

Opening Scripture: Nehemiah 9:5b–8

Introduction: O say can you see, by the dawn's early light, What so proudly we hail'd, at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight, O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air, Gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there,
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave, O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

How do you know the words to that song? Two things—repetition and the melody. We've sung it often enough, and the tune is memorable such that it sticks in our minds.

Of all the national anthems in the world today, it is generally agreed that the Star-Spangled Banner is the most notoriously difficult to sing. And when its words are not botched or flubbed, but instead performed to perfection by the likes of Jennifer Hudson, Faith Hill, the late-great Whitney Houston, or Chris Stapleton— well, just, *chills!* I realize the anthem is a flashpoint of controversy for some due to one line in the 3rd verse that mentions the devastation the war had on slaves (which no one ever sings by the way), but I think we could all agree that the song wasn't intended to cure all that ails our culture. It's a song, and as such, it enshrines the story of America's victory over British tyranny and provides a glimpse into the world at the time it was written. The Star-Spangled Banner is classified as a "Triumph Hymn," a genre of historical songs that uses poetry to commemorate significant events in history.

Triumph Hymns or national anthems are much older than you might think. These songs go all the way back to the beginning of human civilization and are well-attested in ANE literature commemorating the victories of Thutmose III, Ramesses II, Merneptah, Tukulti-Ninurta I, Tiglath-Pileser I, and Shalmaneser III. These ancient victory hymns follow the historical narratives of their victories.

We see these kinds of anthems all over the OT...

- Moses sang a hymn of triumph after the victory over the Egyptians, glorifying God as Israel's divine warrior (Exod 15:1–21; or chapter 19).
- The women of Israel sing of David's victories after he strikes down the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6–7).
- David bursts into praise at God's victory over the house of Saul (2 Sam 22–24).
- All of Israel breaks into song after returning to their land under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh 9).

Transition: These victory hymns give expression to the joy, the relief, the wonder and gratitude we feel for all that God has accomplished for us and through us.

Today, I have just 8 simple observations from Deborah’s Song.

1. The Song praises God for his intervention (5:1–5). “On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang: ‘When the leaders lead in Israel, when the people volunteer, blessed be the Lord. Listen, kings! Pay attention, princes! I will sing to the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel. Lord, when you came from Seir, when you marched from the fields of Edom, the earth trembled, the skies poured rain, and the clouds poured water. The mountains melted before the Lord, even Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.’”

The song pulls back the curtain to show us how God intervened in this situation and fought on their behalf.

Deborah and Barak address the song to Israel’s God, v. 3 “I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.” While the term “God/Elohim” is a generic term for a deity or supernatural beings designating God proper or the heavenly court, the name “Yahweh” is his specific designation, occurring about 700 times followed by the term *elohim* 365 times. The name includes all three tenses in Hebrew—meaning “I Am” or more specifically, “I AM the one who is.”

Israel’s theology here is reflected many centuries later when the Levitical priesthood of Israel led the people in this majestic prayer in Nehemiah 9:5–8 “Blessed be **the LORD your God** from everlasting to everlasting (stressing the Jewish doctrine of God’s eternity). Blessed be your glorious name and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise (glorious means “weighty” or not to be taken lightly). You, LORD, are the only God (emphasizing Moses’ teaching in the *Shema*—there is only one God who is over all creation). You created the heavens, the highest heavens with all their stars, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and all the stars of heaven worship you. You, the LORD, are the God who chose Abram.” This stresses God’s uniqueness and his covenant relationship with Israel.

Application: Singing praises to God reminds us of all that he has done for us, to intervene on our behalf. Why is that important? Because our frequent and fervent praise interrupts our despair and reminds us of our hope.

The only other praise song recorded in the book of Judges is in Chapter 16 and it is the song of the Philistines praising Dagon who gave them victory over Samson. This song of praise in Judges 5 stands out and surprises us because it appears in the middle of a bleak section in the Judges narrative. Right in the middle of a dark and depressing era in the nation’s history appears a hymn of victory over the Canaanites and their false gods.

Illus. In Acts 16 Luke tells the story of Paul and Silas walking along, minding their business and confronted by a demonized girl—she was a slave and made her owners lots of money telling people’s fortunes. Paul, agitated in his Spirit by the Holy Spirit, turned and cast the demon out of her life. For the first time in a very long time, her mind was free of this horror.

Were her owners grateful to Paul? No. Instead, they had Paul and Silas thrown into prison. There they sat in chains with no guarantee they would live another day. They could be executed by a fickle Roman court system, or torn apart by the mobs in the streets out for blood.

About midnight, Paul and Silas began to pray and sing hymns of praise to God *and the prisoners and the guards were listening to their songs.* Suddenly an earthquake shook the prison doors open and everyone’s shackles dropped to the floor. The Jailer woke up and intended to kill himself by the sword, and Paul pleaded with him not to do it. The man was saved by the gospel.

In Acts 16 we learn how they encouraged themselves despite this despair—through prayers and singing hymns of praise to Jesus.

Paul later described his time in Asia this way in 2 Corinthians 1:8 “Of the afflictions we experienced in Asia we were so utterly burdened beyond our ability to endure—that we despaired of life itself.”

2 Corinthians 4:8, 17 “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”

The book of Judges is oddly interrupted by the song of praise right in the middle of a dark and bleak storyline. 31 verses of enthusiastic praise and celebration for all that God accomplished for them.

2. The Song recalls the deplorable conditions within Israel (5:6–8). “In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the main roads were deserted because travelers kept to the side roads. Villages were deserted, they were deserted in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, a mother in Israel. Israel chose new gods, then there was war in the city gates. Not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.”

What Deborah and Barak are describing is a country in lockdown. During the time of Shamgar and Jael, the Canaanite marauders made it dangerous to travel on highways, which negatively impacted commercial trading, the economy, their social life and their worship. The Canaanite raiders constantly disrupted agriculture causing crops and fields to be abandoned, they threatened unwallled and thus unprotected towns and villages. This continued until Deborah emerged as a prophetess and judge who inspired the people to take action. However, before they could do so, they had to give up the "new gods" they had chosen, as God had sent war and oppression because of their sin. They were outmatched, overwhelmed, oppressed, impoverished, and lacking the military resources necessary to even fight the battle before them.

Application: These conditions are caused by their embrace of idolatrous gods “the new gods.” What are the new gods of our culture today? Which gods have we embraced and how has that led to the judgment of “war at the gates”?

Paul reminded the Ephesians 2:11–12, “So, then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands. ¹² At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.” Paul reminds them that they were dead in their sins. They were walking on a path that led to death, enslaved by the rulers and powers of this world. But God who has lavished us with his mercy, saved us by his grace, and set us on a new path of good works which God has prepared for us in advance. ***We are reminded of so great a salvation when we reflect back on a time when we didn’t have it.***

3. The Song celebrates a restoration of commerce (5:9–11). Now, this may seem like a small point or maybe even an “unspiritual” insight, but I assure you that the ability to reengage in free commerce is both biblical and spiritual. “My heart is with the leaders of Israel, with the volunteers of the people. Blessed be the Lord! You who ride on white donkeys, who sit on saddle blankets, and who travel on the road, give praise! ¹¹ Let them tell the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous deeds of his villagers in Israel, with the voices of the singers at the watering places. Then the Lord’s people went down to the city gates.” Following the victory in the battle, the feeling of depression and defeat was replaced by a sense of triumph, enabling travelers to move about freely, and allowing normal activities to resume. The author expresses empathy towards the volunteers and leaders who displayed immense bravery, which led to the restoration of normalcy.

The song draws our attention to how Israel kept its traditions alive—through songs at the wells or cisterns in a hot arid land where everyone would stop at drink. The travelers can now move about the country freely with no fear of Canaanite cruelty. Instead of gathering for war at the city gates (or abandoning them), the people reengage in commerce and trade there.

Illus. Remember how miserable it was to be locked down during covid? Businesses boarded up, and the extreme financial pressure associated with halting all commerce. Social life became non-existent—no sporting events, shopping, dining out, or church attendance. Folks, we were locked down for less than a year in Idaho and some states much longer by comparison. *But Israel was in lockdown for 20 years.* Now, imagine the psychological toll that 20 years of social isolation took on the nation. Notice Deborah’s empathy for the leaders of Israel and the volunteer ranks. Now the people ride on white donkeys, sit on saddle blankets, travel freely on the road, and give praise to God for freedom as they enjoy life again.

Application: I think there is a lesson here for the Church. Deborah’s song celebrates the restoration of the free market, which is based on the principle of voluntary (rather than compelled or compulsory) exchange. The principles of free exchange, land ownership, and fair market value are deeply rooted in the Bible:

- The Ten Commandments and Mosaic legislation regulate the free exchange of goods.
- Principles of fairness and free trade permeate biblical stories.
- The book of proverbs reserves its harshest judgments for those ancient cashiers who price gouge people in the market. Do you realize that the entire description of the Proverbs 31 wife is of a shrewd woman who works hard and conducts commerce “at the city gates” Prov 31:31?

- After the Exile when the Israel finally returns to its land, rebuilds the temple and the city, Nehemiah returns to see the people's progress to find that the marketplace is so prosperous, he has to make them shut it down on the sabbath.
- Jesus regularly ministered healing in the markets, taught principles of free and fair exchange—and gave the parable of the Talents, which presupposes the need for open and free exchange and investment of capital, while also acknowledging the necessity of inequity in terms of outcomes.

The principles of freedom are deeply embedded in both Moses' law and Jesus' teaching.

Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free you are free indeed."

Paul said, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free."

The principles of social and commercial freedom are grounded in the spiritual principles of being set free from the tyranny of the devil and of sin. And those spiritual principles translate into our social and commercial relationships. The song celebrates the restoration of Israeli commerce as a manifestation of their freedom the iron fist of Jabin and the Canaanites.

4. The Song commends the participants in the Battle (5:12–18). “Awake! Awake, Deborah! Awake! Awake, sing a song! Arise, Barak, and take your prisoners, son of Abinoam!” The song praises the tribes that joined the fight such as Ephraim, Benjamin, the half-tribe of Manasseh, the Naphtalians and Zebulunites and Issachar—all volunteer forces gathered as ordered to fight at Mount Tabor.

But the list also includes those tribes who decided to sit this one out. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Dan were largely southern tribes and receive Deborah’s wrath in the song for not coming to the aid of the northern tribes.

The gospels don’t hesitate to note that in Jesus’ greatest hour of need, the disciples deserted Jesus (Matthew 26:56).

In Philippians 4:15 “And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone.” He thanks the Philippians for coming to his aid for the gospel when no other church could do so. In 2 Tim 1:15 Paul recalls how everyone in the province of Asia deserted him, and he calls out Phygelus, Hermogenes, and praises Onesiphorus for hanging in there with him.

Application: It draws our attention to those who jumped into the fray. Those who refused to sit this one out and let someone else step up. You never forget the people who suited up and got in the game and came to your assistance. They become, in our minds, the epitome of loyalty, selflessness, and their example reminds us to be the same kind of people.

5. The Song reveals how God threw Sisera’s charioteers into confusion (5:19–23). “Kings came and fought.

Then the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the Waters of Megiddo, but they did not plunder the silver.

²⁰ The stars fought from the heavens; the stars fought with Sisera from their paths. ²¹ The river Kishon swept them away, the ancient river, the river Kishon. March on, my soul, in strength! ²² The horses’ hooves then hammered— the galloping, galloping of his stallions. ²³ ‘Curse Meroz,’ says the angel of the Lord, ‘Bitterly curse her inhabitants, for they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord with the warriors.’”

The chariot corps of Canaan line up for battle, but what they cannot see is the spiritual forces in heavenly realms invisible to the naked eye—but Deborah sees in the spirit. “The stars fought” likely refers to supernatural principalities who constitute God’s heavenly court—they have been deployed to fight against Sisera and his armies. While the horses galloped away.

Application: God’s miracles often come through natural means. We often think of miracles as God circumventing natural law. For sure, there are many miracles like that in Scripture. But this miracle, like the flood in Genesis 6, uses natural means.

No weapon formed against us can prosper. Society may contrive the most draconian laws, the most restrictive measures to stop us—but ultimately they are opposing the God who controls the very elements of nature—the God who holds every particle and atom together by the power of his Word.

When Jesus was crucified that was it. There is no greater deterrent to a new and upcoming religion than to brutally execute its founder and leader Roman style. But Rome and the Sanhedrin failed to realize that the God who formed the rocks and the earth and who breathed life into Adam’s nasal passages was in control of the whole situation the whole time.

Be reminded that no matter what battle you’re facing, the God is for you, who promises to work out all things in your life for his glory and your good—understand that he made the very elements of nature. And there is no prayer too big for God.

6. The Song commemorates Jael's treachery (5:24–27). “Most blessed of women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; she is most blessed among tent-dwelling women.²⁵ He asked for water; she gave him milk. She brought him cream in a majestic bowl.²⁶ She reached for a tent peg, her right hand, for a workman’s hammer. Then she hammered Sisera—she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple.²⁷ He collapsed, he fell, he lay down between her feet; he collapsed, he fell between her feet; where he collapsed, there he fell—dead.”

One wonders how a song like this squares with Jesus’ teaching. First, it gives us more interesting details about how she lulled Sisera the general to sleep with the milk, or curds which would have had a natural sedative effect on him. But most importantly, it reminds us that even the actions of sinners can be part of God’s overall sovereign plan to accomplish his purposes.

Sisera isn’t just killed in battle, he’s killed by a “tent woman.” This makes his death all the more devastating as he not only loses his entire army along with their chariots, he dies at the hands of a double agent who is a “woman of tents.” Meaning, she is obliged by middle eastern cultural standards to show a guest the highest degree of hospitality—and yet she does just the opposite. Some have pointed out that Jael appears to break 2 of the 10 commandments (You shall not lie; You shall not murder), and she violates the social rules of her middle eastern culture. However, the Song of Deborah commemorates her act as wartime violence. While killing is never preferable, in this case, her actions are clearly the judgment of God on Sisera. Likewise, her subterfuge is justified as his death likely prevents him from regathering more troops and doing harm in the future. Moreover, her actions are proportionate and confined to this one act of judgment. She doesn’t go out and become the “Tent Peg Avenger” killing all God’s enemies thereafter in like fashion.

Application: God is sovereign even over the injustice and evil of men. Acts 4:27 “For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place.” Even the actions of intentional evil or ignorance was predestined by God’s hand to take place to accomplish God’s ultimate will.

The Christian rests assured that even sinful actions by sinful people are being orchestrated by God’s predestining will. We take comfort in the fact that God is sovereign over history and even over those who choose a sinful path or solution.

7. The Song contrasts the mother of Israel with the mother of Sisera (5:28–30). “Sisera’s mother looked through the window; she peered through the lattice, crying out: ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why don’t I hear the hoofbeats of his horses?’²⁹ Her wisest princesses answer her; she even answers herself: ³⁰ ‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoil— a girl or two for each warrior, the spoil of colored garments for Sisera, the spoil of an embroidered garment or two for my neck?’”

In the account, the wealthy, opulent life and expectation of Sisera’s mother is pictured as a longing unfulfilled. In fact, the entire battle is framed around women in the story. Deborah is Israel’s judge and “mother” whom God raises up to call Barak and the loose confederation of Israeli tribes to defend their nation against Jabin and Sisera’s oppression. Sisera’s oppression is seen most vividly in his horrifying treatment of women—taking them as sex slaves. Sisera’s mother waits longingly for him to return to the Canaanite palace with armloads of plunder and a caravan of female concubines in tow. She waits in vain. Because Israel’s mother and Jael, the double agent, take him out. ***Women most often did the hard work of setting up living tents which were portable and mobile.*** So the spike and the hammer are hers, common household appliances in the ANE.

The man who treated women as objects, is himself slain by a woman with a household object.

Application: Listen to your mamma boy. Proverbs 1:8 “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction, and don’t reject your mother’s teaching.”

Proverbs 10:1 “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son, heartache to his mother.”

The first commandment in the 10 is to honor your father and mother so that it may go well with you and you don’t find yourself in an early grave.

Illus. For me personally, I am astonished to see just how often my kids will confide in their mom. By the time they get to me, they’ve already told here *everything!* It’s because she is a gifted listener while I am a gifted advice-giver. And there are times when they need my presence, my strength, and times when they just need mom and here listening ear and wise counsel.

8. The Song anticipates Yahweh's eventual victory over all his enemies. The gods of this world who enslave the Gentile nations in false worship will eventually bow the knee and be destroyed. (5:31) "Lord, may all your enemies perish as Sisera did. But may those who love him be like the rising of the sun in its strength."

Make no mistake about it, we are currently in an ongoing battle with these same false gods who have the nations in their grip of deception. Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens." The difference now is that these false gods face the greatest threat to their cause and their existence than they have ever known. The Gospel of Jesus which transforms enslaved sinners to being set free in Grace.

I assure you, no matter what the battlefield looks like today, God has won the victory in Christ. And Christ will someday judge his enemies and we will celebrate and rise like the sun in its strength.

Application: Until then we love our fellow human enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In a spirit of humility and gentleness, we share the life-saving grace and truth of Christ with them.