

Salvation - Singing the Song

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[0 : 00] While you remain standing, I'll pray. Father, thank you so much for your word. We pray that you might open our eyes, that we might behold wondrous things from it, that you'd soften our hearts, that we might receive your word, that you'd transform our wills, that we might be doers of it, loose our tongues, that they might proclaim it.

And we ask this for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. Well, please sit down. Well, I want you to imagine the scene.

The movie is the first of the die-hard movies. The hero is a streetwise New York City detective, one John McLean, played by whoever else but Bruce Willis.

His opponents are a group of highly organised criminals, led by a certain Hans Gruber. And masquerading as terrorists, Gruber and friends have performed a daring heist in a Los Angeles skyscraper.

The captives include McCain's wife, who makes the conflict, and that makes the conflict, very deeply personal. Anyway, as the movie draws on, the conflict between the tough, energetic, rough hero and the ruthless Gruber grows, and it climaxes in this dramatic scene, which I guess a number of you will have seen.

[1 : 20] Perhaps you might remember it. There is a groan as the sort of bare-chested, limping, McLean comes in out of the darkness bearing this massive gun. And at the other end, Gruber has a gun at the head of McLean's wife.

He has clearly the upper hand. McLean, therefore, in the front of this, drops this massive gun, and his hands go up, and he grasps his head in submission, and Gruber grins triumphantly.

And then the camera swings around behind McLean's back, taking in the picture of Gruber, who is waving the gun there, loosely now and away from McLean's wife.

However, the camera also then reveals a pistol taped to the back of McLean's back. Now, we know the genre of such movies, don't we?

We know what's going to happen. McLean is going to kill this man. Justice will prevail, and we will all feel good. Now, I wonder what you'd do if our filmmaker suddenly stopped there.

[2 : 28] And supposing he took us, in a flash across to somewhere else, from that dim, dark building to another scene. And the scene is Gruber's wife and children.

They are clearly impoverished. One child is obviously disabled. The scene clearly indicates that his wife and children have a deep love for Hans, the kind and caring family man.

And with that background, the camera then brings us right back, slides back to behind the head of McLean. And the inevitable occurs.

McLean shoots. He smiles. He makes some wisecrack. And he blows the smoke from the barrel of his gun. Friends, that is the equivalent of what happens in the climax of our passage we have read today.

Did you notice it? In song, Israel remembers with a sense of justice their heroine. Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, has hammered a tent peg into the head of Sisera, the oppressor of Israel.

[3 : 34] And suddenly the scene changes. Did you notice it? We flip back to the home of Sisera. And we hear the musings of his mum. The song of Deborah and Barak is a magnificent piece of ancient literature, very carefully crafted, possibly the oldest piece of literature we have in the Old Testament itself.

It is splendid in its artistry. It is profound in its theology. And I want you to turn with me as we have a look at it today. It is, we are in for a treat today. It is, we can't cover the detail of it, but I can give you the general feel of it.

So please pick it up. I think it was page 242 or thereabouts in your Bibles. If not, if you can see it up there, probably. Anyway, turn to it in your Bibles. Look at it with me.

Look at verses one to three. In chapter four last week, you might remember we were introduced to the principal participants. They are Deborah, the prophetess. She had called upon Barak to lead Israel in war against Jabin, the king of Canaan and his commander in chief, Sisera.

So there we have Deborah. We have Barak. We have Sisera. And Barak at first had vacillated. Deborah had said, all right, I will go with you.

[4 : 49] My presence will be with you. But she also promised that the honor of the encounter with Sisera would go to a woman, not to Barak. And so it did. We find at the end of the story of chapter four, Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, kills Sisera.

Anyway, just as both men and women joined in singing a song at the edge of the sea after the crossing of the Red Sea, so Deborah and Barak, man and woman, sing together about this great victory.

It is a victory song. In verse two, God is blessed or praised because the people of Israel willingly offered themselves to this battle. Their offering of themselves was evidence of God's work in them.

Then in verse three, Barak and Deborah address unbelieving kings outside Israel and they say, take note of Israel's praise. They're praising the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel.

He is worthy of praise. Now, as you know, in your English Bibles, when the word Lord occurs in uppercase, it is telling us that if we were to read the Hebrew, we would find that God's special name for himself is being mentioned.

[5 : 57] That name probably sounds like Yahweh. In Hebrew, the vowels aren't put in, so all we have is Y-H-W-H. And we can fill in the gaps, we think, such as we know the sound is probably Yahweh.

And I want to use it today occasionally, only because it's a special name for God and it occurs within this poem for a deliberate reason. And I want you to look at what is said about Yahweh in verses four and five.

He's presented as a divine warrior. It's not so much that Israel went out to war, but it was Yahweh who went out to war. That's what's being said here. We're told that he goes out from Mount Seir.

He marches from the land of Edom. And when he does so, the earth shakes, the heavens pour, the sky opens at Yahweh's movement, the clouds pour down rain.

You can hear all the references to water here, can't you? Echoes of the water through which Israel passed in the Exodus. There Israel proclaimed Yahweh as a man of war. And here Yahweh wages war again.

[7 : 01] Here again, he marshals the forces of nature on behalf of his people and even as a weapon of war. All bow, all quake before Yahweh, the one from Sinai, before Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Did you notice it? This is the second reference within this text to Yahweh as God of Israel. You see, he's closely tied to his people. They are integrally bound together.

They are his, he is theirs. And on their behalf, he wages war on their enemies who have become his enemies. Now look at verses six to eight. They tell us about the setting to which Yahweh comes.

Shamgar, who's mentioned there, is a judge mentioned at the end of chapter three. He came after Ehud, the left-handed loner. He was a foreigner. And yet God marshaled him also. He conscripted him.

And with an ox goad, Shamgar took down 600 Philistines. So this is the first item about the context into which Yahweh comes. A context where Israel is bereft of its own leaders, where they're employing foreigners, as it were, to fight their wars.

[8 : 07] It's a context where God is employing them. It's a context where farming implements, such as ox goads, become weapons. But now look at verse six. These days before Deborah and Barak in jail, they were days of weakness and powerlessness.

They were days when subsistence villages were oppressed by urbanized and commercially organized and powerful Canaanites. Verse six says, these were days when people kept off highways out of fear.

They took back roads to avoid getting in the public spaces. Verse seven says, villagers would not fight. Verse eight says, that not a shield or a spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel.

See, here are the Canaanites, huge, great, urbanized, and subsistence farmers as Israelites with no weapons, nothing except ox goads and other things.

The first part of verse eight actually paints an even darker picture than the NIV paints. It talks about Israel choosing new gods, not new leaders, but new gods. And as we know from the cycle that has been repeated in Judges, choosing a new God or new gods means God handing his people over to foreign oppressors and they are Canaanites now.

[9 : 20] These days before Deborah arose as a nurturing mother among Israel were terrifying days. They were days when war was in the gates and when Israel was exposed as a bunch of weaponless peasant farmers.

That's a situation, friends, let me tell you, made for Yahweh. He glories in helping the weak. In weakness, he is strong.

That is the context here. Israel diminished because of its own sin. Israel weak in their sin. Israel in desperate need of a saviour. Now look at verses nine to 11.

In verse nine, the heart of Deborah, the mother of Israel, goes out. It goes out to the commanders who led by example, willingly offering themselves among the people. She blesses the nation for the action of the leaders and for the actions of the Lord.

And in verse nine, she urges both the rich and the poor to proclaim it together. She says, those who ride, it's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Those who ride on white donkeys and sit on the rich carpets, meaning the rich sort of saddlebags and so on, are to be joined by those who walk along the way.

[10 : 31] Rich and poor together, together they are to consider. This sense appears to be, they are to become, if you read on, you see there's conversations happening around water holes through the land.

The victories of Yahweh are being recited and recounted. Actually, the word victories is righteous deeds. The righteous deeds of Yahweh are being talked about. As people go to their watering holes, doing the business of every day, what's the thing that's on their lips?

It is the victories, the righteous deeds of Yahweh. That's what they talk about. All Israel's rejoicing in his righteous deeds. They celebrate him and they celebrate the righteous deeds of his villages.

And in verse 11 closes with a statement that probably summarizes all of verses 12 to 18. Then the people of Yahweh went down to the city gates. The gates are probably the gates of the Canaanite cities, fortified cities.

And in verse 12, things heat up in emotional intensity. I suspect what's going on is that the people singing this song are saying to Deborah and Barak, come on, they're urging them on. Deborah is to rouse herself, sing more exuberantly in her call to battle.

[11 : 41] Barak is to go on his way and lead away captives. In verse 13, a remnant of nobles comes down. The people of Yahweh come down against the mighty.

And in verses 14 to 18, we get a list of participants in this conflict. Tribes of Israel who joined in. There are some from the tribe of Ephraim, verse 14.

Some from the tribe of Benjamin, verse 14. From Markia, which is a leading tribe, leading clan from the half tribe of Manasseh. Zebulun, verse 14.

Issachar, verse 15. Naphtali, verse 18. However, despite the willingness of many tribes in Israel, there are some who won't come and join in. There are some tentativeness and abdication.

Reuben is singled out as those who search in their hearts, but don't leave their flocks for war. They're too busy looking after their flocks to join in with their brothers and sisters in war.

[12 : 39] Gilead refuses to cross the Jordan despite promises they'd made in Joshua and to join with Israel's other tribes. Dan and Asher prefer the relative security of the coast and their ships.

Apparently, you see, while some are willing to put their trust in God as warrior, others are timid. Others fail in faith. But God's strength is not diminished by the weakness of the hearts of his people and by their depleted numbers.

No, God is a warrior, a man of war. Look at verses 19 to 22. Yahweh war begins. Yahweh wages war. The kings of Canaan come.

They fight. And again, God marshals the forces of nature, water, stars, rivers, torrential rain, there's nowhere to hide from Yahweh.

He uses nature itself as well as his people. Horses and chariots and no strength before him and his forces. They retreat. And in verse 23, we set the scene for verses 24 to 30.

[13 : 45] A curse is uttered. Can you see it there? Verse 24. A curse because of a spectacular failure of one group of Israelites. The people of Meroz do not come to the help of the Lord.

They don't join him against the mighty, but there is one who does join God against the mighty and we know her. Her deeds are accounted with delight in the verses that follow.

You see, Meroz may be cursed but not Jael. She is the most blessed of women. This foreigner, this wife of a man who should be allied to Israel but has lined himself up with Canaan is the most blessed of tent dwelling women.

And then our duo gets carried away. They repeat things. Did you hear it when it was read? This repetition of what happens? There's delight.

There's enjoyment. Though it's a very violent event, it bursts from the page as the singers slow down and give us the gory detail of how the proud and the lofty are brought down.

[14 : 53] And the climax is reached in verse 27 as we know and as the song will go on to indicate, rape is only too common in war. I was reading during this week as I was preparing for this sermon that in Berlin during the war 100,000 women had been raped by conquering forces.

100,000. It's not uncommon in war. We know it. It happens still in our day around the world. This day it happens. The English Standard Version captures a reverse in verse 27.

It's not revealed to us very well by our English translations but it's there in the original. The vanquishing of Sisera by Jael has Sisera between her feet instead of the reverse as it were.

That is it's very poignant between her feet he sank. He fell. There he lay.

In case you missed it between her feet. There he fell. Dead. You see what's being said? It's an overturning of what is so common in war. The woman is the victor here and then comes that dramatic moment when the camera moves location as I mentioned at the beginning travels back to Sisera's home and there in verse 28 we find his mum.

[16 : 19] Israel's mother Deborah is out with her children accompanying them in Yahweh war. Sisera's mum what she's doing? She's at home peering out the window waiting hoping expecting victory.

She comforts herself that perhaps her son is dividing the spoils and in a bizarre hope for a mother she wonders if he stopped to rape a woman or two. That's what the text means.

Little can she know what we know. Actually she does lie between the feet of a woman but in an entirely different way. He is dead at her feet.

The colourful garments of verse 30 may be designed to be an echo of remember last week the blanket she put over him and with that with Sisera's mother pondering and us in the know we reach the end of the chapter and it's concluding invocation.

Can you see it there? So may your enemies perish Yahweh and may all who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength. Friends that is the song of Barak and Deborah.

[17 : 30] Now before I examine it at its core I want to give an aside on its violence because it is a violent piece of literature in many ways. Now some of this I think elements of this story offend modern sensibilities and understandably so because we have seen the worst of war in the last 100 150 years and what it does and I think some of the offence comes to us rightly because we have been trained by Jesus and we know that we know Jesus as one who did not return violence with violence we know Jesus as one who waged war on sin by taking the brunt of it upon himself so some of our sensitivities arise I think at a proper Christian dispositions however some of us may also have a misanthropy showing in our reaction a misunderstanding of Christian faith and of Jesus.

let me make clear the New Testament presents Jesus as a warrior waging war on evil and on the forces of evil but let me tell you that the book of Revelation not only paints Jesus as doing that as a lamb as a sacrificial lamb it also paints him in chapter 19 as riding on a great steed justly judging and waging war in the New Testament in the last book of the New Testament he has armies following him and he has a sharp sword in his mouth with which he strikes down the nations he is also said to tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty friend Sisera was a beast he was a violent oppressive man he was set against God he was one whose mum certainly knew he would not be adverse to plunder and rape and he had oppressed harshly

God's people perhaps in these ways God sought to save his people from this man and he did and what's more he slowed down the delight in the demise of this man and the depth of irony within the poem is understandable see God's people here at the end of this story are delighting in God's salvation salvation and rescue from oppression let me tell you when they happen are to be enjoyed savoured and appreciated and we don't know it because we haven't been oppressed like these people have been but if you go to some of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world and feel the oppression that they're under and then feel the relief that they might get when they are rescued from it you'll get a feel for this to enjoy savour appreciate and cherish salvation of an enemy of God is I think to be godly they are enemies of the people of God who persecute the people of God and it is right it is right to rejoice in their demise and the rescue of the people of God

Deborah knew this she savoured it she soaked it in she filled her song with irony and delight why because she loved God the saviour of his people she loved the fact that God wages war on evil friends we do not want to believe in a God who does not deal with evil and those who do it to have that is to have a God who's been emasculated we need a God who judges justly evil it's that that causes him to send his son to take evil upon himself you see Deborah knew it and God's war waged at the at the cross comes with a cost it will be pursued through to its end in the overthrow of Satan and his servants and when that happens you know when Satan is overthrown God's people will rejoice

I can I know it to be the case because we have their song that will be sung comes in Revelation chapter 12 listen to it now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah because the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been who accused them before our God day and night has been hurled down the evil one has been hurled down they triumphed over him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony and they didn't love their lives so much as to shrink from death friends these Christians were killed and God rescued them from the accuser therefore rejoice hear it therefore rejoice when justice is done you heavens and you who dwell in them however let's now briefly consider what lies at the core and the heart of this passage you see we saw last week that the hero of the story in Judges 4 was God the minor heroes were

[22 : 57] Deborah and Jael however it was God who brought salvation it was God who gave Sisera into the hands of Israel and so it is here at the very heart of this passage is the Lord and his righteous deeds of salvation you see he wages war against the enemies of his covenant people marshals people and nature against those enemies uses all that he has at his disposal to care for them and protect them he remembers his holy covenant with them they are his people he is their God he undertook when he entered into covenant to protect them and rescue them and he does and he will and God's people delight in this and so they should friends that's the core of this passage it is the core of scriptural witness it is at the heart of the cross our God is a God who saves and he marshals all in the service of that salvation even the death of his only beloved son he will go to any lengths to save his people now let me just take this a step further

I want us to think about the other thing that you see within this song I tried to pick it up for you as we went you hear about peasant villages lining up with God and fighting against him sorry fighting for him against powerful enemies we see him speaking of Shamgar the foreigner who with his ox goad defeats 600 Philistines the enemies of the people of God we see Yahweh using a woman prophetess from under a palm tree to confront the weak men in Israel and urge them into action and we see God using a somewhat conflicted jail to subjugate a proud and superior Canaanite general and that pattern of God using the weak to shame the wise reaches its climax in the cross again doesn't it for on the cross God uses the ignominious death of his son to defeat the greatest enemies which are sin death and the devil what is more he uses the apparent worldly foolishness of a message of the cross to win over sinners and to turn them into saints but there's even more as Paul puts it in 1

Corinthians chapter 2 not many of us friends were wise by human standards not many were influential not many were of noble birth but God who chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong chose the Corinthians and chose us friends in the history of God's purposes in his world he does it over and over and over again just what as we see him doing it here he takes the weak and he sweeps them up into his salvation purposes so friends glory in weakness for in weakness God crafts strength that is his way he loves doing it for then he is glorified not the great ones I want to close by returning to the last verse of

Judges chapter 5 look at it with me if you would Deborah and Barak say so may all your enemies perish Lord but may all who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength friends there are two sorts of people in the world there are the enemies of God and there are his friends enemies are marked by aggression against God and his people friends are marked by love of God love is characterised by obedience love of God is characterised by obedience it is marked by disposition toward God and a love of God's word and a fidelity to it now the sad thing is that is that very disposition in Israel which we find out in Judges the people of God don't have we will be told time and time again they do not love the Lord they sin they constantly turn quickly to sin they quickly lose touch with God in the end as a result of Israel's sin as it goes on and on and on through the judges through the kings

God will wage war on his own people not after I mean after he has been pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed again by his sinful people but he will have to act in justice and judgment and you can read about this in the book of Lamentations friends I say this for a purpose because this psalm is filled with exaltation of God and I want you to notice how quickly it will be that that exaltation will turn to sin and its practice let me say I think this is a fear that I have for us as Christians you see modern hymnody is filled with exaltation and so it should be we have a great God we ought to exalt in him our God is a

[28 : 39] God who saves and why not exalt in that but let me say friends that as with ancient Israel such exaltation is often not marked by sustained and costly discipleship so I want to close with a warning be careful by all means exalt in God our Saviour but recognise this and these words come from the New Testament that God the Saviour disciplines those whom he loves recognise also what 1 Peter says that judgement begins with the household of God let us pray oh father we thank you that you are such a great Saviour thank you that you have sent your son into the world as

Saviour of the world that the judgement that is due to us to fall upon us fell upon him that the penalty due to us fell upon him and was born by him oh father we come to that cross again asking your forgiveness and we pray that we might be those who love you may we love you in all parts of our existence hearts on our lips and in our lives and father as we express that love may we be like the sun when it rises in its strength father please help us to live lives of radical discipleship knowing and loving your salvation and reflecting it in our lives we pray these things in Jesus name amen