

The Great Canadian Bible Study 2023

Deborah and Jael: Women of Courage

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Open with prayer, asking God to reveal to your group biblical truths that will affect your daily lives.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of spending a month with Baptist women in Nigeria. I learned so much from their faith and determination. I still remember the beautiful sounds of their acapella singing. One song went something like this: “Make me like Deborah, make me like Esther, make me like Mary, to be used in your house, O Lord.” Hundreds of voices joined together in harmony to ask God to help them to follow the examples of biblical women.

But who exactly was Deborah, and why should we want to be like her?

Discuss this question with your group: *What do you know about Deborah?*

Read Judges 4:4-5.

Deborah was one of the judges of the people of Israel. After the leadership of Moses and Joshua, but before Israel had kings, these judges ruled over the people. They were spiritual and military leaders who helped deliver Israel from destruction and bring them back to God in repentance for their sins. Deborah also served in a role similar to what we would think of as a judge today: someone who hears and decides people’s cases. The text tells us that Deborah was also a prophetess—a woman who delivers God’s message to God’s people. Like Miriam, Huldah, and other biblical prophetesses, Deborah had been called by God for a special purpose. She was also known as a “mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7).

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

Is it surprising to you that a woman in the Bible took on so many significant roles?

Do you think it was easy or difficult for Deborah to proclaim God’s messages to others?

What do you think it meant for Deborah to be a “mother in Israel”?

Have you ever felt called by God for a special purpose, like Deborah was?

At the time of Deborah, the Canaanites were attacking the Israelites as they attempted to settle the Promised Land. God gave Deborah a message about how the Israelites could defeat the army of Sisera, a Canaanite army commander. She didn’t hesitate to call Barak, an Israelite military leader, and relay this message to him. At this time, it was unusual for a woman to lead a man, but Deborah was up for the challenge. In fact, Barak depended on Deborah, asking her to go with him into battle. She agreed.

Read Judges 4:6-10.

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

What do you think gave Deborah courage to deliver God’s message to Barak?

Why do you think Barak wanted Deborah to accompany him?

Why do you think Deborah agreed to accompany Barak?

What does verse 9 tell you about how the culture of the time viewed women?

Judges 4 goes on to tell the story of the battle between Barak and Sisera. Deborah encouraged Barak and prophesied to him that God had given him the victory. Judges 4 says that Sisera and his army were defeated, but chapter 5 adds more detail. Judges 5:21 says that water swept them away. God likely sent a flood to defeat them, similar to the story of the Red Sea in Exodus 14.

Read Judges 4:12-16.

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

What do you think Deborah must have been feeling during this battle? Barak?

Have you ever known that God was going before you into a situation you faced?

What should we make of the violence in this passage?

Judges 5 recounts the song of Deborah and Barak regarding their victory. This song includes some of the oldest text in the Bible. Deborah and Barak praise God for delivering them and the Israelites. "When locks are long" likely refers to men growing out their hair, either in preparation for battle or as part of a vow to holiness.

Read Judges 5:1-3.

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

What stands out to you from these verses?

Why do you think chapter 5 is included in Judges in addition to chapter 4?

Do you recall a difficult situation after which you praised God?

Judges 4 and 5 present the story of Deborah as a leader, confident in God's power and message. She conveys God's words to Barak, agrees to support and accompany him, and watches as God gives them the victory. Then she praises God for delivering them from their enemies. She is a powerful example of a biblical woman from whom we can learn.

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

What stands out to you from Deborah's story?

What words would you use to describe Deborah?

What do you think we can learn from Deborah's story?

Judges 4 and 5 would not be complete without the story of Jael, another powerful biblical woman.

Discuss with your group: *Have you ever heard of Jael? If so, what do you know about her?*

Jael was not an Israelite, but God used her to deliver the Israelites' enemy, Sisera, into their hands. She craftily lulled him into a sense of security and then took violent action.

Read Judges 4:17-22.

Judges tells us that there was peace between Jael's household and Sisera's army, so Sisera might have expected to take refuge in with Jael's family. However, custom dictated that he should go to the husband's tent, not the wife's. Sisera also broke traditional rules of hospitality by asking Jael to do things for him. Some interpreters suggest he might have also intended to commit sexual violence against Jael. These violations of hospitality were likely threatening to Jael, who then acted to eliminate the threat.

Jael gave Sisera milk rather than water, which he probably interpreted as a sign of generous hospitality. However, she likely did so to help put him to sleep. Once he was asleep, she took the tent peg, which she used to anchor her tent as her family moved from place to place, and drove it through Sisera's skull. What a climax to this story!

Discuss some or all of the following questions:

What do you think of Jael's story?

What do you make of the fact that the Bible praises Jael's violence?

What words would you use to describe Jael?

What do you think we can learn from Jael's story?

As some interpreters point out, Jael's story is morally ambiguous. While she defeats Israel's enemies, she does so by committing murder. And yet Jael's courage and decisive actions are praiseworthy.

Read Judges 5:24.

Discuss this question:

Why do you think the writer called Jael "most blessed of women"? Would you use this term for her?

As a result of Deborah's and Jael's actions, alongside those of Barak, we learn in Judges 5:31 that there was peace for forty years. As a result of God working through these two women, a generation of Israelites were spared the horrors of war and lived peacefully with each other and their neighbours. This was a striking change from their previous precarious existence battling the Canaanites. God used two strong women to deliver the Israelites and change their lives.

Discuss this question: *What might we learn from the stories of Deborah and Jael?*

If possible, divide into six groups. Assign each group one section below (beginning with bolded text). Each section describes one thing we might learn from the stories of Deborah and Jael. Have each group review their section, discuss its relevance to their lives, and then share their thoughts with the larger group.

Be willing.

Deborah and Jael were willing to be used by God for divine purposes. By contrast, Barak seemed to be hesitant to take action. He wanted Deborah to accompany him. She agreed to do so and followed God's call even onto the battlefield. She could have easily made excuses not to obey God, including the fact

that she was a woman. But instead, she demonstrated a willingness to act and speak in the ways that God commanded.

What about you? The first step in allowing God to use you is to be willing to obey. Are you willing to obey God, even when God's instructions take you out of your comfort zone? Can you think of a time when you have been willing and perhaps a time when you have been hesitant? Ask God today to make you willing to answer the call.

Be courageous.

Both Deborah and Jael demonstrated courage in the face of daunting circumstances. Deborah was not afraid to give God's messages to Barak and to go with him into battle. Jael courageously brought Sisera into her tent, lulled him to sleep, and drove a tent peg through his head! These women were not distracted by circumstances, detractors, or fear but instead took bold action.

Do you feel courageous, or are you more fearful? Can you recall a time when you acted courageously with God's help? Ask God to help you act courageously and to calm your fears. Keep in mind that God's plan is above any earthly plan, and that God will empower you to follow that plan. Seek God and God's courage today and for the future.

Lead.

Have you ever heard the myth that biblical women were meek and mild and subordinated themselves to their husbands? Whoever says that hasn't heard of Deborah and Jael! These women were strong leaders. Deborah not only delivered the Israelites in battle through God's strength; she also judged legal cases and spoke out as a prophet. Jael demonstrated leadership from within her own home. These and many other examples throughout the Old and New Testaments remind us that God calls women as leaders in many contexts.

Can you think of other women leaders in the Bible? What female leaders do you look up to and why? Do you consider yourself a leader? Pray and ask God to empower you to lead, using the gifts God has given you. Don't be afraid to step into a leadership role if God is calling you to do so.

Speak out.

Deborah provides an example of a woman who spoke out with God's message to God's people. As a prophetess and a judge, she delivered God's judgements to the Israelites. She also spoke God's words to Barak on multiple occasions, even when her messages meant dangerous endeavours for Barak and his army. She wasn't afraid to speak the truth in difficult situations, because she knew that God empowered her.

You might not be called to be a prophet, but you can speak out at the Holy Spirit's prompting. What word would God have you deliver to someone today? Might you speak a message of encouragement, hope, or empathy to someone going through a hard time? Could you deliver a word of truth in the midst of a challenging situation? Ask God to help you speak out at the appropriate times with God's message.

Thank God.

Chapter 5 of Judges records Deborah and Barak's song of thankfulness to God. They recognized the ways that God had worked in their lives and community, rescuing them from their enemies—they didn't take God's deliverance for granted. They took time to praise God for working in their circumstances and showing divine power and favour. An entire chapter is devoted to their song of thanksgiving. Wouldn't it have been amazing to have heard this song when they sang it?

Can you think of any present-day songs that thank God? What lyrics stand out to you? We can learn from Deborah's example to thank God for who God is and for all God has done for us. It can be easy to pray hard in challenging circumstances and then forget to pray and praise God after the situation has been resolved. Don't make this mistake—be like Deborah!

Trust God.

Overall, the stories of Deborah and Jael remind us that we can trust God. God works through our circumstances and through our obedience, as we see from these two biblical women. God can bring to us peace, just as God did for the Israelites. And ultimately, God is in control and will have the final victory.

Do you find it easy or hard to trust God? In what circumstances do you need to ask for more faith? Can you recall times when you have trusted God and seen God's power? Ask God today to help you trust God's plan and the ways God wants you to be a part of it.

As a large group, discuss this question:

What stands out to you from what you have read and discussed today?

Close in prayer, thanking God for the stories of Deborah and Jael and the ways they have inspired and encouraged your group today. Ask God to continue to empower the group to be willing, be courageous, lead, speak out, thank God, and trust God.