



Returning to God

Judges 4:1-7; Ps 90:1-12; Matt 25:14-30; 1 Thess 5:1-11

Thanksgiving quickly approaches. If we are not careful, it may be crowded out to get underway with the shopping and celebration of Christmas. The economic pressure on the market urges many to forgo the giving of thanks and reflection on God's blessings. In fact, we are encouraged to forget all about God and attend to the more pressing matters of our financial welfare. Many feel they are losing all they have. Deep down, however, we know that what we call our own might not even be ours. It belongs to those from whom we borrow. If we are honest, we know the Bible says that our very lives are gifts on loan. Are we prepared to live in thanks to God, even if such basic stewardship is revoked?

Before the time of David and the other kings of Israel, the people lived under judges. These were men and women of God who aided the people in understanding and carrying out God's will. Deborah stands out as the only female judge mentioned, but the book of Judges has little to say about the fact of her position as a judge over Israel. It was no issue, it was simply a fact. She was the one the people sought out to settle their differences and find God's leadership for their living. She was God's chosen messenger for that time and place.

Deborah summoned Barak in her role as God's mouthpiece before the people. There was a job to be done. The nation had not been faithful to *Yahweh*. As a result, they had been sold by God to a foreign power as slaves. They were taxed and abused by Jabin of Canaan. After twenty years of oppression and cruel treatment, the people cried out to *Yahweh*, and *Yahweh* was ready to free them from their plight. While God was ready to act, that does not mean the people were ready. They were still trying to decide how much they wanted to serve *Yahweh*. They were wondering about the reach of their faith and trust in God.

That is where Barak was, anyway. Deborah summoned Barak to her at the so-called Palm of Deborah. Her authority, apparently, was not under question. He came at her summons to the place where the people were accustomed to go for judgment and discerning of God's will. Barak trusted that God indeed spoke to and through Deborah. His concern and uncertainty was over his place in God's will and his access to God's direction. God called Barak to step out of the routine. Barak did not like the oppression of his people any more than the next guy. He was as ready as any other to see King Jabin and Sisera's 900 chariots of iron swept out of their lives. He was ready for freedom and a new day in Israel. He was just not sure about having an active role in the process. He was not sure about being the means of God's action and redemption.

As Deborah called for action, his was uncertain. "I will go if you come with me. I trust God to speak through you. I want you there in case something goes wrong." He was worried, anxious, uncertain. While he took Deborah's word to heart, he wanted the reassurance of her presence. Ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun just did not seem like much with which to confront Sisera's 900 iron chariots. He was struggling with the idea that God would bog down the superior numbers and strength of the opposition, just as Israel struggled with God's will as sufficient for their lives.

He wanted visible confirmation of God's presence. He wanted someone else to relate to God on his behalf. He wanted someone else to assure him of God's will, plan, and action. Trust was in short supply. Relating to God and being God's means of deliverance was more than beyond his preparation.

Something about placing his life in God's hands made him uncertain. If he laid his all on the line, would God come through? Did his life really matter in the bigger picture of God's perspective?

The psalmist essentially says we are nothing from the standpoint of eternity. We are but a passing breath, yet we so yearn to be so much more. We would prefer to find ourselves as the world's center, though we know better. How can our lives truly matter to God in the larger scope of things? It is only in seeking God's understanding that we might live so as to matter from God's perspective.

It is from the perspective of God's take on eternity that Paul says we are to live as fully expecting to be in God's presence—as though Christ were coming in glory as unexpectedly as a thief in the night. We were recently visited by a thief. We were awake and aware of his presence, just not his deeds. As we discovered items missing and linked them to the thief, we saw how we should have been more aware and prepared. In a sense, that is how we treat God's presence, isn't it? We know God is present, but we pretend that God's presence makes little difference. It does not change our actions, habits, priorities, or routines. We do not let God's presence matter, and therefore ignore God as though he were not there.

Like one of the slaves in Jesus' parable of the talents, we live as though we were in charge of our own lives—as though God's property were our own. We live too often as though we had no responsibility or task for which to be held accountable. Without some visible sign of God's presence, we live as though we had been abandoned to our own devices with no responsibility as stewards of God. We make believe there will be no accounting for our actions and what we have done with all God has entrusted to us. We pretend to be in charge and owners of all we have and control.

We live as though what truly matters is the American Dream, not the great commandment and the great commission. We pretend that comfort and security are more important than a world in need and far from the gospel. We live as though we were our own masters. We ignore that all we have is entrusted to our care to fulfill God's will, not our own. Our very lives are to be used to further God's purposes, not simply for our enjoyment and pleasure. We forget that there is a fulfillment and blessing in serving God that is greater than the pleasures and dreams for which our society lives. It is according to this perspective that we are called to live in Christ Jesus.

When all is said and done, what do we truly own? We are socially programmed to believe that our money, valuables, and other assets belong solely to us. We are conditioned to treat those items in our control as our property. This is not necessarily God's take on reality. We are stewards of God's blessings. Perhaps true thanks has been too long in coming.

As we head toward Thanksgiving, perhaps we need to give it more attention than our norm. It is time we stopped to reflect on all we have been entrusted. It is time to pause and reflect on what God would have us accomplish with the blessings placed under our control. Rather than fear the thief in the night that may take our prized possessions away from us, we should consider how we are investing God's resources to undergird the mission we have been entrusted.

Life with all its blessings is not a gift. It is a trust. It is God's summons to bring all we have been entrusted to fulfill God's dreams, not our own. On the day of accounting, what will we have to show for the investment of our living? It will be too late if all we have left is entrusted to another. How will we return to God? When it matters, will we have answered God's summons?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*