

# OpenTheo

## June 26th: Judges 8 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

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Gideon's failures. Awaiting the final resurrection.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Judges 8 And Gideon came to the Jordan, and crossed over, he and the three hundred men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. So he said to the men of Succoth, Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zeba and Zalmunad, the kings of Midian. And the officials of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunad already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army? So Gideon said, Well then, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmunad into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.

And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said to the men of Penuel, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.

Now Zeba and Zalmunad were in Karkur with their army, about fifteen thousand men, all

who were left of all the army of the people of the east, for there had fallen one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent-dwellers east of Noba and Jogbahar, and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zeba and Zalmunad fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zeba and Zalmunad, and he threw all the army into a panic.

Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heraz, and he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. And he came to the men of Succoth and said, Behold Zeba and Zalmunad, about whom you taunted me, saying, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunad already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted? And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson.

And he broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city. Then he said to Zeba and Zalmunad, Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor? They answered, As you are, so were they, every one of them resembled the son of a king. And he said, They were my brothers, the sons of my mother.

As the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you. So he said to Jetha his firstborn, Rise and kill them. But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man.

Then Zeba and Zalmunad said, Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose and killed Zeba and Zalmunad, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels. Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.

Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. And Gideon said to them, Let me make a request of you.

Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil, for they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites. And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil.

And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, and the pendants, and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. And Gideon made an effort of it, and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel hoarded after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more.

And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon. Jeroboam the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.

Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash's father at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again, and hoared after the Baals, and made Baal-bereth their god. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

In Judges chapter 8, Gideon has just won the battle against the Midianites, and in the Mopping Up stage he summons people from other tribes to assist, particularly the Ephraimites, who deal with the Midianites at the fords of the Jordan. The Ephraimites, however, are annoyed that they were not summoned at first. They were denied a part of the glory of the battle.

Now the victory of Gideon was not one that was achieved for his own glory. Had the Ephraimites been with him, they would have been whittled down just like everyone else, and there would only have been a small number who would ever have taken part in the battle. He responds in a very gracious manner.

The Ephraimites had captured two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, and the grape harvest of Abieza, Gideon's people, was eclipsed by the supposed gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim. Even though Gideon's men and Abieza supposedly enjoyed the harvest, and only left the gleanings for the Ephraimites, the gleanings far exceeded in quantity the actual harvest. Gideon and his men themselves had not captured any of the leaders, but the Ephraimites had.

By this gracious response, Gideon didn't play a competitive honour game, and he mollifies the Ephraimites' anger. It's not a good sign of the relationship between Ephraim and the rest of Israel, though. Gideon and his men pursue the remaining body of the army of the Midianites and their leaders, Zeba and Zalmanah, and while on the way, they need aid.

They need support and food and provisions, and these two towns of Succoth and Penuel refuse to provide any. The towns refuse to provide aid, as he does not have Zeba and Zalmanah in his possession. If he had, then they would feel safe doing so.

However, as long as the Midianites are free, they fear that if they help Gideon, the full wrath of the Midianites will descend upon them in vengeance for helping and aiding their

enemy. Gideon's response, considering that at the start of the story he was afraid to act and was hiding from the Midianites, could have been one of mercy. But instead, it's not a very gracious response at all, and it's quite cruel.

He threatens to thresh Succoth with thorns from the wilderness and to tear down Penuel's tower, removing their defence. Zeba and Zalmanah are captured, and their army is thrown into panic. They have already lost 120,000 people.

Israel has taken its large portion from their numbers. This is 12 times 10,000. Great victories over the Canaanites and the Perizzites in chapter 1 verse 4 and the Moabites in chapter 3 verse 29 involved 10,000 people being defeated or killed.

Now it's 12 times that number. It's a great victory blown up to Israelite proportions. This is a truly devastating defeat of the locust army of the Midianites.

It's one of the reasons why it's recalled in later history as a paradigm of God's victory over his enemies. Gideon returns by the ascent of Herod's. He avenges himself upon the towns of Penuel and of Succoth.

However, he finds that Zeba and Zalmanah have killed his brothers at Tabor. Gideon at this point makes it a matter of family honour and vengeance, and he instructs his firstborn son Jether to kill Zeba and Zalmanah. This is not the justice of the Lord's warfare.

He'd been willing to spare them on that account, but this is personal vengeance and a vendetta. We might also contrast his initial willingness to let Zeba and Zalmanah live and the way that he treated Succoth and destroyed Penuel. These are not the actions of a wise and good and gracious leader.

As James Bajon notes, the name of Zeba, Sacrifice, and Zalmanah, Refuge is withheld, fit with their fate. The spoil from the war becomes a snare. This is not the first time that this has happened.

It will not be the last. They want to make Gideon into a king, and he rightly rejects this. The Lord is their king.

However, his motive seems to be apathy. While he gives an appropriate and pious reason, his real reluctance lies elsewhere. This is suggested by the parable in the following chapter in verses 8 to 15.

The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, But the olive tree said to them, And the trees said to the fig tree, But the fig tree said to them, And the trees said to the vine, But the vine said to them, And all the trees said to the bramble, And the bramble said to the trees, In response to their request that he be their king, and his refusal, Gideon offers an alternative. He requests their earrings. We've

heard this story before, back in Exodus chapter 32, verses 1 to 4. The people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.

So Aaron said to them, So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, In Exodus chapter 32, the golden calf is a replacement for Moses, who seems to be lost at the top of Mount Sinai.

Here, the ephod is a replacement for Gideon. Instead of depending upon Gideon to lead the people, they're going to look to the ephod. The way that these two events are described in similar ways invites us to consider parallels between them.

Yoram Hazonian, his book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, discusses the way in which similar stories invite us to reflect upon uniting themes. Of this particular instance, he observes, What a newly liberated people want more than anything else, the narrative suggests, is to have someone above them again, someone who can bear responsibility for them, so that they do not have to shoulder this terror and dread themselves. And when this man, this Moses or Gideon, proves unwilling to play a role so similar to that played by their recent oppressors, this people will seek something that is more solid than man, something enduring that will not abandon them in need.

The calf, the fetish. Even leaders such as Aaron or Gideon, who have been the agents of God's will and know the folly of mistaking anything else for God, are not less in danger than the people themselves, since their ear is given to the people's needs, and they are moved to give the people what they want, ostensibly so that they will not do yet worse things. On this view, the act of liberation carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction, tending immediately to tear open a void in the lives of those who have been freed that is most easily filled by idolatry, whether of one form or another.

The ephod was something that contained the orim and the thumim, and it was a means of determining the will of the Lord. It would be a form of divination for Gideon's house. Its functions, then, as a sort of idol.

Gideon had once removed the asherah pole and the altar of Baal, and now he creates a different snare in their place. This snare is also a snare in part because it challenges the exclusivity of the tabernacle as the site of Israel's worship. It establishes a rival site that people come to receive the word and direction of the Lord, and Gideon, presumably, is set up as a sort of priest-judge.

In an exceptional way, the Lord had instructed Gideon to establish an altar earlier on and to sacrifice upon it. But this was not supposed to be a normal way for Gideon to act, for Gideon to establish himself as a sort of priest, as an alternative to the Levitical priesthood. The judge, or the king, was supposed to guard the integrity of the worship of

the Lord.

And yet here Gideon is doing the exact opposite. He's undermining it at a fundamental level. He's setting up something in competition to the true worship of the Lord.

And he starts to act the part of a two-bit ancient Near Eastern ruler. He establishes a harem for himself. He has 70 sons.

These numbers are related to the number seven, which is common throughout the Gideon narrative. Now at the end of his life, he has brought 40 years of rest. It's the last time such rest is mentioned in the Book of Judges.

And when Gideon dies, the people end up just returning back to the Bales. They don't even honour Gideon's family for what the Lord did for them through Gideon. They forget Gideon, just as the people forgot Joseph earlier on in the story of the Exodus.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can erect idolatries to protect us from having to deal with God and our responsibility as free people before him? Now concerning the time in the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

While people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pangs come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day.

We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another, and build one another up, just as you are doing.

In the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, we arrive at some of the main teaching of the letter. As Gordon Fee observes, there are suggestions that this teaching, or at least aspects of it, is being received by the Thessalonians for the first time. Paul doesn't use the language of reminder, or suggest that they do not need further teaching, as he does in chapter 5 verse 1. Rather, his concern is that they are not uninformed.

The matter in question concerns the resurrection of the dead in Christ. It is possible that the Thessalonians interpreted their present sufferings as the sufferings leading up to

Christ's coming. Indeed, Christ would come in judgment in Jerusalem in AD 70 and establish his kingdom to a new degree.

However, the death of some members of the church before this time would clearly be a cause of great distress and uncertainty for the Thessalonians. The expectation of the near return of Christ, in some manner, might provoke these concerns on the part of the Thessalonians. Although there doesn't seem to be desperate anticipation and expectation of the full eschatological reality dawning in that moment in time, they are awaiting something, and they are uncertain of how to relate to the deaths of some of their members before that time comes.

Now, AD 70 clearly did not realize the hope of the future resurrection of the dead in Christ. Anyone who would have placed all of their eschatological hopes on that event would have found themselves sorely disappointed, despite the great significance of the event. In scripture, there are anticipations of final judgment in the middle of history.

In these events, the great and final horizon comes into view, often in a way that relates it directly to events on the nearer horizon. We could perhaps compare this to the way that looking out from an elevated vantage point, distinct mountain ranges many miles divided from each other can seem to be as one. In like manner, more imminent fulfillments of prophecy confuse on the horizon with more distant ones.

This isn't just a misperception. Earlier deliverances in history actually foreshadow later ones, and if we think that the fulfillment of a prophecy entirely terminates on its most immediate referent, we will often not only be disappointed, but be under-reading the text. The Exodus, for instance, foreshadows later and greater exoduses.

It foreshadows the return from exile in the time of the prophets. But the force of the prophecies concerning a new exodus do not exhaust themselves in the return from exile. They also await the death and resurrection of Christ.

And then they also await AD 70 and the final coming. The New Testament often interprets Old Testament prophecies in this way, recognizing that several successive mountain ranges of fulfillment can be present in the horizon of a single prophecy. That single prophecy may refer to a more immediate event, but it refers to it in a way that does not give full resolution of this prophetic force in that coming event, but awaits further events beyond that, for its fuller fulfillment.

The fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus in his body is a basis for belief in the resurrection of those who fall asleep in Christ. Jesus is the first fruits of those who have died. His resurrection assures us of ours.

Our bodies are connected with his by the spirit, and in the rite of baptism that fact is sealed to us. It is only in the light of the awakening of the resurrection that death can be

spoken of as an event of falling asleep. It's truly remarkable to think about our death as a falling asleep, but as we know that we will one day be woken up, it is appropriate to do so.

For this reason we do not grieve as those without hope. We still grieve, but we grieve as people who have hope and expectation of a final resurrection. Paul gives them a word of Christ himself.

He might have received this teaching from those who had witnessed Jesus during his ministry, or he may be referring to something he received by a special revelation. The teaching that Paul gives comes directly from Christ himself then. Paul describes on the basis of the Lord's own teaching the coming of the Lord in a way that reminds us of Old Testament events.

For instance, Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 to 20. We might also think of passages such as Psalm 47 verse 5. Jesus also has taught concerning this event in John chapter 5 verses 25 to 29 for instance. In that passage Jesus connects two sorts of resurrection events.

The raising of people from spiritual death with the word, and the final resurrection by the summons of Christ. And such a passage I believe helps us to understand the way that events can become fused on the eschatological horizon. When you read, An hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

You think this is the final resurrection. But then as part of that I've missed out some words. And is now here.

There is something already happening that is bringing this event to pass. And that event is not actually the final resurrection. It's an anticipation of it.

And there's a future hour coming that Jesus also speaks about. And so the initial referent of these words is one that anticipates a greater fulfillment at some point in the future. The trumpet call is associated with the year of Jubilee.

It is also associated with return from exile or with deliverance. See for instance Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13. And in Zechariah chapter 9 verses 14 to 16.

We might also think the way that the coming of Christ in judgment in AD 70 is described. In Matthew chapter 24 verses 30 to 31. Now if this sounds like the last coming of Christ, the final judgment and the resurrection of all to us.

We could clearly be excused. It certainly does sound like that. Yet in the context it can only refer to an event that occurs within the generation that that prophecy is given.

And as we look back in the Old Testament we can see similar language being used of events that were fulfilled in known history. So it's clearly not the final judgment. But yet



it does anticipate the final judgment.

It's described in a way that is so powerful and charged with cosmic import. That it seems to demand something more than just the destruction of AD 70 for its fulfillment. Now the initial fulfillment is the destruction of AD 70.

But the horizon that we are seeing there expands to include the greater horizon of the end of all things. The coming of Christ in the clouds is also related to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient days was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. This is also reminiscent of Jesus' own ascension in Acts chapter 1 verses 9 to 11. And when he had said these things as they were looking on he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went behold two men stood by them in white robes and said Men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. The final resurrection involves a participation in Christ's own ascended rule. It doesn't say that we are caught up to heaven rather there is a meeting of ascending earth and descending heaven in the air.

Heaven and earth are united. Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 4 speaks of this. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying Behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away.

The Thessalonians are charged to encourage each other with these promises which is exactly what we should be doing on a regular basis. Paul then addresses them concerning times and seasons about which they had already been taught. The day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night.

It's a robbery. It's a disruption of people's false sense of peace and security. It takes from them all the things that they have invested their life in.

It's something that snatches people away. One is taken. The other is left.

It is described as a sort of pain that can come upon them like labor pangs for a pregnant

woman. There is a new age about to be born and this new birth will occur through birth pangs, through pain and suffering and tribulation and people must be prepared for that so that it does not come upon them suddenly and unexpectedly. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they are the children of the day.

The day that is coming is our day. It is the day of the Lord and we are the people of the Lord. As a result we are wakeful people not sleeping in the insensitivity of sin and dissipation.

We are sober people not people who are drunk and people who have lost their senses. We keep our wits about us. In sobriety and alertness we await our deliverance.

We await the coming day, the day that belongs to us and the day to which we belong. We are children of the light. As children of the light we bring something of the light of this coming dawn, this coming day in the way that we behave.

We are as light in a dark place as we bear the light of Christ within us. We testify to the coming dawn that he will bring. Seeing us people should know what to expect.

On the basis of our belonging to the day Paul teaches us that we must be sober. And then he offers a military and perhaps also a priestly image. We put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

This might be related to the clothes of the high priest. It's also the military garment that someone would wear going into battle. God himself dresses in such a way to act on behalf of his people in Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17.

He puts on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Just as we are light in the world, reflecting the fact that God himself is light, so we are those who dress for battle as our Lord dresses for battle to bring salvation for his people.

We are the army that will be joined with him on that great day, caught up in that summons to meet him in the air. God has destined us to receive salvation on the coming day. We can take great assurance in this fact.

It is his purpose that we make it through tribulation, that we end up joined with him and the saints raised up, celebrating in joyful military assembly the return of his son. The future reality of this day, this dawning that we are waiting for, is something that governs all of our life here and now. It's the orienting reality of the entirety of our existence.

As a result, we must always be building up and encouraging each other, always directing each other to this coming day. This is what we're waiting for. This is what we're about.

We should also observe that the way that we are dressed is one that integrates the three

core Christian virtues, faith, hope and love. These are the things that will prepare us for that day. These are the things that will help us to stand firm here and now so that we are both ready for, anticipating and reflecting the reality of that day that is to come.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which we can follow Paul's instruction here and be encouraging each other even more than we do with the light of the coming day of the Lord's return?