

Judges 4-5 • Deborah and Barak

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Judges chapter 4. We've been dealing with the various individuals whom God has raised up to be judges during this time in Israel between the conquest of the land, which we've learned wasn't a complete conquest, and the time of the kings. Well, we're in between that time right now, historically, for the nation of Israel.

The leadership of Ehud was really the last judge that we looked at. There was another guy that they popped in there quick at the end of chapter 3 named Shamgar, but he was a fairly minor character, and it seems that he even rose to his position even during the peace that had come about through Ehud.

Remember, Ehud was the left-handed man who killed the king of Moab. A funny story – well, it's not funny, but it was an interesting story. Let's just say, that went along with that whole thing. But because of the ministry and the leadership of Ehud as a judge, it says at the end of chapter 3 that the nation of Israel had peace for 80 years. That's a long time. That's a long time to have peace.

But we're told that after the death of Ehud, the people once again lapsed into idolatry, and that naturally brings the disciplinary hand of the Lord into play. That's what we see repeatedly here in the Book of Judges again and again.

Chapter 4 is where we are, and it begins—usually these chapters often begin with similar language: *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. ² 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... (that town)” (ESV)*

Now Sisera, by the way, is the key player here. Jabin is the king, but we don't really hear much about him. In fact, he's just the—he's the big mucky muck who's ruling in this area of Canaan. But Sisera is the commander or the captain, if you will, of his army. He's the man – and it seems like he's the one who has power.

That often is the case in government situations. Sometimes it's the military leaders that actually have the real power and will. That's why many times in nations, even today, you'll hear about a military coup that overthrows the political power of the government because the military leaders are the ones that have all of the muscle. Sisera seems to be that kind of a man.

And after we're told where he lived — very difficult town to pronounce, “*Harosheth-hagoyim*” How did I do? I've learned that with these Old Testament names, you just got to say them quick and make people think you know what you're talking about. You just say it quick, and people go woah. But you got to practice, so you could, otherwise you go, ha-gi-sho-wa-ba, or something, and then they know you're a fake. Anyway, that's just a little tip.

It says: “³ *Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help...*” I want you to notice something right here in this verse. What did they cry out to the Lord for? Help. Exactly.

It doesn't say that they cried out to the Lord for help in repentance, does it? It doesn't say that they came to God and said: We've walked away from You. Here we had 80 years of peace and prosperity, and then we made our way back to these idols. And now, look where we are. Oh God, forgive us.

They're not crying out to God for a new heart. They're not crying out in repentance. They're not crying out because of the sorrow of their sinful ways. What are they asking for? Help. They want relief.

Do you guys understand that there's a huge difference between coming to God simply for comfort and relief? Listen, God knows you need comfort and relief. We all do. I need comfort and relief. We all, when things are difficult, need the comfort of the Lord. And God loves to give comfort.

I was talking to Sue about this just today. We were remarking about the fact that in the Book of Isaiah, for example, you might even remember this song, The Messiah. There's a song that's beautiful, a song that's all about comfort my people, Jerusalem; sing comfort over them – and that's right out of Isaiah where God says, speak comfort to my people.

God knows that we need comfort. But when we ask for comfort without any recognition of what may have gotten us into our circumstances in the first place. When there's no recognition of our own personal responsibility. When there's nothing that says, Lord, search me and know me and see if there be any wicked way in me, as David prayed. Then it becomes an empty thing because we just go from our sinful lifestyle to crying out for comfort. Being comforted because God is gracious and merciful, to not learning any sort of a lesson and then getting right back in there again.

It's like that story that Jesus told about the man who has a demon and who has it exorcised from his life, but who goes out and then, it says, that demon finds seven

more demons more powerful than himself, and they go back and reinhabit that man because there's been no change. There's been nothing, fundamentally, that has happened inside the man's heart. He was delivered, sure enough, but nothing got changed. No determination – I'm going to live for God. I'm going to invite the Lord into my life.

And that's what Jesus said about the man. He was like an empty house swept clean— and that's all good and fine, but it's empty. It's still empty, right? So, you get the point.

Now, I want you to also see here in verse 3 because there's more information here. It says: “*Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he (meaning Sisera, or King Jabin, if you want) had 900 chariots of iron.*”

That was a strong military force. A chariot was like a tank— could be considered today, or even a weapon of mass destruction in terms of like a bomb. This was a very powerful man. He had a very powerful army, and I want you to notice what this man did with his power.

Look at the last part of verse 3: “*...he oppressed the people of Israel (how the ESV says) cruelly (and he did it) for twenty years.*”

Now, yeah, that's only a fraction of the time they had lived in peace, but still 20 years is a long time to suffer when you have a cruel, megalomaniac king who has power and isn't afraid to exercise it to make your life miserable just because he can. That's a hard situation to endure under, and the people are now crying out to the Lord.

We're told here in verse 4 that: “*Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ 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.*”

Now, this is an interesting description of what a judge really, typically did and why they got their name. They were called judges because they would help the people with their disputes. They would come to this person like we would go to small claims court. And the king was even—once the period of the kings began, he would do that.

Remember the two prostitutes? One of whom had rolled over on her child during the night and suffocated the child, brought the child that was alive into Solomon to— because the one who had unwittingly killed her child lied about it.

Remember, she got up during the night, took her lifeless baby, put it next to the other woman, and took the other woman's alive baby, and put it in bed with her. And the next morning, the woman whose baby was still alive woke up and went: What's up here? This isn't my baby, and besides, it's dead! So, they had this dispute, and they took it—who'd they go to? Solomon. That's the Supreme Court.

They got to hear this judgment by the king who was sitting in this position as judge. Well, before the time of the kings, we just simply called these people judges because, fundamentally, what they would do was they would hear the cases of the people. Okay?

Often these individuals are used also to bring deliverance, and it doesn't necessarily mean they ever actually judged. Like Samson—he was pretty much a flesh pot, and didn't ever get around to living much of a righteous life, to be completely honest with you.

Just to take one example—we'll get to Samson later on—he never really fulfilled the role of a judge. He was a crazy man, went around breaking things and people, but never really did much judging. But he's still referred to as one of the judges. Right? Even though— so you can see how the name goes.

It says, now, speaking here of Deborah: *“⁶ 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’?”*

That's a good word from the Lord, but look at what Barak says: *“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.’”* Stop there.

Did you hear what he said? If you go with me, I'll go. If you won't go, I won't go. That's called conditional obedience, and it's obviously referred to that because it says, in essence, that certain conditions must be met in order for me to comply. In other words, it's like that person who makes a deal with God. I'll do it if, right? I'll do it if. I will obey if. If you do this, then I will obey. All right?

Now, we know that we all should obey God in spite of how we may be feeling or how we personally see the circumstances stacked up against us, or whatever the case might be, but we don't always do it, do we? Sometimes, we make our obedience conditional. And it happens.

Well, Deborah responds, and she says here: “⁹ ... *“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...*”

As we stop and think about this exchange now between this man and this woman, it's really difficult for us to know what was in his heart and why he said what he said about going along, and why he made the condition of Deborah coming along as a condition of his obedience. We really don't know why. But Deborah agreed to his terms, although she stated for him that he would not receive the glory for this, and she said it would instead go to a woman.

And for the longest time, I thought it was Deborah, and it's not. It's not Deborah. She's acting still as a prophetess. She is speaking about what is to come, and we have to read on to find out what that is.

“¹⁰ And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali (these two tribes from Israel) to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.”

We're not told, by the way, why only two tribes, at this point anyway, are amassing themselves for this warfare. Nothing is really given to us here as to why these are the ones who came out, other than the fact that those are the ones Deborah really told him to go and get. We get a hint at it in the song of Deborah which takes place in the next chapter.

But then we have verse 11, which is an interesting comment that's given to us here. It almost seems out of place until we get later on in the story, but it says: *“Now Heber the Kenite (so that would mean he's not of Israel) had separated from the Kenites, (so he had gotten away from his whole clan) the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, (so there's this shirt tail marriage relationship, alright?) and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.”*

All right? Now, this comment just sits there, but tuck it in your brain, because we're going to be hearing about this family of Heber.

“¹² When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, (that place) to the river Kishon.”

So, they're coming to the river. By the way, the river Kishon is still there today. You can go to Israel, and you can see this is all taking place—I was going to put a

map up, and then I thought better of it. But if you have a mental picture of the nation of Israel, this is all going up in the northern region. In fact, this is right—the Kishon river is just south of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up – remember, Jesus was known as a Nazarene. So that was way up in the region of Galilee, all right? So, it's way up north where these particular tribes are.

And that may be one of the reasons why some of the southern tribes didn't get involved. We don't know how far King Jabin's reach was in his cruel oppression of the Israelites. We're not really sure. But obviously, it was fired up north, and that's why God worked out the deliverance up there as well.

Verse 14: *“And Deborah said to Barak, “Up (which is to say, arise, let’s go)! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. ¹⁵ And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot.”*

So, obviously the battle went very, very badly for him to the point where he had to just run—he had to run for his life. *“¹⁶ And Barak pursued the chariots and the army (all the way back to the captain's home city, which they put there again for you and I to try to read) and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; (in fact, we're told here) not a man was left.*

¹⁷ But (the captain) Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, (look at this) the wife of Heber the Kenite (that's why we were given that information previously because now she's going to figure in to this whole story. And so, he goes there because they were on friendly relations, and that's what we're told) for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸ And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹ And he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. ²⁰ And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” Stop there.

She may have protected him up until he said this, because this request probably tipped her off that something was happening. The Kenites obviously knew that Israel was going to war against king Jabin. They knew that, but they didn't really know how it was going to turn out. But the fact that the captain of Jabin's army came into their campground on foot; secondly, needed sanctuary inside her tent,

and then asked her to lie for him, that if anybody came looking for him, she was to say no.

She's a smart lady. It tips her off, and she realizes, ah, I don't even have to ask this guy how that battle went. It went bad for him. So, she knows that people are coming to look for this man, and she's got to do some fast thinking because even though they're on somewhat friendly relations with king Jabin, they're also on somewhat friendly relations with Israel. They're in a neutral stance, but they know that. She knows that Israel is being delivered this day from this cruel oppression that has been happening for 20 years under king Jabin. So, she's going to do something.

And it says in verse 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.”* You think? Yeah, so she killed him. Yeah.

“²² And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

²³ So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. ²⁴ And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed him.” So, he was wiped out because of this situation.

Now, Judges chapter 5 is really just a song of praise all about this victory, and it says: *“Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day:”* And then it goes on to give us the song, and they begin to just exalt in the Lord, and praise those who came into the battle and did a good work – it starts by saying that:

*“² “That the leaders took the lead in Israel,
that the people offered themselves willingly,
bless the LORD!*

*³ “Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;
to the LORD I will sing;
I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.*

*⁴ “LORD, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled*

(now look at this – they're singing, and yes, this is poetic language, but they say,
the earth trembled)
and the heavens dropped,
yes, the clouds dropped water. ”

Now, you can dismiss this as simple poetic language, or you can learn from this that God also fought for Israel by probably earthquakes in various places, but also a torrential downpour that probably swelled the river to the point.

Now think about this for a minute: if there is a soaking, torrential rain that happens at the time of battle, that's not going to be a real big problem, frankly, for foot soldiers. Who's that going to be a problem for? Chariots. Yeah, chariots. That's going to be a big problem for chariots.

So, in this song of Deborah, they begin to talk about how the Lord intervened in the deliverance through the natural world and brought the shaking of the earth and a torrential rainfall that obviously gave the edge to a much smaller military force from Israel to overcome this army, which we're not even given the number of. So, it seems to do more than suggest that God aided them in the battle.

And it says in verse 6:

*“In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned,
and travelers kept to the byways.
7 The villagers ceased in Israel;
they ceased to be until I arose;
I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.
8 When new gods were chosen,
then war was in the gates.
Was shield or spear to be seen
among forty thousand in Israel?”*

In other words, the question is being asked here: Did the Israelites come out en masse to fight against Jabin, king of Canaan? They did not. She's saying here at this point that this was a small representative army of Israel.

Were there 40,000 people that came out? No, we heard that there was 10,000; just 10. There should have been far more than that, had all Israel been involved. But they weren't – and in fact, she'll talk about that, too. She says:

*“⁹ My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel
who offered themselves willingly among the people.
Bless the LORD.*

*¹⁰ “Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys,
you who sit on rich carpets
and you who walk by the way.*

*¹¹ To the sound of musicians at the watering places,
there they repeat the righteous triumphs of the LORD,
the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel.
“Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD.*

*¹² “Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, break out in a song!
Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,
O son of Abinoam.*

*¹³ Then down marched the remnant of the noble;
the people of the Lord marched down for me against the mighty.*

*¹⁴ From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley,
following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen;
from Machir marched down the commanders,
and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff;*

*¹⁵ the princes of Issachar came with Deborah,
and Issachar faithful to Barak;
into the valley they rushed at his heels. ”*

So, they're just singing this song of praise for the people who were involved. But then it says:

*“Among the clans of Reuben
there were great searchings of heart.*

*¹⁶ Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds,
to hear the whistling for the flocks?*

*Among the clans of Reuben
there were great searchings of heart.*

*¹⁷ Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan;
and Dan, why did he stay with the ships?*

*Asher sat still at the coast of the sea,
staying by his landings. ”*

And these, obviously, are written into this song, are a little bit of a poke in the side, if not a full-out black eye to these other tribes that just for whatever reason didn't get involved. And we don't know why— we don't know why they held back, except there's this interesting statement that's repeated twice, that in Reuben there was great searchings of heart.

It's like— have you ever talked to somebody about something and talked about serving the Lord? And they said, well, I got to think about that. Let me let me pray about that. Yeah, we'll think that over. Strong— long searchings of the heart. Sometimes there's time just to get involved, just to— just get up and do it, and these people just waffled. So it's written into this song how they just didn't get involved. They just sat back.

Verse 18:

*“Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death;
Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field.
19 “The kings came, they fought;
then fought the kings of Canaan,
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;
they got no spoils of silver.*

*20 From heaven the stars fought,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.”*

Not exactly even sure what that's a reference to, but.

*“21 The torrent Kishon (now that's the river. It says, the torrent of Kishon) swept them away,
the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!”*

Again, this is a reference to that— probably that torrential rainfall that filled the Kishon River and made it impassable, or actually, even overflowed to the point where it actually swept away some of the chariots of the king.

And then, it says in verse 22:

*“Then loud beat the horses' hoofs
with the galloping, galloping of his steeds.*

²³ *“Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD,
curse its inhabitants thoroughly,
because they did not come to the help of the LORD,
to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”*

This area of Meroz, we don't know where it is today. It seems fairly obvious that it's probably a— it was a colony of Israelites living in the land at the time, who also refused to get involved in this God-directed battle.

The song includes a curse, and then, look at this:

²⁴ *“Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.*
²⁵ *He asked for water and she gave him milk;
she brought him curds in a noble's bowl.*
²⁶ *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.*

²⁷ *Between her feet
he sank, he fell, he lay still;
between her feet
he sank, he fell;
where he sank,
there he fell—dead.”*

I'm assuming there's a real catchy tune that goes with this. It's— you can probably dance to it because they like to do that sort of a thing. Whenever you get repetition—we know all about repetition in songs.

Verse 28—now, it's interesting, these last verses of the song are spoken as if they are observing Sisera's mother, who would be anticipating his return after the battle; and it says:

²⁸ *“Out of the window she peered,
the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice:
‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?’*
²⁹ *Her wisest princesses answer,*

indeed, she answers herself,
³⁰ *'Have they not found and divided the spoil?—* (In other words, they're busy going through all the loot.)

*A womb or two for every man;
spoil of dyed materials for Sisera,
spoil of dyed materials embroidered,
two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?'*

³¹ *"So may all your enemies perish, O LORD!
But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might."*

And then the chapter concludes with the words: *"And the land had rest for forty years."*

So very interesting chapter—is it not?— of the deliverance of the Lord. I want to give a closing thought to you that— and reiterate what we talked about at the very beginning— I want to come back to this— I guess I should say, I want to come back to this idea here of the nation of Israel after these 20-some years of cruel oppression, crying out for suffering but not change.

King David prayed and said: Create in me a clean heart, a pure heart. That is the heart of the Lord. When we cry out to God, rather than just relief and comfort, He wants us to come and bring our hearts before Him, that He might truly analyze our hearts.

And I'm really hoping— and this is the reason I bring this up again: As we go through the questions that we've prepared for tonight, and look at some of those, and even the prayer points, I want you to keep that in mind, if you would, because I think that's a really important thing to hold on to:

Lord, it's not just relief; it's not just comfort. I mean, You're happy to give me those things, but that's going to ultimately be a very empty thing in my life, if there's not also this true soul searching that brings my heart before the Lord and says: God, search me and know me.

Search me and know me — that's a pretty scary thing to say. I don't know if you've ever searched yourself. That's not actually what David was saying. He didn't say: I'm going to search myself. He said: Lord, You search me.

You search yourself – you're in for some trouble. You look deep into your own personality, your own psyche, your own thoughts – you're going to find a mess

there. You're going to find a dark, creepy mess. You're not going to know it, and it'll overwhelm you.

One of the wonderful things about God is that we can invite Him in to look at the mess that is our inner selves, and we can say, search me and know me, and He's not going to get freaked out. He is going to be able to strengthen us to find our way out of that mess and to begin to put in order and change the things in our life that need to be changed.

I'm not going to— I'm going to step down off this soapbox, but let me just say that it's one of my big pet peeves against modern psychological approaches, this whole idea of we just need to sit down and talk about all this stuff. I think it's a trap. I really do. I think it's a trap to sit and talk about self all day long because it's still—it's just self-focus.

Let God turn His search light on in your heart. Let Him do the searching. That's the biblical picture that we have. Lord, search me and know me, because I trust You, because what You see there, You're going to know what to do with. What I see there is probably just going to overwhelm me and freak me out, but I trust You to know what's best.