

## **Judges 4:1-24 – “Barack: When Leaders Lead”**

(Pew Bible Page: 203)

**Intro:** Whenever we come to study Scripture, we always need to be sure that we understand what we are reading properly by taking account of the context. That is always true, but in the story we have tonight the context is particularly significant. If we do not read this story in context, we’ll surely miss its point. So, let me begin by giving you two pieces of context that will help us understand the point of this account.

The first thing we need to consider is that the Book of Judges was written for a specific purpose. Scholars believe that the prophet Samuel is likely the author of Judges. That makes sense because Judges is obviously an apologetic defending Israel’s need for a king. The point of the book of Judges is that Israel was sorely lacking in strong leadership during the 350 years the Judges ruled Israel. Samuel is the logical choice to make that argument. Samuel was the last Judge of Israel. Through his hands the Kingship was anointed and established over the nation, first through Saul, and then through David. You will recall that Samuel didn’t favor the idea of a monarchy at all at first, but after God made clear that He was moving in that direction, Samuel got on board. By the end of his life, Samuel was obviously a full-blooded royalist! Perhaps during the years of his retirement after Saul became king and before David, Samuel penned this book to explain why having a king was necessary. In a word, his explanation is this: After the strong leadership provided by Joshua and his generation, Israel fell into repeated cycles of idolatry, affliction, repentance, and rescue. But the cycle simply repeated itself after the death of whatever Judge God had raised up to bring rescue. If we are to understand tonight’s account we must realize that the story of Barak and Deborah fits into that context. The question being asked is, “Why did Israel need a king?” This story gives one answer: Israel lacked strong, consistent leadership under the Judges.

The second contextual piece we need to consider is the principle of reading the Scripture from the point of view of its author and his original audience. This applies to all Scripture but is especially helpful to keep in mind with tonight’s passage for this reason. If we approach our Bible with a 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset, we may seriously misunderstand the significance of the role played by Deborah and Jael in the story. We see nothing unusual about women playing a leading part in national events. Maggie Thatcher being Prime minister in England, or Condoleezza Rice being Secretary of State in the US doesn’t seem out of place to us at all. But, when we read the text from the point of view Samuel and his original audience, the strangeness of this situation begins to grip our minds. In the male dominated society of Israel before Christ, women in leadership were something to gawk at. It would have immediately caught the attention of Samuel’s audience that the apparent hero of the story was not Barak, but Deborah and Jael – two women. Leadership by women would have been completely unexpected in those times. That’s part of the point, as we’ll see in our study.

**Proposition:** When leaders lead and the people respond, God gives the victory.

Billboard:	(vv.1-3)	Trouble Brewing
	(vv.4-11)	Leadership Vacuum
	(vv.12-16)	Victory Granted

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(vv.17-24) Vindication and Glory

(vv.1-3) Trouble Brewing – Israel again turned away from faithfulness to the Lord. When Ehud, the Judge died, the nation lapsed back into idolatry once more. **Judges 4:1–3 - 1** *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 Harosheth-hagoyim. 3* *Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.* Why this cycle? First, because of Israel’s failure to obey God’s command to completely rid the land He had given them of the pagan nations that originally inhabited it. After Joshua’s death, the nation ran out of steam. Without the strong leadership God gave the nation in Joshua, the people settled into accommodation with the Baal worshippers around them, and just as God had prophesied, it wasn’t long before they too became worshippers of Baal, the Canaanite God of thunder, lightning, and storms. Secondly, Israel fell continually into the cycle of idolatry because of the people’s sinful, unbelieving hearts. YHWH was their God, nominally, but in their hearts they still worshipped themselves. This becomes clear as each succeeding cycle of idolatry, affliction, repentance, and rescue goes by. In these cycles Israel experienced RELIGIOUS REFORMATION without experiencing REVIVAL OF THE HEART. Religious reformation is when people “clean up their act” externally. Revival is when there is true repentance and heart change. Israel never experienced revival under the Judges, only religious reformation. They lapsed continually back into Baal worship. Baal was the Canaanite God of the storm, thunder, and lightning. Baal made the rains fall, something of immense importance in a semi-arid land like Israel. Baal worship also appealed to the basest instincts in humanity. Worship of Baal was characterized by gross immorality – acts of prostitution, sodomy, and nudity. It appealed to human lust and human greed. By doing acts of “worship” in Baal’s presence, the worshipper hoped Baal, the god of the storm, would provide rain to make the crops grow. Baal was the Canaanite religion and God gave His people into the hands of the Canaanite King, Jabin and his general, Sisera, as a punishment for Israel’s disobedience. The Canaanites were notoriously violent and cruel and Israel suffered greatly under their hands for twenty years. When they could stand it no longer, Israel turned again to God, at least nominally. And God raised up a deliverer.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Only revival of the heart will keep God’s people from falling into the hands of the enemies of God. There must be a change of heart, not a mere change of actions if we are to remain faithful to God.

(vv.4-11) Leadership Vacuum – As mentioned above, a major reason for Israel’s struggles was failure of leadership. This is illustrated for us in these verses: **Judges 4:4–11 - 4** *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. 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?’” 8*

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*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.”* **9** *And she said, “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 to Kedesh. **10** *And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.* **11** *Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaananim, which is near Kedesh.* We are told here that Israel at this time was under the unusual circumstance of being Judged by a woman – Deborah (Bee), the wife of Lappidoth. Deborah held court under the Palm Tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, considerably to the south of the troubled area of northern Israel oppressed by Jabin and Sisera. In a male dominated society, female leadership would signal a complete failure of those who should be leading to take responsibility. Deborah judged Israel because no male was willing to respond to God call to lead the people. This is pictured for us in Barak, the man called of God, who refused to lead, insisting that he would only act in faith if Deborah took the lead. Barak, who’s name means, “Lightning,” had much to commend him. He appears to have been courageous and willing to follow orders – a true man of faith. He showed up and did what he was told to do. But he was unwilling to accept the responsibility of leadership. Barak was God’s choice to lead Israel to victory and it is clear from the text that his refusal to obey was not to his credit in God’s eyes. Barak failed in this matter and because of this Deborah predicted that the glory he might have had from winning the victory would go to another – Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, whom we are introduced to in verse eleven. Consider Barak’s choice: Barak did all he was commanded to do. He followed orders; gathered the troops; attacked the enemy when he was told to do so; fought the battle bravely and victoriously. He did all the “heavy lifting” but the glory was given to another, because he refused to accept the responsibility of leadership when God called him. The only thing Barak avoided by refusing God’s call was the glory offered to Him by God.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God’s invitation to join Him in His work is an honor, not a burden, and God intends to share His glory with those who answer His call.

(vv.12-16) Victory Granted – God had said that He would draw out Sisera, his chariots and troops, when Barak and his army of 10,000 men went to Mt. Tabor and God kept His promise. **Judges 4:12–16 - 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, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. 14* *And Deborah said to Barak, “Up! 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. 16* *And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.* God’s trap snapped shut on Sisera when Sisera thought he saw his opportunity to catch Barak and Israel’s army on the plains between Mt. Tabor and the river Kishon. The plains of the valley were just what the doctor ordered, as far as Sisera was concerned. Chariots, the army tank of its day, were perfectly suited for battle on the plains in the dry season of that moment. No rain was anticipated and Sisera rushed to meet the advancing Israeli army when Barak responded to

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Deborah’s command, *“Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?”* We must consult the context to understand what was about to happen. Chapter 5 gives us the details: **Judges 5:19–21** - **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. 21 The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might!* Chapter 5 is a poetic retelling of the events of chapter 4, and in these verses we get a picture of the scene. As Barak and his army descended the slopes of Tabor, they did so under gathering storm clouds which soon yielded a torrential rain – a true deluge that flooded the plain and caused the River Kishon to overflow its banks, sweeping away the chariots and horsemen of Sisera’s army. As happened to the Egyptians who drove their chariots into the Red Sea behind Israel as they escaped from Egypt, the wheels of Sisera’s chariot sunk into the softened soil of Jezreel Valley rendering the chariots useless. Barak’s army completely triumphed over the Canaanites. Sisera himself was forced to abandon his chariot and flee on foot to the north, toward Jabin’s capitol, Hazor. *“From heaven the stars fought, from their courses against Sisera,”* meaning that God turned the forces of nature against the enemies of His people. Isn’t it ironic that Barak, whose name means “Lightning,” defeated the worshippers of Baal, the Canaanite god of the storm because YHWH, the true God of the Storm unleashed rain, thunder and lightning on the enemies of His people! The debacle was complete: **16** *And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Barak’s faith concurred with God’s fighting for Israel. God sovereignly acts and we receive the victory when we act in faith as Barak did. Faith is the intersection of God’s plan and power with our victory.

(vv.17-24) Vindication and Glory – God not only planned Sisera’s defeat, He ordained his death. But the glory of destroying the enemy would not go to Barak. As predicted the capstone on the victory came through a woman – Jael. **Judges 4:17–24** - **17** *But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, 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.’ ” 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. 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 Jabin king of Canaan.* In verse 11 we were introduced to Heber, the Kenite. Now, we meet the deadly half of the partnership, Jael – a woman handy with a hammer! In Kenite society, it was the women who put up and took down the tents among these nomads. Jael knew how to use a mallet and a tent peg to deadly

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effect, and after lulling Sisera into a false sense of security, she proved her skill. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. The Canaanite kingdom eventually went down to complete defeat.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God raises up the most unexpected heroes when those He calls shirk their responsibilities by failing to answer His call to leadership.

[APPLICATION] What are the lessons we can learn from this story of Barak and Deborah? Here are at least three:<sup>1</sup>

1. God’s people are locked into a hopeless cycle of failure, affliction, repentance, and rescue so long as they ask God for comfort rather than cleansing. Israel’s problem in the Book of Judges is that she only wanted God to provide for her peace, prosperity, and progress. She longed for outward blessings but had no real interest in being cleansed on the inside. The challenges we face in our day are just the same. We fear what’s happening outside of us, while ignoring the fact that the real danger is inward. Until we love Christ more than we love this world, we will never be able to live at peace during the storm.
2. “God’s commandments are God’s enablements.” When He invites us to join Him in His work, we can rest assured that He will enable us to win the victory. On the other hand, when we shirk God’s call to leadership, we miss our chance to share His glory. Is God calling you to join Him in some specific kingdom task? Trust Him to win the victory and have the courage to say, “Here am I; send me.”
3. When those who are called to leadership refuse the call, God will raise up unlikely others who are willing to join Him in His work, and God will win the victory through them. This is true because ultimately, God is the Hero of every story, and He can and will work through any instrument He chooses. Our calling is to be available when He calls; His is to win the victory.

**Conclusion:** We began by noting that observing the context is immensely important in the study of Scripture. As a punctuation to that point, let’s let the context of tonight’s study give us our closing note. This verse from the song of Deborah and Barak celebrating the victory is a fitting closing to our lesson on the importance of leaders leading: **Judges 5:1–2 - 1** *Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: 2 “That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD!*

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Wiersbe makes the first three applications.