

# **The Book of Judges, Teacher's Guide**

## **Lesson 3: Deborah and Barak: The Lord Goes Before Them**

### **Judges 4:1-24**

#### **Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)**

Doctrinally, this chapter is about the identity of the true Deliverer. It is tempting to make the story about its colorful human characters, Deborah the prophetess, Barak the reluctant general, Jael the woman with the tent peg, but the text keeps pointing past them to the LORD who draws out Sisera, the LORD who goes out before Barak, the LORD who routs the chariots. The aim is to fix in the student's heart that salvation, then and now, belongs to God. Israel had no answer for nine hundred iron chariots, and we have no answer for sin and death; in both cases the victory must come from heaven and be received by trusting, obedient faith. This guards against the modern instinct to reduce the Bible to inspiring human examples and instead lifts the eyes to the God who saves.

This passage also calls for careful, gracious handling of Deborah. We honor her without reservation as a faithful prophetess whom God genuinely used, in her time and under the Old Covenant, to speak His word, to judge Israel, and to summon His people to the deliverance He had planned. Her faith puts the hesitating men of her generation to shame, and Scripture holds her up with honor. At the same time we do not turn a unique Old Testament narrative into a charter for overturning the New Testament's plain teaching that men and women have distinct, complementary roles in the Lord's church, where women do not serve as elders or preachers or teach over men in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The aim is to teach the student to read narrative rightly, drawing the timeless lesson the text intends, the power of God through a yielded life, without importing conclusions the text never makes.

Finally, this lesson aims squarely at the student's spiritual formation. Barak's bargaining faith is the mirror most of us need. We will obey God, we say, if He first sends a person, a guarantee, a feeling, a visible reinforcement. The chapter gently exposes that hesitation and then overwhelms it with a greater truth: the LORD goes out before you. For the Christian this points straight to Jesus, our forerunner who entered ahead of us (Hebrews 6:20) and now reigns. The goal is not merely that students admire an old victory but that they walk out trusting the One who has already gone before them, ready to obey without conditions because the outcome rests on Him.

#### **Question 1**

##### **Student Question:**

*Judges 4:1–3 says Israel again did evil and was sold into the hand of Jabin for twenty years. What does this repeated cycle of sin, oppression, crying out, and deliverance teach us about both the seriousness of sin and the patient mercy of God?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The chapter opens with the now-familiar formula of the book: the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. The little word again is the heartbeat of Judges. This is not a single tragic fall but a chronic relapse, a nation that cannot seem to stay faithful for one full generation. The writer wants us to feel the weight of that repetition, because it is the pattern of every human heart left to itself.

Because of their evil, the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The verb sold is striking; God hands His own people over to the consequences of their unfaithfulness. This is discipline, not abandonment. The commander of Jabin's army is Sisera, and the source of Israel's terror is named plainly: nine hundred chariots of iron. He oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

Then comes the turn that opens every deliverance in the book: the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. It took twenty years of harsh oppression, but the cry finally went up. God's mercy meets that cry. Notice that the oppression was not random misfortune; it was the harvest of their own choices. Yet the moment they turn, the God they abandoned is ready to act on their behalf.

We must hold two truths together here. Sin is serious; it has real consequences, and God does not pretend otherwise. But God is patient; He disciplines in order to bring His people back, and He responds to the cry of the repentant. This is the rhythm Paul says was written for our instruction (Romans 15:4), a warning against drifting and an encouragement that the door home is never bolted shut.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The cycle of Judges: sin, servitude, supplication, salvation, and silence before the next relapse. This chapter is one full turn of that wheel.
- Sold into the hand of Jabin: God handing His people over to consequences is a recurring biblical theme of loving discipline, not rejection (compare Hebrews 12:6).
- Each person bears the guilt of his own sin (Ezekiel 18:20); Israel suffers for its own choices, not for an inherited curse, and the cure is repentance, not fatalism.
- Twenty years is a long time to wait to cry out; the delay shows how sin dulls our urgency to seek God.
- The nine hundred iron chariots set up the central tension: a humanly hopeless situation that only God can resolve, preparing us to see Him as the real Deliverer.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Trace the four stages of the cycle (sin, oppression, crying out, deliverance) in these verses and ask where the group sees the same pattern in their own walk with God.
- Discuss why God's discipline should be read as mercy aimed at restoration rather than as rejection.
- Reflect together on what it reveals about us that Israel waited twenty years before crying out to the LORD.

## **Question 2**

### **Student Question:**

*Israel cried to the LORD only after twenty years of harsh oppression. Is there a pattern in your own life of waiting until things become unbearable before you genuinely turn to God in prayer?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question turns the historical pattern into a personal mirror. Israel did not cry out at year one or year five; they cried out after twenty years, when the oppression had become unbearable. Many of us know that delay from the inside. We treat prayer as a last resort rather than a first instinct, turning to God only when our own resources are exhausted and the situation has grown desperate.

There is mercy in the fact that God still answers the late cry. He did not refuse Israel because they should have come sooner. But there is also a sober lesson: twenty years of oppression might have been shortened by an earlier turning. Sin not only offends God; it dulls the very instinct that would send us running back to Him, so that we suffer longer than we need to.

The healthier pattern is to make crying out to God a first response, not a final one. The Christian is invited to come boldly to the throne of grace to find help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16), and the invitation is for the moment of need, not merely the moment of collapse.

This is an examination question, so let the silence do its work. The goal is honest self-knowledge: where am I currently white-knuckling a hard situation that I have never truly brought to God, waiting until I cannot bear it before I pray?

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The delay before crying out exposes a heart that trusts self first and God last.
- God's willingness to answer the late cry displays grace, but does not erase the cost of the delay.
- Prayer is meant to be a first instinct, not an emergency measure (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
- Unaddressed sin and self-reliance both dull our urgency to seek God.
- Honest naming of a specific unsundered area is the point; resist the urge to keep it general.

## Discussion Prompts

- Invite each person to think of one current pressure they have been carrying alone rather than bringing to God.
- Ask what makes us delay: pride, distraction, doubt that God will act, or something else.
- Encourage a concrete commitment to bring that pressure to God in prayer this week before it becomes unbearable.

## Question 3

### Student Question:

*Deborah is called a prophetess through whom the LORD spoke and who judged Israel (4:4–5). How should we honor the faith and the genuine role God gave Deborah in her time without using this passage to overturn the New Testament’s teaching on the distinct roles of men and women in the Lord’s church (1 Timothy 2:11–12)?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 4–5 introduce Deborah with genuine honor: she was a prophetess, a woman through whom the LORD spoke His word, and she was judging Israel at that time. People came up to her under the palm of Deborah for judgment. Scripture does not apologize for her or hide her; it presents her as a faithful instrument of God in a faithless age, and we should receive her that way, with respect and gratitude.

Her role as prophetess means God sovereignly chose to communicate His word through her. As judge she settled disputes and led Israel toward the deliverance God planned. In a generation when the men of Israel had largely failed to lead faithfully, here is a woman whose heart was tuned to heaven, and God used her mightily. Her faith, as the chapter will show, outshines Barak’s hesitation.

Here we must read carefully and graciously. The honor due Deborah is real, but the question of roles in the church is settled elsewhere, in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit through Paul teaches that in the assembly of the Lord’s church women are not to teach or exercise authority over men, and that men are to serve as elders and preachers (1 Timothy 2:11–12; Titus 1:5–6). These are complementary roles, both honored, both essential, rooted not in cultural prejudice but in the created order Paul cites.

To take an Old Testament narrative about an extraordinary deliverer-judge and use it to overturn an explicit New Testament command is to read the Bible backwards. Narrative describes what happened; the New Testament epistles prescribe how Christ’s church is to order itself. We honor Deborah fully, we celebrate the power of God through her, and we let the New Testament teach us how God has arranged service in His church. There is no contradiction, only the difference between an account of God delivering Israel under the Old Covenant and the instructions Christ has given His church under the New.

The timeless lesson the text actually offers is not a charter for offices but a portrait of a yielded heart: God can use anyone, man or woman, who will listen to His word and act on it in faith. That lesson lands on every reader.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Deborah is honored without qualification as a true prophetess and judge whom God genuinely used.
- Her role was given under the Old Covenant for the deliverance and governance of Israel, not as a pattern for offices in the New Testament church.
- Roles in the Lord's church are settled by direct New Testament teaching (1 Timothy 2:11–12; Titus 1:5–9), not derived from Old Testament narrative.
- Narrative describes events; epistles prescribe church order. Reading prescription out of narrative leads to error.
- Paul roots the distinction in the created order, not in passing culture, so it is not overturned by counter-examples.
- The genuine timeless lesson is the power of God working through a heart yielded to His word, a lesson for every believer.
- Honoring Deborah and upholding New Testament teaching are not in tension; they address different covenants and different questions.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Ask the group to list specific ways the text honors Deborah, then to articulate the difference between Old Testament narrative and New Testament instruction on church order.
- Discuss how we can speak about Deborah with warmth and respect while remaining faithful to 1 Timothy 2:11–12.
- Draw out the lesson that lands on everyone: God uses the yielded, listening heart, wherever He has placed it.

### **Question 4**

#### **Student Question:**

*Deborah was a woman whose heart was clearly tuned to the LORD in a faithless generation. What would it take for your heart to be that kind of listening, available instrument in the hands of God where He has placed you?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The remarkable thing about Deborah is not first her office but her availability. In a generation drifting toward Canaanite gods, her heart was tuned to the LORD, ready to hear His word and speak it. This question asks the student to want that same quality of heart, the kind God can use, wherever He has placed them.

We sometimes tell ourselves that God could use us if our circumstances were different, if we had a bigger platform or a clearer calling. But Deborah simply sat under her palm tree, faithful where she was, available when God spoke. Faithfulness in the place God has put us, with an ear open to His word, is what makes a person usable.

An available heart is cultivated, not stumbled upon. It grows through steady time in God's word, through prayer, through the willingness to obey small promptings before big ones come. The person God uses in a crisis is usually the one who has been quietly faithful in the ordinary days beforehand.

Let each person locate the place God has actually put them, home, workplace, congregation, neighborhood, and ask honestly whether their heart is presently tuned and available there, or distracted and self-occupied.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Availability to God matters more than position or platform.
- Faithfulness in our actual circumstances, not imagined better ones, is what God uses.
- A usable heart is cultivated through word, prayer, and obedience in small things.
- Distraction and self-occupation are the chief enemies of an available heart.
- God can and does use the ordinary person whose ear is open to Him.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Have each person name the specific place God has currently put them and assess how tuned their heart is to Him there.
- Discuss the daily habits that cultivate an available, listening heart.
- Invite one concrete step toward greater availability this week.

### **Question 5**

#### **Student Question:**

*When Deborah summons Barak she says, Has not the LORD commanded you? and promises that the LORD will draw out and give Sisera into his hand (4:6-7). What does the wording of this command teach us about who actually wins the battle and where our confidence in obedience should rest?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Deborah's summons to Barak is worded with great care: Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you? Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor. The command does not originate with Deborah; she is delivering the LORD's order. And the promise that follows places the outcome entirely in God's hands: I will draw out Sisera to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots, and I will give him into your hand.

Read those verbs carefully. The LORD will draw out Sisera. The LORD will give him into your hand. Barak's job is to obey, to go and gather and stand in the place God appoints; God's job is to deliver the enemy. This is the pattern of faith throughout Scripture: obedience is real and required, but the victory belongs to God. We act, but we do not save ourselves.

This guards us against two errors. The first is passivity, the idea that because God wins the battle we need not obey, gather, or go. Barak still had to march. The second is self-reliance, the idea that the outcome rests on our strength or cleverness. The nine hundred chariots make that idea laughable; only God can hand them over.

Our confidence in obedience, then, rests not on our assessment of the odds but on the One who gives the command. If the LORD has commanded it, the LORD will accomplish it. The believer obeys not because success looks likely but because God has spoken and God is faithful.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The command comes from the LORD, not from Deborah; she is His messenger.
- The verbs (I will draw out, I will give) place the victory squarely in God's hands.
- Faith both obeys (Barak must go) and depends (God must deliver); the two are never separated.
- The passage rebukes both passivity and self-reliance.
- Confidence in obedience rests on the character of the One who commands, not on the odds (compare Psalm 20:7).

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Identify every action God promises to take in these verses and every action Barak is responsible for, and discuss how the two relate.
- Ask where the group is tempted toward passivity (God will do it, so I need not act) or self-reliance (it all depends on me).
- Reflect on what it means to ground our confidence in the One who commands rather than in the likelihood of success.

### **Question 6**

#### **Student Question:**

*Barak said, If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go (4:8). Where do you find yourself bargaining with God, obeying only if He first supplies a particular person, comfort, or guarantee you can see?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Barak's reply is one of the most human lines in the book: If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go. He has just been handed an explicit command and a

promise of victory from the LORD Himself, and still he attaches a condition. He will obey, but only if Deborah, the visible bearer of God's word, goes along.

This is not flat unbelief; Barak does go, and Hebrews 11 will list him among the faithful. But it is faith that bargains, faith that needs a hand to hold, faith that wants God's promise reinforced by a presence it can see and touch. He trusts the word of God more readily when it comes wrapped in a person he can lean on.

Most of us recognize ourselves here. We will obey God if He first sends the encouraging friend, guarantees the comfortable outcome, removes the risk, or supplies some visible reassurance. We say yes to God with conditions attached, hedging our obedience until the circumstances feel safe.

This question asks the student to name the specific condition they tend to attach. The point is not to despise Barak or ourselves but to see the bargaining clearly, so that we can begin to obey the bare word of God, trusting that the One who commands is enough, even when no visible reinforcement comes.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Barak's condition reveals faith that is real but hesitating and self-protective.
- He trusts God's word more easily when it comes through a visible person he can lean on.
- Conditional obedience (I will obey if God first supplies X) is a common and subtle compromise.
- The remedy is to trust the bare word and character of God, not to demand visible guarantees.
- Naming our specific condition is the first step toward unconditional obedience.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Ask each person to finish the sentence honestly: I will obey God in this area if He first gives me ...
- Discuss why we find it easier to trust God when His word comes through a visible person or guarantee.
- Explore one area where obedience could move from conditional to unconditional this week.

### **Question 7**

#### **Student Question:**

*Deborah told Barak the road he was taking would not lead to his glory, for the LORD would sell Sisera into the hand of a woman (4:9). What does this teach about how God distributes honor and why hesitating faith can forfeit a blessing it could have had?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Deborah answers Barak's condition with a sober word: 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. The honor of striking down the enemy commander, an honor Barak might have carried, will now go to another, to Jael.

This is not God punishing Barak; he still shares in the victory and is honored for his faith in Hebrews 11. But there is a real consequence to hesitating faith. The blessing that might have been his is relocated. Hesitation does not cancel God's plan, but it can forfeit a portion of the blessing God was holding out.

We see here how God distributes honor. He is not bound to give the glory to the strong, the prominent, or the expected. He delights to hand the victory to an unlikely instrument, in this case a woman in a tent with a peg, so that no one can boast and so that the spotlight falls on God's surprising power rather than on human prowess.

The gentle warning for us is that hesitation has a cost. When God holds out an opportunity to trust Him fully and we bargain instead, we may still be saved and even used, but we can miss a blessing that was within reach. Wholehearted, unconditional obedience positions us to receive everything God wants to give.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Hesitating faith does not cancel God's plan but can forfeit a blessing it might have had.
- Barak is not rejected; he still shares the victory and is honored in Hebrews 11:32.
- God distributes honor as He pleases, often to unlikely instruments, so that He alone is glorified.
- The relocation of glory to a woman foreshadows Jael and underscores God's surprising sovereignty.
- Wholehearted obedience positions us to receive the fullness of what God offers.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Discuss the difference between losing salvation and forfeiting a particular blessing through hesitation; Barak does the latter, not the former.
- Explore what this passage teaches about how and to whom God chooses to give honor.
- Ask the group where wholehearted obedience might open them to a blessing that hesitation would cost them.

### **Question 8**

#### **Student Question:**

*Have you ever sensed that a moment of hesitation or self-protection caused you to miss a blessing or an opportunity God was holding out to you, and what did you learn from it?*

## **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question invites honest reflection on a tender experience: the sense that hesitation or self-protection caused us to miss something God was offering. Like Barak, we may have obeyed in part, but our bargaining cost us a fuller blessing, a deeper joy, a clearer testimony, an opportunity that did not come again.

The purpose is not to drown in regret. God is gracious, and He weaves even our hesitations into His larger plan, as He did with Barak. The purpose is to learn, to let a remembered cost teach us to obey more readily the next time God holds out His hand.

Often the hesitation springs from fear, from a desire to keep ourselves safe, from waiting for guarantees God never promised to give. Recognizing the root helps us resist it when the next opportunity comes.

Let each person bring one such memory into the light, not to shame themselves but to draw a lesson from it, so that the next time God says go, they go without bargaining.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Hesitation and self-protection can cause us to miss blessings God was extending.
- The goal is learning, not paralyzing regret; God remains gracious toward His hesitating servants.
- Fear and the desire for guarantees are common roots of costly hesitation.
- Remembered costs can train us toward readier obedience.
- Bringing the memory into the light disarms its shame and turns it into instruction.

## **Discussion Prompts**

- Invite each person to recall one moment when hesitation cost them a blessing or opportunity.
- Discuss the fears or desires for guarantees that usually drive our hesitation.
- Ask how that memory could shape a readier response the next time God calls them to act.

## **Question 9**

### **Student Question:**

*Judges 4:14–15 says Deborah told Barak, Does not the LORD go out before you? and then the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots before Barak. What does this passage reveal about the LORD as the true Deliverer who goes before His people, and how does that truth help us hold up Deborah’s faith rightly, as a display of God’s power working through her, rather than as a precedent for roles God has assigned otherwise?*

## **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Here we reach the heart of the chapter. As the armies face off, Deborah gives the word: Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you? And then the verse we have been building toward: the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak. The grammar is decisive. Barak marched, but the LORD routed. The Deliverer is God Himself.

Everything in the chapter has been pointing here. The nine hundred iron chariots were never really Barak's problem to solve; they were the stage on which God would display that He goes out before His people. Sisera's chariots, his great advantage, end up stuck and scattered, and the proud commander flees on foot. The God who goes before His people turns the enemy's strength into the enemy's downfall. This is the same God who told Israel at the Red Sea, the LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent (Exodus 14:14).

This is also the lens through which we rightly understand Deborah, Barak, and Jael. None of them is the hero of the story; the LORD is. Deborah's faith is genuine and beautiful, and God truly worked through her, but the text never lets her become the point. She herself keeps pointing to the LORD: it is the LORD who has commanded, the LORD who will give, the LORD who goes before. To hold up Deborah's faith rightly is to do exactly what she did, to let it magnify the power and faithfulness of God rather than to redirect the spotlight onto the human instrument.

This is why we can honor Deborah fully and still leave the New Testament's teaching on roles untouched. The chapter is not making a point about who may hold office in Christ's church; it is making a point about who delivers His people. When we keep the LORD at the center, as the text does, we avoid two mistakes at once: the mistake of diminishing Deborah's real faith, and the mistake of building a doctrine of church order out of a narrative whose whole concern is the saving power of God. We let the Old Testament account stand as an account of God delivering Israel under the Old Covenant, and we let the New Testament epistles instruct the church (1 Timothy 2:11–12), and we find no conflict, because they are answering different questions.

And this saving God who goes before His people points us straight to Christ. Jesus is called our forerunner, the One who has gone in ahead of us behind the veil (Hebrews 6:20). He went before us into death and out the other side, defeating sin and the grave, and He now reigns as King (Acts 2:33–36). The pattern of Judges 4, a hopeless enemy, a God who goes before, a victory His people could never win for themselves, is the very shape of the gospel. The true Deliverer who scattered Sisera's chariots is the same Lord who has conquered our greatest enemies and bids us follow where He has already won.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The decisive verb is the LORD routed; God Himself, not Barak, wins the battle (4:15).
- Does not the LORD go out before you? is the theological center of the chapter; the LORD is the Deliverer.

- The iron chariots, Sisera's great strength, become the stage for God's power, ending in mud and flight.
- Deborah, Barak, and Jael are instruments; the text never lets any of them eclipse the LORD.
- Holding up Deborah's faith rightly means doing what she did, magnifying God's power, not redirecting the spotlight to the instrument.
- Because the chapter concerns who delivers, not who holds office, it leaves New Testament teaching on roles (1 Timothy 2:11–12) untouched; the two address different questions and different covenants.
- The God who goes before His people points to Christ our forerunner, who has gone ahead through death and reigns now (Hebrews 6:20; Acts 2:33–36).

### Discussion Prompts

- Have the group underline every action attributed to the LORD in 4:14–15 and discuss why the writer insists that God, not Barak, won the battle.
- Discuss how keeping the LORD at the center lets us honor Deborah's faith fully while leaving New Testament teaching on roles intact.
- Trace the line from the God who goes before Israel to Jesus our forerunner who has gone before us into victory.

### Question 10

#### Student Question:

*Jesus is the One who has gone before us, conquering sin and death and now reigning as King (Hebrews 6:20; Acts 2:33–36). Name one specific way the Lord is using this account to form courage and unconditional obedience in you this week.*

#### Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone turns the whole chapter toward Christ and toward us. The LORD who went out before Barak is the same Lord who, in Jesus, has gone before us into the hardest places. Hebrews calls Him our forerunner, the One who entered ahead of us (Hebrews 6:20). He has already faced and defeated our deepest enemies, sin and death, and He now reigns, so that when He calls us to follow, He is calling us along a road He has already cleared.

Barak's struggle was unconditional obedience; he wanted a visible companion before he would go. The risen Christ offers us something better than a visible companion: His finished victory and His abiding presence by the Spirit. We do not march toward an uncertain outcome; we follow a King who has already won and who promises to be with us always (Matthew 28:20).

So the question is pointed and personal. Where is the Lord, the One who goes before you, calling you to courage and to obedience without conditions this week? Perhaps it is a hard conversation, an act of obedience you have been deferring, a step of faith you have been hedging until circumstances feel safe.

Name one specific way this account is forming you. Let the truth that Jesus has gone before you turn your bargaining obedience into wholehearted obedience, so that when He says go, you go, trusting that the victory rests in His hands and not in yours.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Jesus is our forerunner who has gone ahead of us into victory (Hebrews 6:20).
- He has already defeated sin and death and reigns now, so we follow a road He has cleared.
- His finished victory and abiding presence are better than the visible companion Barak wanted (Matthew 28:20).
- The call is to unconditional obedience in one specific area this week.
- Spiritual formation is the goal: bargaining obedience giving way to wholehearted obedience.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Ask each person to name the one area where Christ is calling them to courageous, unconditional obedience this week.
- Discuss how Jesus going before us changes the way we face a risk or a hard step.
- Invite one specific, concrete act of obedience that flows from trusting the Lord who has already won.