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## June 22nd: Judges 5 & 1 Thessalonians 1

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The Song of Deborah. Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians.

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

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## Transcript

Judges chapter 5 1. The Lord said, I have awaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord the God of Israel. 2. In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travellers kept to the byways. 3. The villagers ceased in Israel, they ceased to be until I arose, I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.

4. When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. 5. Was shield or spear to be seen, among forty thousand in Israel? 6. My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel, who offered themselves willingly among the people. 7. Bless the Lord! 8. Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets, and you who walk by the way, to the sound of musicians at the watering places.

9. There they repeat the righteous triumphs of the Lord, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel. 10. Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord.

11. Awake, awake, Deborah! awake, awake! Break out in a song! Arise, Barak! Lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam! 12. Then down marched the remnant of the noble.

The people of the Lord marched down for me against the mighty. 13. From Ephraim their route they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen.

14. From Macchae marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff. 15.

The princes of Issachar came with Deborah, an Issachar faithful to Barak. 16. Into the valley they rushed at his heels.

Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. 17. Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? 18.

Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. 19. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan.

And Dan, why did he stay with the ships? 20. Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. 21.

Zebulun is a people who risk their lives to the death. 22. Naphtali too, on the heights of the field.

23. The kings came, they fought, they fought the kings of Canaan. 24.

At Tayanak, by the waters of Megiddo, they got no spoils of silver. 25. From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.

26. The torrent Caishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Caishon. 27.

March on, my soul, with might. 28. Then loud beat the horse's hooves, with the galloping, galloping of his steeds.

29. Curse Meroz, says the angel of the Lord. Curse its inhabitants thoroughly, because they did not come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

30. Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked for water, and she gave him milk.

She brought him curds in a noble's bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg, and her right hand to the workman's mallet. She struck Sisera.

She crushed his head. She shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank.

He fell. He lay still. Between her feet he sank.

He fell. Where he sank, there he fell, dead. Out of the window she peered.

The mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice. Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoof-beats of his chariots? Her wisest princesses answer. Indeed, she answers herself.

Have they not found and divided the spoil? A womb or two for every man. Spoil of dyed materials for Sisera. Spoil of dyed materials embroidered.

Two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil. So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun, as he rises in his might. And the land had rest for forty years.

The Song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5 is one of the few songs of victory in scripture, perhaps most comparable to the Song of the Sea in Exodus chapter 15, the song that Moses and Miriam sing after the victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Here there is another victory, and another song to go with it, and the events that lead to this song are similar to those that led to the Song of the Sea, where a military force of chariots was overwhelmed by water in a miraculous act of the Lord. Like Moses, Deborah sings a song of praise in response.

Although Barak accompanies her, Deborah seems to be the lead singer of this song. The verb for the singing of the song is feminine singular. There aren't many parts of scripture that are authored by women.

Interestingly, it is in the songs and the poems of the narratives of scripture that we might most commonly encounter the voices of women, in things such as Miriam's voice in the Song of the Sea, the prayer of Hannah, Mary's Magnificat, the voice of the woman in Song of Songs, the acrostic poem given by Lemuel's mother at the end of the Book of Proverbs, and then here in the Song of Deborah. In song we see something of the union of male and female voices in the text of scripture. The Song of Deborah exhibits many of the features with which we are familiar from Hebrew poetry, most notably parallelism.

Such parallelism is often captured in Christian worship through antiphonal singing or chanting, where singers or chanters take up lines alternately. The song presumes that the hearer is familiar with the story of Deborah and Barak from the previous chapter. As Barry Webb observes, the song elaborates many of the scenes of the narrative that precede it, scenes that don't have the same detail in the prosaic telling.

It interprets and further dramatizes the event, but it also memorializes them in the form of praise. While Deborah is the most prominent figure in much of chapter four, in the song it is the work of the Lord in the victory that is most emphasized. It's often argued that the song is one of the oldest texts in the Bible, due to its poetic form and its archaic and unusual terminology.

Translating it often presents challenges. There are various theories about the shape and the structure of the song too, with various divisions into distinct stanzas having been suggested. James Jordan for instance argues for three stanzas, verse 2 to 11, 12 to 22, and then 23 to 31.

Barry Webb argues for five, verses 2 to 8, 9 to 13, 14 to 18, 19 to 23, and 24 to 30. Trent Butler divides it into ten short stanzas, and various other suggestions have been made. Whatever structure we settle upon, we can largely agree upon the song's contents.

It opens with Deborah's praise to the volunteers who willingly offered themselves to the cause. The meaning of the first line of verse 2 is unclear. ESV translates it as that the leaders took the lead in Israel.

However others such as Webb and Jordan have suggested a reference to loosed hair. This is strange until we consider the connection between long hair and Nazirite vows of dedication to the Lord. The reference to uncut and loose hair might be a reference to the long hair of Nazirite warriors, people who have been completely devoted to the cause of the Lord.

It might explain the parallel with the willing self-offering to the Lord that's being spoken of. This is followed by a summons to the kings and the princes of the nations to give their attention to the works of the Lord recounted in the song. It's a shot across their bowels as it were, a warning that they need to hear lest they too seek to rise against the people of the Lord.

The Lord arrives on the scene in a theophanic manner as the Lord of the storm, with the mountains quaking at his presence and the clouds bursting with rain. He comes up from the south, from the region of Edom, up from Sinai. The Lord comes in a way that the Canaanites might have associated with the Baals as they presume them to be the lords of the storm.

The song then proceeds to set the historical scene that led up to the battle. The Canaanites are oppressing the Israelites and people need to travel using back roads in the hill country because the Canaanites dominate in the highways in the plains. Rural inhabitants dry up as the Israelites have to take refuge in walled settlements against the predations of the Canaanites.

Trade and farming are limited. Rather than turning to the Lord however, the Israelites seem to be making covenants with false gods in their desperation. Even so, war is within the gate as the Canaanites prey upon the helpless Israelites.

Weapons are rare within the land. This is described as the days of Shamgar and Jael, one of whom fought with an ox goat and the other who crushed Sisera's head with a tent peg. These are not typical weapons because typical weapons were not to hand.

In this terrible situation, Deborah arises as a mother in Israel. Where Israel lacks leaders and strength, Deborah arises as a mother figure. Someone who through her instruction and maternal authority will raise up sons like Barak to fight for and to lead Israel.

Her prominence on the front line is irregular and was not the ideal. The public life of Israel was typically dominated by men and this was regarded as a healthy and positive state of affairs. It was only as Israel's public life was crippled by oppression without leaders or warriors that that space was created for someone like Deborah to take the most prominent position.

And Deborah's concern was not to establish a situation of gender equality in public life but to establish Israel's strength again by raising up sons to fight. No one was better off when the nation lacked effective deliverers and guardians. Living in an individualistic society like ours where the sexes are so often pitted against each other, we can struggle to understand why Deborah considers herself less as an individual woman acting for her sex against the patriarchy and far more as a mother who's trying to raise up sons to fight for the defense of her people.

The heroism of Deborah is not to be in any way lessened by this. However what we should see is that her heroism is less that of a woman breaking the Israelite glass ceiling of the patriarchal power structure and is rather a maternal heroism. A sort of heroism that typically lacks public prominence but which women more generally widely exercise.

Rather than presenting heroism as more proper to male realms with a few women struggling to enter those realms to be heroes too, perhaps in Deborah we see a feminine heroism coming to the foreground but a heroism that has always been there in various forms. We also learn something about the more immediately visible heroism of men, that the quiet and typically unsung heroism of mothers lies behind the more noticed heroism of their children. One striking feature of the biblical narrative is the number of times we are made to witness this quiet heroism of women so that we might better consider that what appears to be the front line of human activity in our perspective as not in fact what God sees.

And from stories like this, a story of Deborah's heroic motherhood, we should learn to see the heroism in motherhood more generally. As we go through this song, Deborah's motherhood will also be contrasted with the wicked motherhood of Sisera's mother. People, rich and poor, are called to join in and to consider the song of Deborah and its message, to ponder this great deliverance of the Lord.

And verses 12 to 13 are a call to battle, summoning the willing people to action. It describes the primary role played by Deborah. Deborah is the singing prophet who rouses Israel to action.

Barak is the one who acts in response to this and in the light of Deborah's prophetic

guidance. This is followed by a roll call of those who responded, separating Israel into those tribes and groups that responded to the call, the groups who were blessed for their commitment and action, and those who failed to join in, who are subject to dishonor for their failure. The Israel that fights is a remnant of the brave survivors of the oppression, facing off against mighty opponents.

This part of the song also gives us some window into the shape of Israelite life at that time. The centripetal force of a single site of worship seems to be only weakly operative. It isn't a strongly unified nation, but functions as a broad coalition of tribes, chiefly the northern ones.

Israel's unity is weak and vulnerable during the period of the judges. There is no single leader over the nation, no one like Joshua or Moses. The judges are mostly regional figures.

There is no single national mission, although such moments of a special military need should have spurred the tribes to a renewed recognition of their brotherhood. From chapter 1, we already get an indication of a nation divided along the lines of northern and southern tribes, with Judah dominating in the south and the house of Joseph in the north. In Joshua chapter 22, we saw the fracture that the Jordan represented between the two and a half tribes dwelling outside of the land and the nine and a half dwelling within.

In this story, both of these divisions in the nation seem to have an impact. Judah and Simeon are not mentioned, perhaps suggesting that the southern part of the nation was largely doing its own thing. The Transjordanian tribes are challenged for their failure to get involved, although Mekhi, a part of the half tribe of Manasseh, sent commanders.

However, the mighty kings that fought against them gained no victory or spoil. The Lord fought against them with the very elements, fighting on behalf of his people against foes that they could never have defeated in their own strength. The battle isn't clearly described, but we get the sense that the Lord defeated the Canaanites through a storm.

This is similar to some other victories that we read of in the history of Israel. The river Kishan overflowed with the extreme rainfall and washed away the Canaanites or turned the land into marshland so that their chariots became a liability rather than an advantage. The similarity with the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea should not be missed here.

It is not clear what Meraz was. Was it a representative Israelite city that failed to come to the aid of the battle? The curse on Meraz is juxtaposed with the blessing upon Jail. The incident with Jail and Sisera probably has sexual connotations.

She gives him milk instead of water and he sinks between her feet. The language is that

of an erotic relationship, but it is used to describe a death. The deception of Jael is praised here and her deception is highlighted by subverting the expectation of the reader.

Reading of a Canaanite military commander entering into the private tent of a woman, we're braced for a rape scene and there are sexual elements present, but there is a most surprising subversion for Sisera is the one who has penetrated with a tent peg. In the song, the fact that Jael gets Sisera's scalp rather than Barak is not presented as a judgment upon Barak as it is within the narrative. Rather, it is another case of divinely instigated poetic justice.

This reading is given further support by the description of Sisera's mother that follows, which heightens the irony. Sisera's mother is waiting for him to return. Sisera's mother is juxtaposed with Deborah as a mother in Israel.

She's a mother of the Canaanites. She's surrounded by her attendants and court ladies who assure her that her son Sisera will simply be dividing spoil with his men and raping some Israelite maidens. Nothing is amiss.

However, unbeknownst to them, in a judgment of the Lord, Sisera has been penetrated by a potential rape victim. The curtain falls abruptly at this point. The worried mother of Sisera has not yet received the news of her son's death, yet she and her women have revealed their willing complicity in his wickedness.

If Deborah's song foregrounds the bravery and heroism of women, it also foregrounds their potential wickedness. The triumph of Deborah, a mother in Israel with her sons, and Jael, the potential victim, over Sisera's mother and the cruel son that she raised and encouraged is now seen to be complete. And the song ends with a statement declaring the desire that all of the Lord's enemies would suffer the same fate as that of Sisera, his men, and the Canaanite women who raised and praised them.

After the defeat of Jabin and his commander Sisera, the land enjoys rest for 40 years. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the song of Deborah functions as a declaration of the power of the Lord against the Baals? 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, and you became

imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything, for they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1 Thessalonians, commonly regarded as likely Paul's first letter, begins with a typical Pauline greeting.

The greeting is a more standard greeting for letters of the period. It declares or introduces the writer or the writers, it identifies the addressees, on this occasion the Thessalonians, the Christians in the church at Thessalonica. This is followed by greetings, and as most letters followed this with a wish for the health of the addressees, Paul's epistles typically have a thanksgiving or prayer at this point.

Paul includes Silas, Silvanus is an alternative form of the name Silas, and Timothy with him as those sending the letter. However, in verse 18 of chapter 2, where he writes, I Paul, we have a suggestion that Paul is the one writing the letter in all of their names. While it is sent under all their names then, Paul is the true author.

Silas was one of Paul's missionary companions in his second missionary journey, during which they had visited Thessalonica. Their visit there had been short and abortive, which helps us better to appreciate Paul's joy and wonder in the lasting fruit that it had produced. In Acts chapter 17 verses 1 to 10, we read of this period.

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews, and Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they



arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue. Timothy had joined Paul and Silas back in Lystra, at the beginning of Acts chapter 16. In verses 1 to 5 of that chapter we read, Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. Timothy came to function as if a son to Paul, who represented him as a son might represent his father, and who could act in his name.

Timothy presumably was present with Paul and Silas in Thessalonica, and perhaps he stayed on there for a little while after Paul and Silas escaped. Paul addresses his letter to the church of the Thessalonians. The church was a way of referring to the communal assembly of a body of people.

It is not unlikely that they had various smaller groups within the city, but the whole body of believers in that city are termed a church. They are described as being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a very unusual reference to a church being in God, something that is associated in the closest way to the church being in Christ.

As Gordon Fee notes, this is probably an indication of the very high Christology, or the strong doctrine of the divinity of Christ, that Paul holds. It is not unlikely that the Shema can be heard behind such a formula. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The term God is related to the Father, the term Lord to Christ. Both Christ and the Father are related to the one God. Where a typical letter of the time would begin with the salutation, greetings, Paul opens his letter as he often does, grace to you and peace.

The source of the grace is God, and the consequence of this grace is the peace of Christ. The thanksgiving that follows situates the gratitude that Paul expresses within the context of the continual prayers of Paul and his missionary companions. They recall the initial response of the Thessalonians to the gospel message that they brought.

This remembrance is before God. It is probably not merely a subjective bringing of these details to their minds and thankfulness for the memory. It is also a declaration of these things in their prayers to the Lord, constantly calling for his attention to these things, calling for him to complete what he has started in the Thessalonians.

They were distinguished by their work of faith, their labour of love, and their steadfastness of hope. Their work of faith was likely the way that they acted out of

confidence in the word of Christ, producing the fruit of righteousness in their community. Their labour of love could have been the efforts manifesting their hearts of devotion for Christ and the Father, and their steadfastness of hope might have been their unwavering assurance of and living in terms of the Lord's promise.

The Thessalonians' initial response to the gospel message, the message of the lordship of Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth, was a demonstration of their election, of the fact that God had chosen them. The Christian virtues with which they answered the message revealed that they had first been lovingly chosen by God, their eyes being opened to see Christ. That is why faith, hope, and love were the fruit that sprang up.

The gospel came to them with a bang, not just as words, but with signs of the Spirit's power accompanying it. The conviction with which it came to the Thessalonians was also proof of the Spirit's power. It wasn't just words of Paul the apostle, the gifted rhetorician.

It was an effective communication of the Spirit that broke open hard hearts and produced new life where death had once reigned, resulting in remarkable and manifest transformation. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries were among them, setting an example for the Thessalonians which they had followed. As the Thessalonians followed the example of Paul and his companions, they themselves became examples to other churches.

Indeed, their reputation has spread abroad among the churches. Paul and his companions don't even need to say anything about the Thessalonians to churches elsewhere, because those other churches have already heard and are talking about the news from Thessalonica. Their response to the good news of Christ's reign in Thessalonica had itself started to function as good news of Christ's reign.

The word of the Lord had sounded forth from them. What is this word of the Lord that Paul refers to here? It is the news of what God had done among them, which is also the message of their answering faith, an answering faith that is proof of the Lord's power in and among them. They have abandoned idols to serve the true and living God.

They're waiting for the risen Son from heaven, the one who delivers us from the wrath to come, both the final judgment and the condemnation of the present age awaited in coming judgment upon Jerusalem and other places. A question to consider. The news of what the Lord had done in the hearts and lives of the Thessalonians itself became a word of the Lord and a gospel message.

What are some of the ways in which the sharing of our testimonies of what the Lord has done in our lives and the lives of others can function as an extension of the fundamental message of the gospel?