

PENTECOST 25

Proper 28 - Year A

This Bible study was written by James Miller for Proper 28 (A) in 2014.

Judges 4:1-7

⁴ The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. ² So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³ Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help, for he had nine hundred chariots of iron and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophet, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. ⁶ She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Position yourself at Mount Tabor, taking ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷ I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand.’”

Commentary from James Miller

In our Old Testament reading, we find that the Israelites are being punished by the Lord for the evils that they have committed. In fact, they have been “sold” to King Jabin of Canaan. This is about to change. Deborah, who is a prophetess and the only woman in scripture to be a judge, summons Barak and tells her vision: The Lord will bring the army of the Canaanites under Sisera to him, a battle will ensue, but the Lord will make Barak victorious.

There are three important issues here.

First, once again, Israel is being punished for evil: worshipping false Gods.

Second, while there are some notable depictions of prophetesses in scripture (Miriam, sister of Moses in Exodus 15:20; and Huldah, who authenticated the rediscovery of Torah in 2 Kings 22: 14-20, Joel 2:28 and Acts 21: 8-9), Deborah is unique in that she is the only female judge noted in scripture.

Third, Sisera had a commanding military advantage over the Israelites with his 900 chariots of iron. The use of iron was a technique not available to the Israelites at that time. Yet, the prophecy is that Barak will be victorious. This is because it is not physical strength of armies or weapons that will carry the day, but the power of the Lord.

Trusting in the Lord for deliverance is an important theme of scripture. See David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17; Gideon in Judges 6-8, Psalm 37:39 and Psalm 46. Note also God’s reaction to David, who took a census in order to determine Israel’s strength.

Discussion Questions

Is all of our faith being placed in Jesus, or are we guilty of portioning out to some false gods?

Can we look past gender when we receive God’s Word?

Can we think of ways to increase our faith in Jesus instead of spending time stockpiling physical resources?

Psalm 123

- ¹ To you I lift up my eyes, *
to you enthroned in the heavens.
- ² As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their
masters, *
and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her
mistress,
- ³ So our eyes look to the Lord our God, *
until he show us his mercy.
- ⁴ Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy, *
for we have had more than enough of
contempt,
- ⁵ Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, *
and of the derision of the proud.

Commentary from James Miller

The psalmist is not angry, but is calling for help, for relief. Scorn and contempt has been laid upon the people, and they are either incapable or unwilling to fight against it alone. They turn to the Lord with confidence that they will receive mercy. An important dimension of mercy, רחמים (Isaiah 49:15), is that it can be understood as the tender love a mother has for her children. The psalmist's wish is for the Lord to show motherly care for the people.

Discussion Questions

If you feel that there is no place to turn, no one to help, will you turn to the Lord for mercy? In fact, will you turn to the Lord first?

Consider the innocent of the world, those suffering oppression, hunger, disease, those living in war-torn regions, those who have been kidnapped. Can you pray to the Lord for mercy for them?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. **2** For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! **4** But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; **5** for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. **6** So, then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, **7** for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. **9** For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, **10** who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. **11** Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Commentary from James Miller

Paul is exhorting the church to be vigilant. In using "day of the Lord," he is invoking code from Old Testament that was well-understood as "judgment day." He describes it as sudden destruction (v. 3). He calls on the church to be ready – awake and sober (v. 6) – and to use the "weapons" that they have been given: faith, love and hope (v. 8). Most importantly, though, Paul wants them to know that those with faith in Jesus will not receive wrath, but salvation. Finally, note that Paul encourages community. We are not to look to our own futures to the exclusion of others. Part of our calling is to "encourage one another and build each other up" (v. 11).

Discussion Questions

Do you think that the scenario of destruction that Paul paints is real or symbolic? Either way, are you prepared?

What do you think of the armor Paul describes: breastplate of faith and love; helmet of the hope of salvation? Can you relate this to the passage above from Judges?

How can we build each other up?

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. At once ¹⁶the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter?’ ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Commentary from James Miller

There are two issues at play in this parable. One has to do with the use of one’s gifts, assets, or as they are called here, “talents.” The other has to do with relationships.

Our reading is a parable (“For it is as if ...”), but it is interesting to consider the literal as well as the figurative meaning of “talent.” One source notes that one talent was worth the equivalent of more than 15 years’ wages for a laborer. Another suggests that one talent was worth the equivalent of 7,300 denarii (with 1 denarius = 1 day’s pay). This would work out to more than 26 years’ wages. In any case, it is clear that a talent was extremely valuable. Just consider the one who received five talents was given over a lifetime of earnings.

We read that the owner entrusted these talents with his slaves. There is a settling of accounts upon his return. Two of the slaves traded with their talents and produced a profit. This trading was not reckless gambling; they carefully considered how to increase the value of what had been entrusted to them. They had faith that they were serving their master’s best interests. This looks like a good relationship.

Not so with the third slave. Out of fear, he did not use the talent with which he was entrusted. He was not interested in the betterment of his master, or even his own betterment. He had disdain for his master and accused him of a pattern of theft and injustice.

Discussion Questions

Think of the talents/gifts with which God has entrusted you. They could be health, physical or mental acumen, friends, family, prayer, the sacraments. Are you using/investing them to your fullest ability? Can you see them as not being yours, but being entrusted to you by God?

Do you view your relationship with God as one of trust and gratitude for the blessings you enjoy, leading you to use them for God’s glory, or do you so fear God that you feel mistrustful and perhaps accuse God of being the source of injustice?