

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-7 Deborah the Leader

Any big task takes time. Someone said you should estimate how long a task will take, and then double your estimated time! The Israelites took a long time to settle the Promised Land. The conquest under Joshua took about five years. But settlement went on for more than 200 additional years.

When Joshua had grown old, Yahweh said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over” (Josh 13:1). So the land east of the Jordan River was assigned to two tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh. (The tribes were named after the sons of Jacob.) The land between the river and the Mediterranean Sea was assigned—region by region—to eight tribes and half of Manasseh. The tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe. They were given towns and pasturelands here and there within other tribal territories. The Levites were to be spiritual leaders throughout the Promised Land, and not in only one region.

As Joshua neared the end of his life, he summoned all the tribal leaders to the town of Shechem, in the middle of the land. There he encouraged the people one last time. “You yourselves have seen everything Yahweh your God has done to all these nations for your sake. It was Yahweh your God who fought for you” (Josh 23:3). He went on to remind them that God would continue to help the tribes settle the land.

“Be very strong,” he continued, “be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses. Don’t turn aside to the right or to the left. Hold fast to Yahweh your God, as you have until now.” Then Joshua led the people in a ceremony to renew the covenant with Yahweh. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh.”

The people promised to serve Yahweh. “Far be it from us to forsake Yahweh to serve other gods” (Josh 24:6, 8, 15-16).

As years went by, tribal leaders continued the task of subduing their own assigned regions. This went on for many years, with differing degrees of success. The Book of Judges tells this part of the story. Six major judges functioned as military leaders over the next 200 years. They rallied fighters from the tribes to fight against invaders who oppressed them. There was no strong central government. The tribes were busy in their own regions, and worked with other tribes only reluctantly. One sentence tells the story: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Jud 21:25).

This settlement period was a sad time spiritually in Israel. The tribes were being influenced by the Canaanites and their religions. Joshua had warned them this might happen. They were not faithful to God’s commands. They repeated a cycle of spiritual ups and downs. Again and again they would turn away from Yahweh in their beliefs and actions. Then the Lord would allow a foreign nation to punish them for their sins. The enemy would destroy their crops and take over their pastures. They would enslave the Israelites, too. These oppressions lasted for 10 or 20 years each.

Next the people would cry out to their leaders and to Yahweh. They would repent of their evil beliefs and actions. In response, Yahweh in his mercy would raise up a deliverer—a man or woman to lead the people against their enemies. They were successful, and their region would be safe and quiet for a few decades. Sadly this cycle was repeated many times during the settlement period: sinfulness, punishment, then repentance and deliverance.

A woman named Deborah led the tribes against oppression in the north. A Canaanite king, Jabin, and his general, Sisera, cruelly crushed Israel in the northern part of Canaan. Deborah was a spiritual leader in the central part of the land. She summoned a northern leader named Barak. “Yahweh the God of Israel, commands you to take fighters from two neighboring northern tribes. Yahweh promises, ‘I will lead general Sisera with his chariots and fighters to a river valley and give him into your hands’” (Jud 4:7). (Israel had only foot soldiers and no chariots.)

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

“Certainly I’ll go with you,” said Deborah. “But the honor of the victory will not be yours. Because of your hesitation, Yahweh will defeat Sisera by a woman.” Barak, Deborah, and 10 thousand Israelite fighters gathered for battle.

Deborah told Barak, “Go! Has not Yahweh gone before you? You will defeat Sisera today!” The battle raged against Sisera, his fighters, and his 900 chariots. A heavy rainstorm caused the river to flood the valley. The mud made the horse-drawn chariots useless. The enemies abandoned their chariots and weapons and ran away. Hundreds were killed. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword. Sisera himself ran into the hills. He hid in the tent of an Israelite he thought was his friend.

This man’s wife, Jael, greeted the general. “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.” He was tired and lay down under a blanket.

“I’m thirsty,” he said, “please give me something to drink.” She did so. He was tired from the battle and wanted to sleep. “Stand in the doorway,” he commanded. “If anyone comes by and asks, ‘Is there a man in here?’ say ‘No.’”

When Sisera fell asleep, Jael took a tent peg and hammer and drove it through his head. As Deborah had predicted, a woman—Jael—killed the general. Just then, Barak rushed up to her tent. He had been trying to catch Sisera.

“Come in,” she said, “I’ll show you the man you’re looking for.” There lay Sisera with a tent peg through his temple—dead (Jud 4:8-22).

Yahweh gave victory through Deborah, Barak, Jael, and the Israelite fighters. A rainstorm turned the battlefield into a muddy mess. Deborah wrote a poem about this victory. “So may all your enemies perish, Yahweh! But may all who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength” (Jud 5:31).

This story is **important** because it shows us that God was not defeated by the sins of his people, Israel. He remained faithful to them, but they were repeatedly unfaithful to his covenant. Settlement was difficult for several reasons. The enemies had superior weapons. God wanted to

teach Israel how to fight. God wanted to test his people; would they remain faithful? The chief reason for difficulty was Israel's tendency to adopt the pagan ways of their neighbors.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God was merciful and responsive to the repentance of his people. God blesses people who trust him and obey his commands.

To **review** this lesson, answer these questions:

1. What is the main reason for the difficulties of the settlement period? [Pause]
A. If you said, "Israel kept adopting the pagan ways of the Canaanites," you are correct.
2. Can you list the four elements of the sad sequence of events during this period? [Pause]
A. If you answered, "Sinfulness, punishment, repentance, deliverance," you answered correctly.
3. How did Yahweh use godly female leaders during this period? [Pause]
A. If you said, "Deborah and Jael led Israel to victory, when Barak was reluctant to obey God," you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to the story at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell the story in your own words as you remember it. Then listen to the story again and re-tell it until you feel sure you are repeating the words and actions correctly. You should spend at least 45 minutes in learning the story. You may need to have someone check that you are telling the story correctly.

Ask a friend who has never heard this story to listen to it. Then gather some women who are believers and challenge them to step out in faith to become leaders. After Joshua died, Israel had no one leader. God raised up several deliverers, however, to help Israel defeat its enemies.

Memorize Joshua's words: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh" (Joshua 24:15).