

June 4
Lesson 1

DEBORAH

AND BARAK

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 11:29-40

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Judges 4, 5

JUDGES 4:1-10

¹ Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. ² So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. ³ Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”



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⁸ Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” ⁹ “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

KEY VERSE

“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.—Judges 4:9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the relationship between Deborah and Barak.
2. List possible reasons for doubts and fears on the part of Barak and evaluate their legitimacy.
3. Commit to helping one fellow believer overcome doubts regarding his or her leadership role in a ministry project.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. “Let’s Ask Granny!”

B. Lesson Background

I. Cry to God ([Judges 4:1-3](#))

A. Sin and Subjugation ([vv. 1, 2](#))

What’s Right in Whose Sight?

B. Score of Suffering ([v. 3](#))

II. Challenge Others ([Judges 4:4-7](#))

A. Deborah’s Role ([vv. 4, 5](#))

B. Barak’s Call ([vv. 6, 7](#))

Prophets, True and False

III. Collaborate as Needed ([Judges 4:8-10](#))

A. Barak Balks ([v. 8](#))

B. Barak Backed ([vv. 9, 10](#))

Conclusion

A. Pick Your Heroes Carefully!

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. “Let’s Ask Granny!”

“Granny” was one of the sweetest, kindest, most humble persons in the congregation. “Let’s ask Granny!” was frequently heard when the leaders of the church needed additional input on an issue.

Granny knew the Bible’s precepts and principles better than many. Her wisdom had been accumulated through decades of Bible study, personal experience, and observations of the flow of events in her world. She held no official position of authority. But people willingly received her counsel, and she was willing to give it—especially when biblical concepts were involved.

Some are leaders by position. Others are leaders by their very natures. (And, of course, some are both.) A church’s official leaders demonstrate wisdom when they recognize what has been called “leadership from below” and seek to learn from those such as Granny.

Today’s lesson will help us better understand the importance of leadership skills as we examine how a leader of Israel, known as a judge, led her nation through a trying time.

B. Lesson Background

Joshua had been appointed by God and commissioned by Moses to lead Israel in conquering Canaan ([Deuteronomy 31](#)). But something was different when Joshua passed off the scene in about 1370 BC: no one was appointed to succeed him! The solution was very simple. God was in charge, and each tribe or unit would obey God and take care of its area.

In Joshua’s farewell addresses ([Joshua 23, 24](#)), he warned the Israelites again, just as Moses had done, of what they would experience if they served other gods. But they did serve such gods, and [Judges 2:10](#) explains why: “another generation grew up who knew [not] the Lord.” What followed was disaster after disaster. If one generation does not teach the next generation about God, then tragedies follow.

The book of Judges is concerned primarily with the sin-cycles that Israel experienced during the period of the Judges. To date that era with precision is difficult. By one calculation, there were 330 years between the appearance of the first judge ([Judges 3:9](#)) and the passing of the last ([1 Samuel 25:1](#)). But depending on the interpretation of [Acts 13:20](#) and other factors, some calculate the period to span 450 years.

Regarding the sin-cycles themselves, these have been summarized in terms of four stages: *sin*, *sorrow* (or *servitude*), *supplication*, and *salvation*. A different way of stating this cycle is *rebellion*, *retribution*, *repentance*, and *restoration*. When the Israelites worshipped other gods, they suffered. When the people eventually repented, the Lord would send a deliverer, known as a judge. Then the cycle repeated itself (see [Judges 2:10-19](#)).

The lessons of this unit are biographical studies of 4 of the 12 judges recorded in the book of Judges: Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. These 4 plus Othniel and Ehud are traditionally said to be the 6 “major judges” in light of all that is recorded about them. They were military deliverers; thus the word *judge* should not cause us to think exclusively in terms of civil magistrates.

The longest period of peace recorded within the book of Judges is the one of 80 years between Ehud and Deborah ([Judges 3:30](#)). Today’s lesson takes us back to about 1225 BC as that period of peace comes to an end.

I. Cry to God

([JUDGES 4:1-3](#))

A. Sin and Subjugation ([vv. 1, 2](#))

⚠️ Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead.

The phrase *the Israelites did evil* occurs seven times in the book of Judges, and this is the fourth of those. Since the first occurrence in [Judges 2:11](#) is a general reference (see the Lesson Background), the phrase’s use here indicates the beginning of the third sin-cycle.

To consider what evil consists of in this context, we look to the use of the phrase *the Israelites did evil* in [Judges 3:7](#), which introduces the first sin-cycle. The sin mentioned there is summed up with a single word: *idolatry*. The nations the Israelites had failed to destroy had become a snare to them in this regard ([Deuteronomy 7:16](#); [20:16-18](#); [Joshua 23:12, 13](#); [Judges 3:5, 6](#)).

The exploits of *Ehud*, the second major judge, are noted in [Judges 3:12-30](#). The non-major judge who follows him is accorded only a single-verse description ([3:31](#)) as the author hastens to move to the next sin-cycle.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to prevent negative things from happening during times of leadership vacuum in the church?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

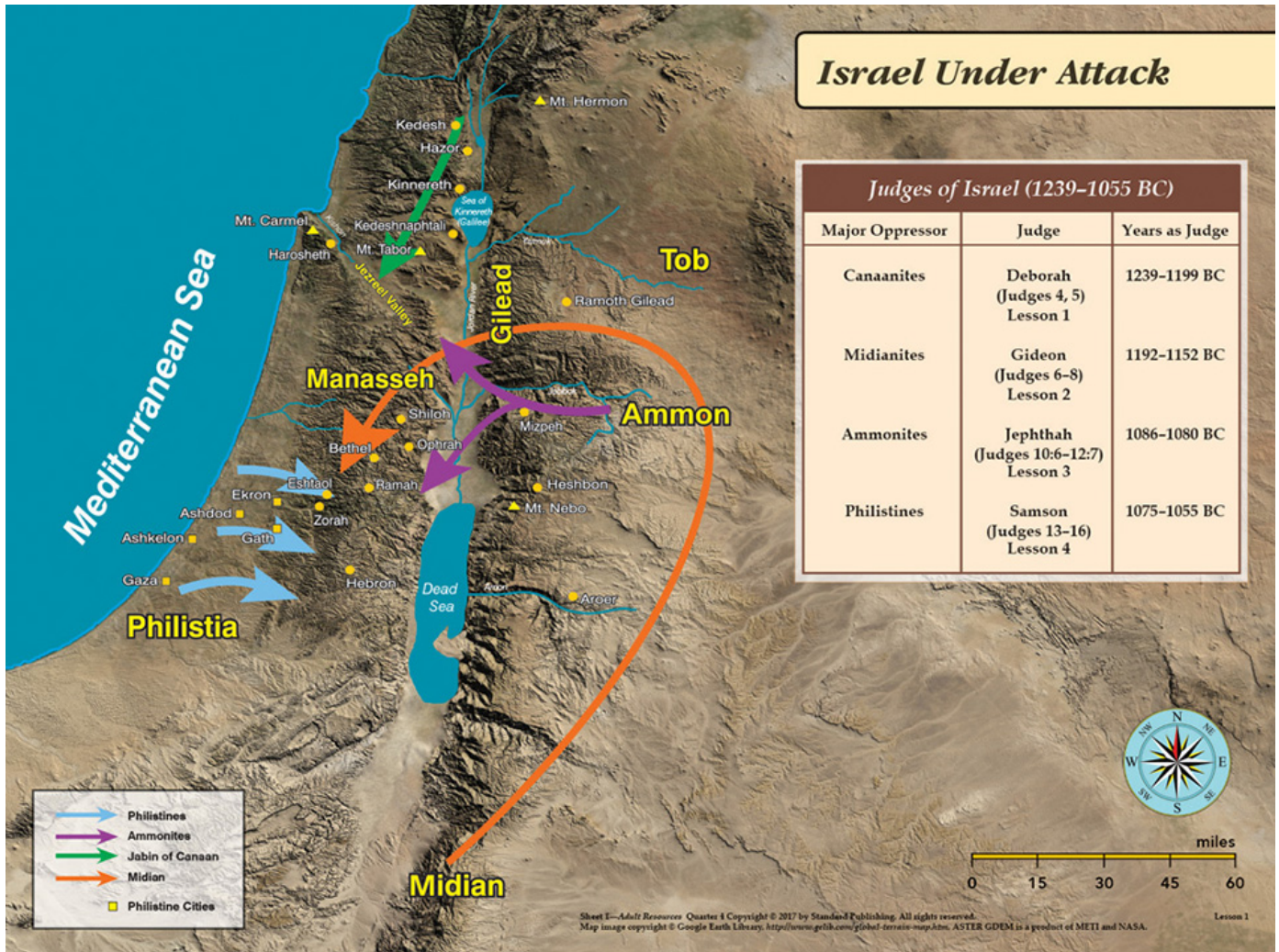
- Regarding coverage of ministry tasks
- Regarding use of church resources
- Regarding political viewpoints
- Regarding teaching or leadership roles
- Other

WHAT’S RIGHT IN WHOSE SIGHT?

The U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark decision on June 26, 2015, that declared same-sex marriage to be a constitutionally protected right. An amazing cultural shift had taken place in a ten-year period: in 2004, opinion polls showed about 60 percent of Americans opposing same-sex unions with about 40 percent supporting them; by 2014, those numbers had reversed.

The five justices who created this decision seemed to hold to the theory that the U.S. Constitution is a “living document.” This theory, known as *loose constructionism*, asserts that courts are free to interpret the Constitution in light of prevailing cultural winds. What’s illegal in one decade can become a “right” in another.

We must recognize that God and humans often do not share the same conclusions regarding what is good and what is evil (compare [Isaiah 5:20](#)). This is true whether or not one embraces a loose-construction theory for interpreting a country’s founding documents. The book of Judges offers this sobering observation twice: “everyone did as they saw fit” ([Judges 17:6](#); [21:25](#)). The step from doing what is right in one’s own eyes to doing “evil in the eyes of the Lord” ([4:1](#)) is smaller than one may think! —C. R. B.



Visual for Lesson 1. Keep this map posted throughout the first unit of this quarter's studies to give your learners a geographical perspective.

2. So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim.

The oppression arises from northern *Canaan*, since the city of *Hazor* is located about eight miles north-northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Before 1400 BC, Joshua had destroyed *Hazor* utterly (*Joshua 11:10-14*). Mention of "Jabin king of Hazor" occurs in conjunction with that military action of at least 175 years previous (*11:1*). Therefore we don't know if the word *Jabin* is a title that is passed along or is simply a favorite name for kings.

Despite Joshua's success, pockets of unconquered peoples remained by the time he had become elderly (*Joshua 13:1-6*). It was these people who rebuilt *Hazor* as a royal city. The mopping-up operations had been left to the individual tribes, but they did not follow through (*Judges 1:27-34*). In this particular case, it seems to have been the tribe of Naphtali that dropped the ball, since *Hazor* is in its tribal allotment (*Joshua 19:32-39*). Instead of obeying Joshua or the Lord, the tribes just became content with what they had.

Israel must confront *Sisera*, the military commander, not the king. *Sisera's* base of operations at *Harosheth Haggoyim*, near the Kishon River that flows into the Mediterranean, is perhaps 30 miles southwest of *Hazor* and 16 miles northwest of *Megiddo*. These factors become an important part of the battle plan that God designs.

B. Score of Suffering (v. 3)

3. Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

The nature of the 20-year oppression that *the Israelites* suffer isn't specified. It may take the form of servitude (example: *Joshua 16:10*), a

periodic taxation of gold and/or silver (example: [2 Kings 23:33](#)), and/or a confiscation of crops and livestock (examples: [Deuteronomy 28:51](#); [2 Kings 3:4](#)). The latter could be collected as marauding groups go from place to place (example: [Judges 6:2-6](#)).

It is serious when oppressors take food that your family depends on to get through the rainy months of the winter season! Frustration and anger follow, as the Israelites watch the results of their labor snatched away. Prayers for deliverance undoubtedly begin far in advance of the 20-year point mentioned here. But it can take time for repentance to be joined with prayer. Even today, many people call upon the Lord in a crisis, but do not accompany that prayer with repentance.

A reason for the seeming hopelessness of Israel's situation is the *nine hundred chariots* possessed by the enemy. The note that these are *fitted with iron* is not a reference to the entirety of their construction. Rather, the chariots are made of wood, with iron covering strategic parts.

This is not the first time the issue of ironreinforced chariots has come up; some Canaanites had them when Joshua divided the land among the 12 tribes in about 1400 BC ([Joshua 17:16](#)). The Iron Age is dated as beginning about 1200 BC, but some nations get technological advances later than others. Some Canaanites apparently know the techniques of processing iron ore that are yet unknown to the Israelites.

II. Challenge Others

(JUDGES 4:4-7)

A. Deborah's Role (vv. 4, 5)

4. Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

Deborah's position in the line of judges is noted in the Lesson Background. She seems to have abilities that are recognized by the people, resulting in her having become a leader in Israel in a twofold way: that of judge and prophet. The latter means she is a spokesperson for the Lord. This passage is the only place in the Bible that mentions her husband, *Lappidoth*.

5. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.

Deborah's role as civil magistrate is revealed by the fact that Israelites *go up to her to have their disputes decided* (compare [Exodus 18:13](#)). The phrase *hill country of Ephraim* refers to the central part of Israel (compare [Joshua 17:15](#)). The distance between Ramah and Bethel is about five miles, the towns lying about five and 10 miles, respectively, due north of Jerusalem.

The location of *the Palm of Deborah* between the two towns probably places this tree within the tribal territory of Benjamin. We say "probably" because Bethel lies just outside the tribe's territorial boundary, in Ephraim ([Joshua 18:13](#)).

What Do You Think?

How do we keep cultural expectations regarding gender roles from being a greater influence in the church than the Bible itself?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Before such influence occurs (preventive measures)

After such influence occurs (curative measures)

B. Barak's Call (vv. 6, 7)

6a. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you:

Deborah fulfills her role as a prophet: having received a message from *the Lord, the God of Israel*, she delivers it to Barak as the one to lead Israel in battle. Barak is a popular name, so the man is further identified by the name of his father and his place of origin. *Abinoam* is mentioned only here and in [Judges 5:12](#). A bit of uncertainty exists regarding the location of the town *Kedesh in Naphtali* (the latter name designating a tribal territory of the Israelites). One proposal locates it on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee; another proposal places it about 35 miles farther north (compare [Joshua 12:22](#); [19:37](#); [20:7](#); [21:32](#); [2 Kings 15:29](#)).

6b. "Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor.

Barak receives his orders in terms of route of march and recruitment. Keeping in mind the current location of Deborah and Barak according to [verse 5](#), *Mount Tabor* is roughly 50 miles to the north and about 11 miles east of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee. This rounded mountain, which has been described as an upside-down teacup, lies just within the northern border of the tribe of Issachar, very close to where the border meets those of both *Naphtali* and *Zebulun*.

Men from these areas are likely to respond positively to a call to arms, for their families are likely to have suffered the most from two decades of oppression. The areas Naphtali and Zebulun form part of what is later called "Galilee of the Gentiles" in [Matthew 4:15](#).

7. "I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the

Kishon River and give him into your hands.”

HOW TO SAY IT

Abinoam	Uh- <i>bin</i> -o-am.
Canaan	<i>Kay</i> -nun.
Ephraim	<i>Ee</i> -fray-im.
Esdraelon	<i>Es</i> -druh-ee-lon.
Haggoyim	Hawg-goy-em.
Harosheth	Huh- <i>roe</i> -sheth.
Jephthah	<i>Jef</i> -thuh (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Kedesh	<i>Kee</i> -desh.
Kishon	<i>Kye</i> -shon.
Lappidoth	<i>Lap</i> -pih-doth.
Manasseh	Muh- <i>nass</i> -uh.
Megiddo	Muh- <i>gid</i> -doe.
Naphtali	Naf-tuh- <i>lye</i> .
Sisera	<i>Sis</i> -er-uh.
Zebulun	<i>Zeb</i> -you-lun.

The Lord promises to do his part in the forthcoming battle: he will arrange for the enemy to gather near *the Kishon River*, which flows through the Jezreel Valley. The Israelite army at Mount Tabor will be several miles to the northeast. Once *Sisera*, the commander of *Jabin's army*, hears that Israel has formed a fighting force, his natural reaction will be to muster *his chariots and his troops* for a showdown ([Judges 4:12, 13](#)).

The reason for Barak to have been instructed to take his force to Mount Tabor becomes clearer: his force of foot soldiers will have a great defensive position there against chariots. Wheeled conveyances don't function well in rugged, hilly terrain! But if Barak imagines the forthcoming battle to be defensive in nature, his thinking will change soon enough. The victory for his army is assured, but the manner of the victory will probably not be what Barak expects.

PROPHETS, TRUE AND FALSE

Yogi Berra (1925-2015), legendary baseball player, manager, and coach of the New York Yankees, was notable for his incongruous statements. One such is his purported lament that “it's tough to make predictions—especially about the future.” Our laughter should not cause us to forget that false predictions have consequences. God's people of the old covenant were beset with false prophets ([Jeremiah 14:14](#); [Ezekiel 22:28](#); etc.); Jesus warned of the same for our era ([Matthew 24:11](#)).

How right he has been! In September 2013, a purportedly Christian blog prophesied an earthquake of magnitude 9.7—the largest in recorded history—to strike the California coast on October 3. As with all such failed predictions, the primary result was to make Christianity seem a little less credible.

In striking contrast, true biblical prophets were always right (compare [Deuteronomy 18:22](#)), and Deborah's prophecy of Israelite victory over the Canaanites came true just as she had relayed that assurance from the Lord ([Judges 4:15](#)). Jesus says we can recognize false prophets “by their fruit” ([Matthew 7:15, 16](#)). A track record of 90 percent accuracy isn't good enough. Would you be able to explain why to a friend? —C. R. B.

III. Collaborate as Needed

([JUDGES 4:8-10](#))

A. Barak Balks (v. 8)

8. Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go.”

Although Barak knows the outcome that is promised, he voices the ultimatum we see here: he will go only if she will as well. His reasons are not given, so different ideas have been suggested. One theory is that Barak wants to have Deborah with him in case there are further instructions from God.

Another theory is that Barak lacks courage. Some object to this theory because Barak is listed as a man of faith in [Hebrews 11:32](#) and is listed among other great leaders of the past in [1 Samuel 12:11](#). But courage can fail in even the greatest of leaders (example: just after his stunning victory at Mount Carmel, “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” when threatened by Queen Jezebel; [1 Kings 19:2, 3](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to encourage others in their ministry tasks?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In contexts of doubt regarding spiritual giftedness

In contexts of doubt regarding abilities

In contexts of previous ministry failures

Other

B. Barak Backed (vv. 9, 10)

9. “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Deborah follows the Lord and has the ability to make good decisions quickly. This may explain why she is a recognized leader. She is also one who is prompt in encouraging others to fulfill their roles. This trait is a positive factor in the lives of the people who consult her.

What Do You Think?

What has to happen for Christians to exhibit the leadership qualities of Deborah?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of supporting appointments of others to leadership positions

In serving as an example to those already in leadership roles

In preventing godly confidence ([2 Thessalonians 3:4](#); etc.) from becoming overconfidence ([1 Timothy 1:7](#); etc.)

Other

Deborah gives an additional prophecy, and Barak probably misunderstands the meaning of *the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman*. He probably anticipates that it will be Deborah who brings an end to Sisera. However, the verses that follow the lesson text reveal that it will be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who ends Sisera’s life (see [Judges 4:11, 18-21](#)).

^{10a.} There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali,

The Kedesh that is located on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee (see [v. 6a](#), above) is an ideal place to muster troops from *Zebulun and Naphtali* before advancing to Mount Tabor. Men traveling in small groups toward Kedesh in answer to a call to arms will not attract much attention, since movement toward Kedesh is away from Sisera’s base at Harosheth ([v. 2](#), above).

^{10b.} and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

As *ten thousand men* follow Barak with Deborah accompanying, they can think about the years of oppression that their families have endured. The thought of ridding themselves of such misery may be what attracts men of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar to participate as well ([Judges 5:13-15a](#)). Members of other tribes, however, do not participate ([5:15b-17](#)). By and large, the latter are located in areas away from the oppression that originates from the north, so they may feel that it is not their fight. Even so, the result will be victory and 40 years of peace ([4:23, 24; 5:31](#)).

Conclusion**A. Pick Your Heroes Carefully!**

A counselor asked his client to think of the people he knew whom he admired. Then he was asked to consider what those people had ever done that was worthwhile. The client replied, “As I think about it, all they have ever done is to complain. They never do anything else.” He was advised to evaluate what he had said, and then to find some new heroes.

The account of Deborah and Barak illustrates that each respected the other. It also suggests that the soldiers in Barak’s army trusted his leadership. The combination of interpersonal respect and God’s help were the ingredients for success. And so it is yet today. [Hebrews 11](#) encourages us to pick our heroes carefully! If their lives are not godly, how can they be our heroes?

What Do You Think?

What character traits do you look for in those whom you would accept as mentors? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding spiritual issues
- Regarding vocational proficiency
- Regarding consistency
- Other

B. Prayer

Almighty God, grant us the wisdom to select godly men or women as our heroes and mentors! But most of all, empower us by your Spirit to imitate Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Who we follow today shapes who we become tomorrow.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 348) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Summer Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 4629117 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Before class, write each of these names on a separate sheet of paper in large letters: *Bill Gates, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther, Winston Churchill, Cleopatra, George Washington, Harriet Tubman, Thomas Edison*. (Substitute other famous names for any you do not believe your group would recognize.)

To begin class, ask for 10 volunteers and tape one of the names to each of their backs. Have the volunteers move about the room while others talk to them as that person (without mentioning the name). As soon as a volunteer guesses his or her famous identity, that person can remove the label and take a seat.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Leading the Way” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, discuss characteristics these leaders had that made them effective. Then lead into the Bible study by saying, “We can learn a lot from great leaders. Today we will examine how Deborah and Barak led their nation at a trying time.”

Into the Word

Write this outline on the board with the title, *The Three Cs of a Leader*:

- I. Crisis: God can prepare strong leaders during times of trouble ([Judges 4:1-3](#)).
- II. Command: Good leaders not only identify problems but also identify solutions and those who can implement them ([Judges 4:4-7](#)).
- III. Collaboration: No one person can do everything. Good leaders build and work with good teams ([Judges 4:8-10](#)).

Divide learners into groups and assign each group one of the three points of the outline. Give each group strips of paper (approximately 3" x 12") and markers. Have groups read their assigned text and summarize it with one or more bumper-sticker slogans. After several minutes of small-group creativity, allow groups to share their slogans.

Some suggested bumper stickers follow.

Crisis

Troubles knock some down and raise others up.

Under Attack? Dial 1-800-CALL GOD

Command

Inspired Leaders Inspire Others

Looking for a Few Good Men

It Takes a Leader to Raise an Army

Collaboration

Surrender the ME for the WE

Together We Can

There are no limits when nobody cares who gets the credit

Into Life

Say, “Deborah seems to have been able to encourage Barak and help him believe in himself so he could accomplish the task God had given him. Has there ever been a person in your life who really believed in you and encouraged you during a difficult time?”

Ask students to pair off and tell their stories to a partner. Allow time for some students to share their stories. Then distribute an index card to each student.

Say, “Are there people you can encourage in their ministries? Write one person’s name, the method you will use to communicate with him or her, and a date by when you will have completed this task.”

Encourage your students to take these cards home with them and follow through on the task.

Alternative. Hand out copies of the “What’s Holding You Back?” activity from the reproducible page. Allow students to share their fears; have other students give words of encouragement.

Close either activity with group prayer.