4:4-7, listening for the two people introduced in these verses and their roles.

DISCUSS: *God had commanded Barak to deploy the troops, but it seems Barak had delayed in moving. Why is prompt obedience so important when God calls us to a task? Is delayed obedience really obedience?*

GUIDE: Instruct the group to silently read the paragraphs under Verses 4-5 (PSG, pp. 94-95) and Verses 6-7 (PSG, p. 95) and underline some of the facts they find about Deborah and Barak. Call for volunteers to share the details they found.

DISCUSS: *Why is willingness to serve essential in the life of a faithful believer?* (PSG, p. 95)

TRANSITION: *Although Barak was slow to obey God's command to deploy the troops, we will see in these next verses that he was willing to go under certain conditions.*

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Judges 4:8-10, while the others listen for Barak's conditions and Deborah's response.

GUIDE: Instruct half the group to read the information under Verse 8 (PSG, p. 96) and the other half to read the information under Verses 9-10 (PSG, pp. 96-97). Then call for volunteers to share details they discovered about Deborah and Barak.

DISCUSS: *In what kinds of situations do you need courage to take a stand for God? How does your fear or courage influence others? What blessings might one forfeit due to unfaithfulness and unwillingness to serve God?* (PSG, p. 97)

TRANSITION: *Let's look for the next moves that Barak, Deborah, and Sisera make.*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Judges 4:12-14, as the group listens for Deborah's words of guidance and encouragement to Barak.

GUIDE: Call attention to the information about chariots under Verses 12-14 (PSG, pp. 97-98), and note that Sisera with his chariots would have been a formidable opponent. Use Explore the Text on pages 98-99 to provide more background.

DISCUSS: *How did Deborah's assurance of God's presence bolster Barak's willingness? How does the assurance of God's presence give a believer confidence?* (PSG, p. 98)

TRANSITION: *With Deborah's confidence that God was going before them into battle, Barak positioned his men for battle. Now let's look at Judges 4:15-16 to see the outcome.*

READ: Call on someone to read aloud Judges 4:15-16, while the others listen for the description of how God went before Barak into battle, bringing him success.

DISCUSS: *How would you describe God's role in this battle? How do you differentiate between fighting for a cause and fighting alongside God?* (PSG, p. 99)

READ: Call for a volunteer to read aloud the information under Verses 15-16 (PSG, p. 99) to share how the story of Sisera ends (vv. 17-24).

EMPHASIZE: *God's purposes were completed with Sisera's army utterly destroyed.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

ASK: *How can knowing that God always keeps His promises help us when we face doubts? What can we say or do to encourage each other toward stronger confidence in God and His purposes?*

DIRECT: Encourage the group to think about their responses to the questions under In My Context (PSG, p. 100). Focus attention on the first question set: *How can you encourage leaders to follow God's commands? What actions can you take to encourage them in a Christ-honoring way?* Call for responses. Challenge them to commit to lifting up leaders through prayer and by the words they speak.

DO: As time allows, call attention to the third question set on page 100 of the PSG: *Evaluate your level of willingness to serve on a scale of one to ten with one being not willing and ten being actively serving now. What evidence can you point to in support of your evaluation? What needs to change for you to increase your level of willingness?* Read the questions and encourage the group to jot down a personal response in their PSG.

PRAY: Ask God to bless those who lead in your church, your community, and your country.



PRACTICE

- Send an email or text message to the group, encouraging them to greater confidence in God and His plans for their lives.
- Pray for all those who are leaders in your church.
- Follow up with any answers to questions the group had during this week's study.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the introduction to today's study, ask: *Who has been an example of a faithful servant in your life?* Encourage the group to make a phone call or send a note this week, thanking that person for the way they have demonstrated Christlikeness.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement Judges 4:12-14, point out that while Sisera depended on his chariots and men, Deborah depended on God, who already held the battle in His hands. Call for volunteers to find and read aloud the following verses: Philippians 1:6; 4:13; Hebrews 4:16; and 1 John 5:14. Ask: *How do these verses help our confidence in God grow? Where do you need God to go before you in circumstances or events today?* Encourage the group to pray for each other, especially that their confidence in God might be strengthened.
- To encourage the group to remember the memory verse for this session, Judges 5:3, refer to **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Discuss ways to praise God in our daily lives.
- To supplement Judges 4:12-14 and help the group better understand the idea that God provided the victory in battle, encourage the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 99): *Read these passages in your Bible: Exodus 14:1-31; Judges 7:1-25; 2 Kings 18:13-19:37. Noting the similarities of the above passages, read Revelation 19:17-21 and 20:1-15. What central themes do you see present in each passage, if any? What do these passages teach about God's victory?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct the group to the second question set in the PSG on page 100: *Discuss ways the Bible study group can provide evidence of being faithful and willing servants to Jesus. What can the group do to foster faithfulness and willingness?* Encourage the group to name specific, practical ways to increase their faithfulness and willingness.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Review the words to "He Leadeth Me! O Blessed Thought," by Joseph H. Gilmore, noting God's leadership in Deborah's life and in our lives today. Sing or read the lyrics to the hymn as a group.