

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
1-31-24

Judges 4

The Cycle Begins Again: Apostasy, Servitude And Supplication – Verses 1-3

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. ² So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. ³ Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

4:1 Israel sinned “in the eyes of the LORD.” Our sins harm both ourselves and others, but all sin is ultimately against God because it disregards his commands and his authority over us. When confessing his sin, David prayed, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51: 4). Recognizing the seriousness of sin is the first step toward removing it from our lives.

4:2-3 Nothing more is known about Jabin. Joshua had defeated a king by that name years earlier and burned the city of Hazor to the ground (Joshua 11: 1-11). Either the city was rebuilt by this time, or Jabin was hoping to rebuild it. This is the only time during the period of the judges when the Israelites’ enemies came from within their land. The Israelites had failed to drive out all the Canaanites. These Canaanites had regrouped and were attempting to restore their lost power. If the Israelites had obeyed God in the first place and had driven the Canaanites from the land, this incident would not have happened.

4:2-3 Chariots were the tanks of the ancient world. Made of iron or wood, they were pulled by one or two horses and were the most feared and powerful weapons of the day. Some chariots even had razor-sharp knives extending from the wheels designed to mutilate helpless foot soldiers. The Canaanite army had 900 iron chariots. Israel was not powerful enough to defeat such an invincible army. Therefore, Jabin and Sisera had no trouble oppressing the people— until a faithful woman named Deborah called upon God.

4:3 After 20 years of unbearable circumstances, the Israelites finally cried to the Lord for help. But God should be the first place we turn when we are facing struggles or dilemmas. The Israelites chose to go their own way and got into a mess. We often do the same. Trying to control our own lives without God’s help leads to struggle and confusion. By contrast, when we stay in daily contact with the Lord, we are less likely to create painful circumstances for ourselves. This is a lesson the Israelites never fully learned. When struggles come our way, God wants us to come to him first, seeking his strength and guidance.

Deborah: A Prophetess And A Judge For Israel – Verses 4-5

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 to her to have their disputes decided.

4:4 The Bible records several women who held national leadership positions, and Deborah was an exceptional woman. Obviously she was the best person for the job, and God chose her to lead Israel. God can choose anyone to lead his people, young or old, man or woman. Don’t let your prejudices get in the way of those God may have chosen to lead you.

4:4-5 Some consider it unexpected for God to raise up a woman as prophetess. But the New Testament makes it clear that God grants the gift of prophecy unto women also, and they are to practice it appropriately (1 Corinthians 11:5). The Bible tells us of several other prophetesses: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Anna (Luke 2:36), and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:8-9).

4:4-5 And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment: Often it is assumed that Deborah was allowed leadership because unspecified men failed to take the position. While later we will see that Barak doesn't seem to be all he should be, we have no indication that he failed to do something God told him to do in taking leadership.

Deborah Calls Barak With A Message From God – Verses 6-7

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. ⁷I 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.’”

4:6-8 Was Barak cowardly or just in need of support? We don't know Barak's character, but we see the character of a great leader in Deborah, who took charge as God directed. Deborah told Barak that God would be with him in battle, but that was not enough for Barak. He wanted Deborah to go with him. Barak's request shows that at heart he trusted human strength more than God's promise. A person of real faith steps out at God's command, even if he or she must do so alone.

Barak Will Only Lead If Deborah Accompanies – Verses 8-10

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.

4:9 How did Deborah command such respect? She was responsible for leading the people into battle, but more than that, she influenced them to live for God after the battle was over. Her personality drew people together and commanded the respect of even Barak, a military general. She was also a prophet, whose main role was to encourage the people to obey God. Those who lead must not forget about the spiritual condition of those being led. A true leader is concerned for persons, not just success.

The Armies Gather Together Against One Another – Verses 11-13

¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh. ¹² When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

4:11 Heber was Jael's husband (4: 17). He was from the Kenite tribe, descendants of Moses' father-in-law, and longtime allies of Israel. But for some reason, Heber decided to remain neutral in this war, maybe because Jabin's army appeared to have the military advantage. It was probably Heber who told Sisera that the Israelites were camped near Mount Tabor. Although Heber threw in his lot with Jabin and his forces, his wife, Jael, did not (4: 21).

Sisera And His Army Are Utterly Defeated – Verses 14-16

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. ¹⁵ At Barak’s advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶ Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera’s troops fell by the sword; not a man was left.

4:14-16 So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men: This was a wonderful act of faith on the part of Barak, who moved to a battleground where his armies were at a great disadvantage against the enemy’s chariots. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots: Because of Barak’s great trust in God (as well as the trust his armies had in the LORD), God granted them a great victory against great odds. Deborah played a big role in this victory. She was an encourager, building up the faith of Barak and his men. Her encouragement was that God, as a king, would go out before His people into battle.

The Death Of Sisera By The Hand Of A Woman – Verses 17-22

¹⁷ Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. ¹⁹ “I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. ²⁰ “Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone in there?’ say ‘No.’” 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.

4:18-21 Sisera couldn’t have been more pleased when Jael offered him her tent as a hiding place. First, because Jael was the wife of Heber, a man friendly to Sisera’s forces, he thought she could be trusted. Second, because men were never allowed to enter a woman’s tent, no one would think to look for Sisera there. Even though her husband, Heber, apparently sided with Sisera’s forces, Jael certainly did not. Because women of that day were in charge of pitching the tents, Jael had no problem driving the tent peg into Sisera’s head while he slept. Deborah’s prediction was thus fulfilled: The honor of conquering Sisera went to a brave and resourceful woman (4: 9).

After This Decisive Battle, Full Victory Soon Won For Israel – Verses 23-24

²³ On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. ²⁴ And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

4:23-24 And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger: The battle against Sisera was important, but it did not end the struggle. It was an important event that Israel had to continue to develop and walk in. The war was not over until Jabin was destroyed. Israel could not think the war was over when a great battle was won.