

**Deborah
Judges 4
Week 3**

Opening

Prayer

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.

When was a time of transition in your life? What was difficult about that season? How did that time energize you?

Background

The broader context of leadership in Judges 4 is that Moses has died, and his successor, Joshua has also died. 3:7 says that, "the people worshipped the Lord all the days of Joshua..." Then, in 3:11, it says, "then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals..." The Israelites are learning to exist with a new leader. 3:16 says that, "Then the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them." Judges are a new system of leadership for Israel.

A few things about Judges:

- God raised up judges for at different times during this period to settle disputes and to lead the Israelites particularly against the attacks from the Canaanites.
- When a judge died, years might go by before another judge was raised up. Particularly when the people were oppressed, God would provide someone to lead them.
- These judges were not judges as we think of them. Though they did sometimes settle disputes, they had a primary function of military leadership.

Scriptures names Deborah as one of these leaders in Israel. The text says that she is:

- “prophetess,” one who makes God’s will known to the people of Israel;
- “judge,” one who settles disputes and functions as a military commander.
- Also, in Judges 5:7, she is named, “a mother in Israel.”
- Deborah is a woman in tune with God, the world, and her people.

In chapter 4, there is a new technology of war. 4:3b says, “for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.” The mention of iron provides a glimpse into the major cultural shift in technology occurring in the ancient Near East at this time from the earlier Bronze Age to the early phase of the Iron Age (1200-1000BCE). The Canaanites were the more established, powerful, and richer culture in comparison to the Israelites. Thus the Canaanites had access to the most recent military technology, which they used to maintain their power and “cruelly” oppress the Israelites.¹ Perhaps this technology, partnered with Israel’s new leadership style and current situation, “cruelly oppressed,” we can better understand Barak’s words, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” It may be that he sought the assurance of one of God’s leaders with him on the battlefield.

One will notice the similarities between Judges 4 and the Exodus account. The Israelites are being oppressed. They cry out to God. God fights for them, God employs significant leaders, the enemy is much stronger, and yet, against the odds, the Israelites are delivered.

The Lord throws Sisera and all his chariots into a panic, again, a similarity with the Exodus story, and Sisera flees on foot. Sisera finds the tent of Jael. Here, in a rather comedic way, Sisera is reduced to an infant. Jael gives him milk and he lies down to sleep. In verse twenty Sisera tells Jael to answer the question, “is anyone here?” in the negative. That question can also be read, “Is there a man here.” It would seem as though the author is having a bit of fun telling the story at the expense of Sisera.

Overall, the first phase of the judge stories in 3:7-5:31 portrays faithfulness and effectiveness on the part of Israel’s leaders and judges. When the judge or judges are alive, Israel prospers. But when the judge dies, Israel reverts to its old evil ways.²

¹ Dennis T. Olson, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Pg. 779.

² Dennis T. Olson, The NIB, Pg. 782.

Read Judges 4

*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

1. In the book of Judges, there is a pattern of violence. First, we get the story of Ehud, and then this story here Deborah and Jael. The stories continue throughout the book when violence is followed up with violence. In some ways, the sentiment of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is present, "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." That is to say, violence begets violence.
 - a. What sense have you made of the violence in scripture?
2. The judge stories and the portraits of women begin as healthy, strong, and faithful. The first women we encounter all have names (Achsah, Deborah, Jael). But increasingly, as Israel and the judges begin their decline, the fate of women will decline as well. The many women characters become nameless (except for Delilah in the Samson story). Women gradually lose their independent power and become objects and victims, first inadvertently and willingly (Jephthah's daughter and his foolish vow in chap. 11), but then more intentionally and unwillingly (Samson's women in chaps. 14-16, the Levite's concubine in chap. 19, the 400 young virgins of Jabesh-Gilead and the women dancers at Shiloh in chap. 21). The book of judges offers a wide spectrum of the possible experiences of women, but positive and negative. In the ancient world as well as our own, the health and well-being of women provide an important barometer to measure the core health and values of a society or community.³
 - a. What sense have you made of women's role within a faith community? Within our society?
 - b. Given our current culture, how might we take seriously the treatment of women laid out in the Book of Judges?

So What Questions

1. In Judges 4, God uses courageous women, cowardly men, and a non-Israelite to deliver his people. In some ways, one may simply not expect God to work through the people God does in the story.

³ Dennis T. Olson, NIB, Pg. 783.

- a. Have you ever seen God work through someone you didn't expect? What was that story?
2. Some stories from scripture are easy to read, make you feel good, and easy to put in children's bibles. This isn't one of them. The story of Deborah requires much more than a surface level understanding of scripture and a dynamic understanding of God.
 - a. For someone who may be reading this for the first time who is new or young in the faith, what encouragement might you offer them to navigate this story faithfully?

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with a one word prayer.

One word prayer explained:

Begin with a few moments of silence, time for the Holy Spirit to give each person one prayerful word to speak. Then, go around the room, and have each person pray their one word. They don't have to explain or preface their word. Also, if someone says the word someone was going to say, tell the group that there is no need to change their word. The Holy Spirit works communally. Lastly, if the Holy Spirit doesn't seem to give someone a word, invite them to say, "love." It always works 😊