“We have to distrust each other. It’s our only defense against betrayal.”
~Tennessee Williams

DISCUSS

Which of the following people do you believe to be the most trustworthy? The least trustworthy? Number the following from 1-10 (with 1 being the person you trust the most).

____ Myself       ____ My best friend       ____ College professors       ____ Doctors
____ Tech support       ____ Policemen       ____ Pastors       ____ Bankers       ____ News media
____ Lawyers

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Who or what are you trusting to get you through a crisis: spiritually, economically and physically?

The Canaanites were powerful because they were the first culture to move from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. They possessed nine hundred iron chariots, while the Israelites had only a few primitive weapons. How could the Israelites ever expect to overthrow such a technologically advanced enemy? Read Judges 4-5.

EXPLORE

- God’s Word by asking questions of what you saw. The notes which follow may help you to think through these questions.

1)

Who is your favorite character in this story: Deborah, Barak, Sisera or Jael? Why?

- Who should be strong in this account, and who is actually “broken” (not expected to be a hero)? Is there any irony here? Why?

2)

What gifts and skills did Deborah possess (4:4-14)?

- How did Deborah use her skills to make a difference during a godless period of Israel’s history?

- How can you encourage the people you know to trust in God?
3) Why was it wrong for Barak to ask Deborah to go with him (vv. 8-9)?
   • In what ways should we seek other’s help in obeying God’s will?

4) What do we learn about Jael in verses 11 and 17-22?
   • Why did you think Jael betrayed Sisera and helped the Israelites?

5) What assumptions did Sisera make regarding his safety?
   • How did each of the things Sisera trusted for protection fail?
   • What people and things have you assumed would be there to rescue you in a crisis?
   • Compare the leading characters of this story: Deborah, Barak, Jael and Sisera. In what did each of them trust?
   • Which of them are you most like? Why?

6) Judges 5 retells the events of chapter 4 as a song of triumph. Here the activity of God is more prominent. What did God do to rescue his people? How does God’s action make or break heroes?

7) What has this study helped you to discover about your trust in God?
   • What is necessary in order to be a hero? Could you? Why or why not?
Notes On The Passage

4:1-3 - As long as Ehud lived, he kept Israel faithful to God (v. 1). However, after he died, God's people again "did evil," and turned from the Lord. In discipline, God allowed the Canaanites in the North to gain strength and dominate the Israelites for 20 years. The earlier oppressions were from outside Canaan, but now a leader within Canaan led an uprising against the Israelites. Hazor was one of the largest cities in the land, situated on the main road connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia. Hazor's king was "Jabin" ("The Discerning," lit. "he will understand"), a sarcastic title since he would learn that Yahweh opposes oppressors of His people. The Canaanites' "900 iron [war] chariots" gave them complete control of the flatter and dryer portions of this area. The Israelites were forced to live in the hills. These "chariots" were state-of-the-art weapons at this time. Compare Pharaoh's chariots in the Exodus account. Chapter 5 also recalls the Exodus.

4:11 - "Deborah" was a "prophetess," one of three prophetesses identified as such in the Old Testament (v. 4), along with Miriam (Exod. 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). She was also one of the judges. The account of her life and ministry shows that some of the judges served as civil leaders almost exclusively. Samuel was a similar type of judge, whose military exploits were minor. "Barak" apparently was a well-known military leader in Israel at this time.

As a prophetess, Deborah sent orders to Barak to assemble 10,000 soldiers, or possibly 10 units of soldiers, at "Mount Tabor," southwest of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee). Note that God's command to Barak was clear: he was to "Go" ("and march"; Heb. masak, lit. "to draw along") with his recruits, and wait at the mountain. God said that He would "draw out" Sisera to advance against Barak. Barak was then to move west and deploy his army against Sisera's forces at the Kishon River, just north of the Carmel mountain range, which stood on the south side of the Jezreel Valley. On this occasion, Israel's forces were very numerous. They had perhaps a 10 to one advantage over the Canaanites. Gideon's later battle with the Midianites would be the opposite, with Israel's forces in the minority. God promised to "give" the Canaanites "into" Barak's "hand" (v. 7).

Barak's refusal to go on this mission without Deborah raises questions. He may have been afraid to go into battle without Deborah's comforting company. Probably he wanted to have this prophetess with him, so that he could obtain God's guidance through her if he needed to do so. Whatever his motivation may have been, he put a condition on obeying God. The will of God was clear. He even had God's promise of victory. Nevertheless he refused to obey unless Deborah accompanied him. Barak would defeat the Canaanites, but "a woman" would get the credit ("honor") for defeating the commander, "Sisera." This was Barak's punishment for putting a condition on his obedience to God (v. 9). Barak probably assumed that the prediction in verse 9 referred to Deborah, but, as things turned out, "Jael" the "Kenite" received the glory that might have been his (vv. 17-22). Even though Barak had faith (Heb. 11:32), his faith was not as strong as it should have been.

Apparently some of the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, had moved north to continue their semi-nomadic life in the northern part of western Manasseh. Hobab was probably Moses' brother-in-law (NIV) rather than his father-in-law (AV, NASB; cf. Num 10:29). Most of the Kenites lived in southern Judah. Heber's family was able to maintain good relations with both the Canaanites and the Israelites ("there was peace between Jabin . . . and . . . the house of Heber"; v. 17). Heber's name means "Ally," and reflects his alliance with the Canaanites.

12-16 - When word reached Sisera that Barak had mustered Israelite troops at Mt. Tabor, he moved east across the Jezreel Valley with his 900 iron chariots and warriors to engage Barak. With Deborah at his side, and her reassuring statement of God's promised victory (v. 14), Barak was now not afraid to engage the enemy. Evidently God sent an unseasonable thunderstorm that mired Sisera's chariots in the softened valley soil (cf. 5:4-5, 20-21). The main battle apparently took place near Taanach, near the south central portion of the valley (5:19). The Israelites destroyed the whole Canaanite army that participated in this encounter ("all the army of Sisera fell . . . not even one was left," v. 16). This loss was a double disappointment for the Canaanites. Not only did they lose control of the lowlands that their chariots had dominated, but their god had failed them. The Canaanites believed that Baal controlled storms and rode upon the clouds, but he allowed their army to be totally destroyed.
because of a storm!

17-22 - Little did Sisera realize, that even though Heber's sentiments apparently favored the Canaanites, his wife Jael was a loyal worshipper of Yahweh. She was no compromiser, as her husband seems to have been. Sisera "had systematically violated every covenant of the code governing the actions of host and guest." Sisera should have gone directly to Heber, the head of the household, not to his wife's tent! This violation of hospitality customs would have alerted Jael that something was amiss. Furthermore, Sisera should not have accepted Jael's offer of hospitality — but when he did, this doubtless indicated to Jael again that his intentions were not right. Sisera proceeded to make two requests of his host. First, he requested something to drink, and secondly, that Jael would stand guard at the door of the tent — evidently to lie about his presence, which would have endangered her safety.

In the light of Sisera's violation of hospitality customs, it seems that Jael's act was self-defense. Moreover, this was war, and "holy war" at that. What she did shows her commitment to do God's will, namely, destroying the inhabitants of the land (cf. Deut. 31:1-8; 32; Josh. 1:1-9). To die by the hand of a woman was a disgrace in the ancient Near East (cf. 9:54). Verse 22 is somewhat amusing and full of irony. Somehow Barak had gotten on Sisera's trail, and finally found his way to Heber's tent at the east end of the valley. As Deborah had commanded Barak to "Go" (v. 6), now Jael commanded him to "Come." But they used the same Hebrew word in addressing him on both occasions. The man who should have taken the initiative, in attacking Israel's enemy years earlier, now got another order from a woman — a seemingly "ordinary housewife," who had conquered his, General Barak's, mighty enemy, General Sisera!

This story warns us about putting conditions on our obedience to God. If we do this, God may use someone else, and we will not achieve all we could for His glory. God honored Barak, but he has forever remained in Deborah's shadow. He defeated the Canaanites, but he failed to defeat their leader. God will use unusual people with unusual equipment — if they desire to do His will (cf. Ehud and Shamgar). Jael used what she had at hand to serve Him.