

# ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

## • JUDGES 4–5 •

*"Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment" (4:4, 5).*

Judges can be called the book of Israel's failures and God's victories. Truly, the power to win victories is in God. When a battle against Satan is to be fought, however, God looks to His people to fight it. For that reason, when the time for battle came in the days of the judges, the trumpet was sounded, and God's people were expected to rise up.

### THE REASON FOR GOD'S CALL (4:1-16)

God's people were in slavery once again in Judges 4. This time they were in bondage to Jabin, king of Canaan. Jabin reigned from the capital city of Hazor. It had been destroyed years earlier as Joshua led the people through the northern part of the land of Canaan (Joshua 11:1-3). When the land was divided, Hazor was included in the territory given to the tribe of Naphtali (Joshua 19:32-36). By the time of the judges, Hazor had been restored and was being used as the capital of the oppressing nation over God's people. This is the first oppression from a nation *inside* the land of Israel.

The captain of the Canaanite army was Sisera. While we have little information about Sisera

prior to Judges 4, we do know he was the captain of a powerful army. The Canaanite army had nine hundred chariots of iron (4:3). This made the Canaanites a formidable opponent on the battlefield. God's people had been oppressed by Jabin for twenty years.

In 4:4 we are introduced to the person whom God would raise up to deliver His people—Deborah. Deborah is different from the other judges in several respects. The most obvious difference is that she was a woman. Second, she was a prophetess; she spoke for God to the people on many occasions. Third, she was already serving as a judge to God's people. She made her home in Mount Ephraim, and the people came to her with their civil and tribal disputes.

Deborah sent for Barak, who lived in Kedesh (a city in Naphtali), and told him of God's desire to free His people. Since the capital city of the oppressor was in Naphtali, and since the battle would be fought near that region, Deborah looked to the people of that territory to supply soldiers. The reason she called upon Barak is unclear. One can speculate that Barak had a reputation for being a great warrior among God's people.

Deborah instructed Barak to gather ten thousand soldiers out of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and bring them south to Mount Tabor, the northern boundary of the Valley of Jezreel. Mount Gilboa was the southern boundary, and the Kishon River flowed between those mountains. Barak was glad to gather the army and go

to Mount Tabor as instructed, but he wanted Deborah to join him. Deborah promised to join him, but she said he could not get the glory for the victory that God would give them. Instead, a woman would be the one to strike the final blow to the Canaanites. This did not seem to bother Barak. He gathered his army and met Deborah at Mount Tabor.

When the captain Sisera heard that ten thousand Israelites were at Mount Tabor, he gathered his soldiers and his nine hundred chariots and went to Taanach, a city near the southwest corner of the Valley of Jezreel. Upon the arrival of the Canaanite forces, Deborah sent Barak and his army into the valley where they defeated Sisera's army until "not even one was left" (4:16). Seeing that his army was defeated, Sisera left his chariot and ran until he came to the tent of an Arab sheik named Heber. Heber's tent was just outside of Kedesh near where the battle was fought. When Sisera arrived, he was met by Heber's wife, Jael. Jael invited him inside where she could take care of him. Since peace had reigned between the Canaanites and Heber, Sisera felt secure enough to go inside. After refreshing Sisera with a drink of milk, she covered him with a rug and promised to protect him from the soldiers of Barak's army. Exhausted from fighting and running, Sisera fell asleep. While he lay asleep, Jael took a mallet and a stake that was used to nail the tent down and drove the stake through Sisera's temple and into the ground. When Barak arrived on the scene, Jael showed him what she had done, and the battle was over. The victory continued until God had defeated King Jabin and given the Israelites prosperity and peace which lasted for forty years (5:31).

This was another mighty victory for God's people, but several questions need to be asked. For instance, exactly how did God "discomfit" (destroy) the Canaanite army with only ten thousand soldiers? Second, why would Sisera get off his chariot and run on foot? These are questions that cannot be answered by a casual reading of chapter 4. If one will read chapter 5, he will find some of the answers. Also, the historian, Josephus, gives his insights on what occurred in the Valley of Jezreel on that day.

Deborah's song of praise to God for the great victory that He won for His people is recorded in Judges 5. In her poetic description of what happened, details are given which were not included

in the historical account of Judges 4. She sings that "the stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera" (5:20). Josephus tells of a "storm of sleet and hail which gathered from the east." Judges 5:19 says that Sisera's army approached the battle from "Taanach near the waters of Megiddo." This location was southwest of Jehovah's army. Since the storm came from the east, Sisera's forces would have been entering the battle with their faces to the storm. In addition to that problem, the Kishon River swelled and overflowed its banks. In 5:21, 22, Deborah sang, "The torrent of Kishon swept them away, . . . Then the horses' hoofs beat from the dashing, . . ." While a chariot of iron is a powerful weapon against the enemy on a dry battleground, it is a dangerous liability on a soaked and muddy ground. The horses cannot get the proper footing, and the wheels of the heavy iron chariots sink deeply into the mud. No wonder Sisera jumped off his chariot and began to run. The powerful army of chariots made no difference in the battle. God was fighting this battle. He was using the awesome forces of nature to do His bidding.

Deborah's battle song gives insight into what actually happened when Jabin's army was defeated! God is praised for the awesome power He had displayed since the days of Mount Sinai (5:15). In 5:6-31 many of the otherwise unknown details of the battle are given in Hebrew poetry.

## THE RESPONSE TO GOD'S CALL

The conditions in Israel during the days of the Canaanite oppression were terrible. "The highways were deserted, and travelers went by roundabout ways" (5:6). Danger was so great in the land that the streets could not be traveled. People had to travel down side streets and dirt paths in order to avoid the violence on the main thoroughfares. Besides the danger on the main streets, "war was in the gates" (5:8). No one was able to defend God's people from the enemy. "The noise of archers" was at the "places of drawing water" (5:11; KJV). It was even unsafe to go out and get a bucket of water for the household needs. This was a terrible day indeed in the history of God's chosen people. Suddenly, "Deborah arose" as a "mother in Israel" (5:7). She issued the call to battle, and people out of Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali responded (5:14, 15). Special recogni-

tion is given to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali as those who “despised their lives even to death” (5:18). The efforts of these people combined with the power of God resulted in an awesome victory for the army of Jehovah (5:19-22). What wonderful things happen when men heed God’s call to duty!

### **A Call of Faith**

God’s call is a call of faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him.” The writer to the Hebrews tells about men and women who were faithful *because of their deeds of faith*. Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice to God. Enoch is said to have “pleased God.” Noah’s faith drove him to build an ark in response to God’s promise of a flood. Abraham at the age of seventy-five left his home and his country and set out for a land God promised to show him. Hebrews 11 begins with the premise that faith is necessary before we can ever hope to please God.

An “easy chair” faith is not the biblical picture of faith. For our faith to be God-pleasing, it must be an “obedience-producing” faith. This obedient faith will often demand a high cost. The Jews who were in Nazi-occupied areas during World War II understood the terrible cost of their faith. When the war came to an end, the Allied forces found a Star of David scratched on the basement wall of a Jewish home. Beneath the star were scratched the following words:

I believe in the sun—  
Even when it does not shine.

I believe in love—  
Even when it is not shown.

I believe in God—  
Even when He does not speak.

The faith God desires is a faith that will fill our prayers and hearts, transforming our lives.

### **A Call of Distinction**

God’s call is a call of distinction. In Romans 12:2 God tells us not to be “conformed” to this world, but to be “transformed.” God calls us to be different from the world.

The kind of distinction Paul discusses in Romans 12 is a natural result of who and whose we are. While the world is governed by the fashions of the day, the Christian is guided by God’s fashions. While the world judges its entertain-

ment by the movie critics, the Christian goes by God’s guidance on decency and purity. When a person is guided by the principles laid out in the Bible, he will be different from a world which gives no thought to the will of God.

God’s call today is for us to pay the necessary price to maintain our distinction as God’s people!

### **A Call to Sacrifice**

To communicate his love to the Corinthian brethren, Paul said, “And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. . . .” (2 Corinthians 12:15). To the church in Rome Paul said, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (Romans 1:14, 15). Paul expressed his willingness to give all he had in his service to his brethren and to his God. That is what answering God’s call involves—a willingness to live life on the altar of sacrifice.

Answering God’s call may require one to end a friendship. It may mean suffering embarrassment or ridicule. Under some circumstances, answering God’s call may demand that one quit his job and lose a career opportunity. Whatever the costs may be in your life, if you answer God’s call, you must face the consequences. Even Jesus bowed before the throne of Jehovah and said, “Behold, I have come to do Thy will” (quoted in Hebrews 10:9). Answering God’s call will cause us to have the determination of Paul, who in response to his friends who were trying to convince him not to go to Jerusalem said, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13). This was the attitude of faith, distinction, and sacrifice that we see in those who answered God’s call in Deborah’s day.

## **THE REJECTION OF GOD’S CALL (5:15-17, 23)**

Some people refuse to respond to God’s call. In spite of the desperate conditions of oppression, some of God’s people found it more convenient to look the other way.

Some lived outside the situation (5:15-17). Since these people were not directly involved in the conflict, they must have believed that it was none of their affair. Consequently, the tribe of Reuben

remained in their fields watching their sheep. The region of Gilead was located on the other side of Jordan. They were too busy with the affairs of the "east side" to be concerned about the problems of the "west side." The tribe of Dan was too busy keeping their ships to be bothered with the needs of their brethren. The people of Asher remained on the seashore and on the banks of their creeks probably tending to their fishing industry. The excuses these people used for not answering God's call ranged from, "It's none of our business," to "We are too busy with our own problems."

Some who ignored God's call even lived in the thick of the conflict. Such was the case with the people in the city of Meroz. While its exact location is not known with certainty, most scholars believe that Meroz was located in the Valley of Jezreel. In 5:23 the angel of God pronounces a curse on this town because "they did not come to the help of the Lord, . . . against the warriors." This town did nothing while their brethren were risking their lives in conflict. Had we been in Meroz, we likely would have heard statements like, "I do not know how to fight very well"; "I have a family to provide for"; or "I do not know enough."

People ignore God's call today. Some try to stay outside of God's work. Anytime they speak about the church where they attend, it is always in the third person: "They did this," or "They did that." These people are invariably too busy with their own affairs of life to be bothered with the work of the church.

Others realize they are part of God's work, but they tremble with fear. They have never been fully involved in the work of the church before, and they do not want to fail. They say, "There are plenty of other people who could do a much better job than I."

Regardless of the type of excuse maker one might be, the result is always the same—God's call to duty is ignored, and someone else has to do the work. If we are excuse makers, we are ignoring God's call, and we must repent! The story of Deborah shows that God expects His children to make themselves available when the battle cry is given!

### **THE REWARDS OF ANSWERING GOD'S CALL (5:28-31)**

Deborah's song ends with a note of confidence. In this poetic passage, Sisera's mother is pictured

as staring out her window anxiously awaiting her son's arrival from battle. In wondering why he is late returning from battle, she comforts herself by saying that he must be dividing the spoil. Sisera's mother is symbolic of the attitude of anyone who is not God's child. She expected that her son would have no problems in spite of the life he had lived. She had no concept of accountability and had no expectation of any punishment from God. How deceived men are when they live outside of God's will. Their confidence is in all of the wrong things.

In contrast to the false confidence displayed by Sisera's mother, God's people have a beautiful confidence based on God's faithfulness. Paul said, ". . . I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12). Paul had made a commitment to God many years earlier; he knew that God would give him the reward that He had promised. In addition to the blessings of the life to come, Paul had confidence in the provision of God for this life. He said, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Unlike the false confidence others have, God's children have a confidence that is rooted in the faithfulness of Jehovah!

In 5:31 the contrast between God's enemies and God's children is seen to be one of strength as Deborah says, "Let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord." That is exactly what happens to anyone who opposes God. Those who obey God will be "like the rising of the sun in its might." When the sun first comes up, it gives off little heat. As the morning turns to midday, its warm rays begin to be felt. By midafternoon, the full strength of the sun is felt as it beats down upon the earth. The sun's strength is the kind of strength that God gives to His children.

### **CONCLUSION**

When it is time for battle, God issues a call to His children. Though we are weak and though God is the one who will ultimately win the battle, He expects His children to answer His call to arms. Deborah's victory over the Canaanites and her song of praise to God illustrate that some will heed God's call while others will ignore His call. The call has been given! The battle has begun! How have you responded?

—Craig Tappe