

JUDGES—WEEK 4

WHEN LEADERS LEAD



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

After the great victory over Sisera's army, Jael kills Sisera with milk and a tent peg. Deborah and Barak sing a song of the victory and of the involvement of the tribes of Israel.

Some tribes get commended, some criticized. But God gets the glory.

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Thank you.

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Joshua, Week 4 — When Leaders Lead

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1 Judges 4:17–24

However, Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear.” And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket.

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.” So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him. And he said to her, “Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, ‘Is there any man here?’ you shall say, ‘No.’”

Then Jael, Heber’s wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, “Come, I will show you the man whom you seek.” And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.

So on that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

Once again we see that trusting someone completely because you don’t see them as a threat can be a fatal mistake. We aren’t told why Jael wants to kill Sisera, but he makes it easy for her to do it.

And, once again, we see women taking initiative. Jael’s husband had made peace with King Jabin, but Jael appears to not be a fan. Her name sounds a lot like the Hebrew for “The LORD is God.” That doesn’t feel like a coincidence. Sisera’s hiding in a woman’s tent is about as cowardly as it gets, so the result is fitting.

In that culture, it’s shameful to be killed by a woman.

Sisera’s dishonorable behavior is representative of his life and his culture. The claim that someone’s ethics can be “compartmentalized” is dubious in any case, but laughably suspect back then. Children were either raised on righteousness or they weren’t.

A modern society can kill ethics too. When the USSR punished people like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for writing poetry about goodness, they were trying to obliterate ethics.

One of our tasks as Christians is to inculcate right and wrong into our children. Parents and Sunday School teachers must be ever mindful of this. We live in an era of a battle for truth. It’s not just a battle for what is true; it’s a battle for whether there is a truth at all.

This is the subject of CS Lewis’s book *The Abolition of Man*. It’s a must read.

<http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/cosmos/philo/AbolitionofMan.pdf>

2 Judges 5:1–5

Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying:

*“When leaders lead in Israel,
When the people willingly offer themselves,
Bless the LORD!*

*“Hear, O kings! Give ear, O princes!
I, even I, will sing to the LORD;
I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel.*

*“LORD, when You went out from Seir,
When You marched from the field of Edom,
The earth trembled and the heavens poured,
The clouds also poured water;
The mountains gushed before the LORD,
This Sinai, before the LORD God of Israel.”*

The song of Deborah and Barak will take up a week of DEEPs. Two typical themes recur:

- 1) It’s about God, not people. Though the events sung about involve people, He gets all the glory.
- 2) We can learn a lot from the things not sung. Some things are notably absent.

Modern Israel has conscription; everyone has to serve a term in the military. Ancient Israel did not. The soldiers who won this battle—against insurmountable odds—were like the American militias who won the Revolutionary War, except the American militias weren’t outnumbered the way the Israelites were.

So, when Deborah and Barak sing, *“When leaders lead in Israel, when the people willingly offer themselves,”* they’re singing of genuine heroic courage.

But where does that lead?

Bless the LORD!

So, who do they sing to?

I, even I, will sing to the LORD;

They know who the real hero is.

The lesson seems simple enough. Worship the LORD.

But Americans do not get this. We worship people to an amazing extent. And the ones we worship the most, sports and entertainment stars, are some of the least important people in history. If they’d never been born, it wouldn’t have made much difference.

3 Judges 5:6–11

*“In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath,
In the days of Jael,
The highways were deserted,
And the travelers walked along the byways.
Village life ceased, it ceased in Israel,
Until I, Deborah, arose,
Arose a mother in Israel.
They chose new gods;
Then there was war in the gates;
Not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.
My heart is with the rulers of Israel
Who offered themselves willingly with the people.
Bless the LORD!*

*“Speak, you who ride on white donkeys,
Who sit in judges’ attire,
And who walk along the road.
Far from the noise of the archers, among the watering places,
There they shall recount the righteous acts of the LORD,
The righteous acts for His villagers in Israel;
Then the people of the LORD shall go down to the gates.”*

It looks like all Israel needed was a little adult supervision and everything would be just hunky-dory.

But before “mom” showed up, life in Israel was anything but hunky-dory. The word “deserted” says it all. *The highways were deserted, and the travelers walked along the byways. Village life ceased.*

The deserted highways mean there was no significant traffic, thus no commerce. “*Travelers walked along the byways,*” hints at people avoiding the main roads because they aren’t safe. Normal life and commerce (*village life*) had ceased.

But it gets worse. They lost everything when, “*They chose new gods.*” They submitted so totally to their conquerors that, “*Not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.*”

So, their deliverance was all the more spectacular. And the tale should be told by all, from the nobles, “*who ride on white donkeys, who sit in judges’ attire,*” to the commoners, “*who walk along the road.*”

And, of course, they don’t take the credit. *There they shall recount the righteous acts of the LORD.*

Giving God the credit isn’t as easy as it sounds. Even when God’s hand is obvious, we want the glory.

Our sinful nature always seeks to self-promote.

4 Judges 5:12–18 (ESV)

“Awake, awake, Deborah!

Awake, awake, break out in a song!

Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,

O son of Abinoam.

Then down marched the remnant of the noble;

the people of the LORD marched down for me against the mighty.

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;

the princes of Issachar came with Deborah,

and Issachar faithful to Barak;

into the valley they rushed at his heels.

Among the clans of Reuben

there were great searchings of heart.

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.

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.

Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death;

Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field.”

While the victory was the LORD’s, the tribes that stepped up to the task are commended while the tribes that didn’t get blasted. Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (western Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali followed Deborah and Barak into battle.

But the tribe of Reuben was a notable no-show, and it soon regretted its failure with *great searchings of heart*. Gilead (eastern Manasseh), Dan, and Asher also stayed back, to their shame. Gad, Simeon, and Judah get no mention at all, either up or down.

Finally, Zebulun and Naphtali get special commendation, as they *risked their lives to the death*.

The cliché “God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible, though many people think it is. Still, this cliché says something useful. We must never think that faith in God absolves us of all responsibility. There’s much work to be done and, as God’s servants, we’re the ones to do it.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_helps_those_who_help_themselves

5 Judges 5:19–27

*“The kings came and fought,
Then the kings of Canaan fought
In Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;
They took no spoils of silver.
They fought from the heavens;
The stars from their courses fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
That ancient torrent, the torrent of Kishon.
O my soul, march on in strength!
Then the horses’ hooves pounded,
The galloping, galloping of his steeds.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the LORD,
‘Curse its inhabitants bitterly,
Because they did not come to the help of the LORD,
To the help of the LORD against the mighty.’ ”*

*“Most blessed among women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Blessed is she among women in tents.
He asked for water, she gave milk;
She brought out cream in a lordly bowl.
She stretched her hand to the tent peg,
Her right hand to the workmen’s hammer;
he pounded Sisera, she pierced his head,
he split and struck through his temple.
At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
At her feet he sank, he fell;
Where he sank, there he fell dead.”*

The Hebrew word translated as “torrent” (נַחַל, na-hahl) typically means valley, gorge, or stream. Some nahals can be dangerous as they’re normally dry, but a cloudburst can transform them suddenly into torrents. You might not have time to get out before being swept away. Thus, 900 chariots caught in one of these flash floods would be a catastrophe. That’s apparently what happened, so na-hahl is “torrent” here.

But Sisera is not a fool. He wouldn’t send his army of chariots into the Kishon na-hahl when there’s much chance of a storm. Thus, many commentators assume this was a freak storm during the dry season.

This was *the help of the LORD against the mighty*.

Jael gave Sisera milk to make him sleepy and then killed him. Since she was an ally, this is surprising. But, as we’ll see in the next lesson, she had ample justification for this. Thus, the song hails her as a hero.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Is our society killing ethics?

2. Name a hero that our society ignores.

3. Where/when do we fail to give God the credit?

4. What Church tasks should get more attention?

5. Ever been in dangerous weather?

Items for prayer: