

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

This Stone Shall Be A Witness

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Judges 8:33-9:57

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 8. Thank you, Rachel, for reading our passage for us.

After a passage like that, this feels like an appropriate time to remind you that these stories in Judges are *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. In other words, the author is telling us what DID happen, not what SHOULD have happened.

To be clear: There is no hero in our passage this morning. There is no good example to follow. So, what then are we meant to make of this? What would God have us see as we reflect on this story? The Apostle Paul is helpful here. Regarding these Old Testament stories, he tells us:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but **they were written down for our instruction**, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:11 ESV)

This story is an *example* that is meant for our instruction. Some examples are positive and should be followed. That's not the case here. This is a negative example. It illustrates very clearly what we are NOT to do.

I think that's exactly why this story is here. The author of Judges holds up the story of Abimelech as a *warning to heed*. And – at the centre of this story – there is one foundational lesson to learn.

Three Warnings

Our passage for this morning focuses in on one of Gideon's 70 sons, Abimelech. He was born to a concubine from the city of Shechem. Since his mother was not formally Gideon's wife and was likely not even a Hebrew, Abimelech would have been seen as something of an outcast by his brothers. He wanted the power and position that had been enjoyed by his father, but he was last in the succession line. And so, Abimelech took matters into his own hands. And that brings us to the first warning:

1. Beware of the inclination to seize what the Lord in His wisdom has not given

An aspiration for greater position and responsibility is not in and of itself wrong. In fact, the Bible *encourages* us to be ambitious! Use the talents that God has entrusted to you as faithfully and as fruitfully as you can! However, ambition becomes ugly and sinful when we are too impatient for promotion and instead *seize* power and position for ourselves. That's what we find in this story. Look again at verses 1-2:

Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, ²“Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?’ Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.” (Judges 9:1-2 ESV)

His argument was simple and compelling. “Why are you showing loyalty to all 70 of Gideon's sons? Wouldn't it be easier for you if there was only one ruler to follow? And I'm one of you! Who better to represent the interests of Shechem than one of your own?”

The people of Shechem – evidently driven more by pragmatism than by loyalty to Gideon – agreed with Abimelech's pitch and swore their allegiance to him. More than that, they took 70 pieces of silver out of their temple and used it to finance Abimelech's mercenaries. With a band of hired soldiers at his side, we read in verse 5:

And he went to his father's house at Ophrah **and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone.** But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. (Judges 9:5 ESV)

Once again, let's state this plainly: We are not meant to follow this example. We're meant to see how ugly and sinful it is so as not to repeat it. And, while I don't imagine that any of us will ever be tempted to murder our siblings for a throne, we will certainly face our own share of temptations.

Perhaps you will have the opportunity to slander or misrepresent someone else in order to make yourself look better. Perhaps you will be tempted to badmouth your employer in an attempt to usurp her position. Perhaps you will slander those who are in authority over you politically or undermine those who are in authority over you spiritually. Young people, perhaps you will be tempted to disrespect and dismiss your parents even though you are still living under their roof. SEIZING authority and position that God has not entrusted to us is always ugly and sinful.

I can't help but contrast this story with the example of David who had two perfect opportunities to assassinate King Saul. He had two opportunities to seize the throne by force. But he knew that position was not his to take. It was God's to give. He entrusted himself to God's timing and said:

Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, '**I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed.**' (1 Samuel 24:10 ESV)

David understood that the way to greatness in the kingdom of heaven is through humility and meekness. As Jesus taught us:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11 ESV)

In God's kingdom power and position are given, not taken. That's the first warning we glean from this story. Second:

2. Never forget that what goes around tends to come around

The agreement that was reached between Abimelech and the people of Shechem was born of betrayal. Abimelech essentially said, 'Why should we be loyal to my brothers if *disloyalty* will purchase us an easier, happier life?' The people of Shechem agreed, and a relationship was forged.

But when Jotham – the lone brother who escaped Abimelech’s treachery – heard about this, he made his way to a hill that was overlooking the king’s inauguration ceremony and shouted out an announcement. He declared:

“Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. ⁸The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’⁹ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’¹⁰ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’¹² And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’¹³ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’¹⁴ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘**If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.**’ (Judges 9:7b-15 ESV)

The trees went looking for a king, but when they could find no suitable option, they chose to bow down and submit themselves to a bramble bush. This parable – often referred to as Jotham’s fable – uses ridiculous language to highlight the foolishness of the people of Shechem.

The bramble was useless in that it couldn’t provide shade. It was dangerous in that it was covered in thorns. And, on top of all that, it was highly flammable. At the heart of the fable is a question: Can you HONESTLY say that Abimelech should be your king? Can you HONESTLY say that you are acting in good faith right now?

He goes on to declare in verses 19-20:

if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. ²⁰**But if not**, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech. (Judges 9:19-20 ESV)

Jotham’s words here drip of sarcasm. ‘If you honestly believe that you are acting with honesty and integrity then ALL THE BEST! I’m sure this will be a great arrangement! But if not, then Abimelech will be the death of you, and you will be the death of him.’ As one commentator notes:

Since both king and populace got where they were by breaking faith with the family of Gideon, they could hardly be surprised when in due course they broke faith with each other. ¹

Because a relationship that is birthed in betrayal will persist in betrayal. What goes around tends to come around. We see this played out all the time, don't we?

This is why it's hard to find a healthy church that was birthed out of a church split. I'm sure that some exist, but by and large, a congregation that is birthed from conflict tends to live in perpetual conflict.

This is also why affairs never lead to happy relationships. He's willing to betray his wife today because you are a better, prettier option, but five years later he'll betray you just as quickly when the next girl presents a better, prettier option.

That's exactly what happens in this story. Three years into this newly forged relationship, a man named Gaal moves to Shechem and – after a night filled with much wine – he asks:

“Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? **29 Would that this people were under my hand!** Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Increase your army, and come out.’” (Judges 9:28b-29 ESV)

The leaders of Shechem – driven as they were by pragmatism rather than loyalty – decided that Gaal was a better, prettier option and, for the second time in three years, they chose betrayal.

In order for a relationship to be healthy – be that a relationship with a spouse, a church, or a king – it must be founded on faithfulness and honesty. Because what goes around tends to come around. And that leads to one final warning in this tragic story:

3. Don't forget that in the end God's justice will prevail

¹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message Of Judges* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 72.

If you were a faithful believer living in the days of Abimelech, I suspect that you would have had a hard time reconciling what you know to be true about God with what you could see unfolding around you.

Where was God when Gideon's sons were massacred? Where was God when Shechem's bandits were robbing innocent travellers on the mountaintops? How are we to believe in a good and just God when 'bad people' do bad things and always seem to get away with it?

I'm sure that there are many in this room who have wrestled with some form of that question. Why isn't God doing anything in the face of all the evil we see around us?

In this story, the author pulls back the heavenly curtain to show us that God IS working in this story. Look, for example, at verse 23:

And **God sent an evil spirit** between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem (Judges 9:23a ESV)

'Wait... God sent WHAT?! Yes, you read that right. God saw the wickedness and the treachery of Abimelech and Shechem and so He sent an evil spirit into their midst as a punishment.

Now, to be clear, God is not the AUTHOR of evil, but we see here that He can use even evil spirits to accomplish his purposes. Like a rabid dog that has been released from his leash, God released the evil spirit and it went straight to Shechem. Sometimes, God judges our sin – not by stopping it – but by allowing us to experience the terrible consequences of it. As Tim Keller explains:

God in his judgement uses the tools of human rebellion against those who rebel. ²

At the prompting of this evil spirit, the pattern of dishonesty and betrayal eventually set both parties on fire. When Abimelech heard of Shechem's new alliance with Gaal, he marched against the city. Seeing that they were overrun, the people of Shechem fled and took refuge in the stronghold of the tower of Shechem. It was there that – in the words of Jotham – a flame would shoot out from the bramble that they had chosen to reign over them. We read in verses 48-49:

² Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 105.

And Abimelech took an axe in his hand and cut down a bundle of brushwood and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. And he said to the men who were with him, “What you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done.”⁴⁹ So every one of the people cut down his bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about 1,000 men and women. (Judges 9:48b-49 ESV)

Thus was Shechem brought to justice. But, what of Abimelech? We’re not told why but – perhaps because of his blind rage or perhaps because of a heightened sense of paranoia – Abimelech proceeded to attack the neighboring city of Thebez. There, he too was met by the justice of God. We read:

And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull...

⁵⁶ **Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech**, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers.⁵⁷ And **God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads**, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal. (Judges 9:53, 56-57 ESV)

The wicked may *seem* to prosper in this life – evil may seem to go unchecked – but, as we learn in Proverbs:

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of his fury will fail. (Proverbs 22:8 ESV)

We learn from this story that no one ultimately gets away with anything. In the end, God’s justice will prevail. This ends the story of ‘king’ Abimelech. As we conclude, I want to draw your attention to the one foundational lesson that lies at the heart of this story.

One Foundational Lesson

For the Israelites who first read this, the detail that would have been MOST significant to them is the one that we pass by without even a second thought. Look again at verse 6:

And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, **by the oak of the pillar at Shechem**. (Judges 9:6 ESV)

This city of Shechem – and specifically this stone pillar by the oak tree – is the KEY that unlocks the purpose of this passage. If we want to understand what the Israelites saw in this detail, then we need to flip back a few pages in our bibles to Joshua 24.

After being miraculously rescued out of Egypt, Joshua led God’s people into the land that God had promised them. Remember – that’s where the book of Judges begins. These are the generations that immediately proceeded Joshua, and this is the story of how they lived in the land that God had given to them.

Why, then, are we looking back at Joshua 24? Well, in Joshua 24, fresh after taking possession of the land, the people of Israel held a grand ceremony and made a covenant with God. They swore that day to obey His commandments. They declared: ‘You have given us this land, and we PROMISE that we are going to live according to YOUR Law!’

And guess where that ceremony was held?

And the people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.” ²⁵ **So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem.** ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. **And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.** ²⁷ And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, **this stone shall be a witness against us**, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.” (Joshua 24:24-27 ESV)

Shechem was the place where the people of God promised that they would keep His Law. Then they set up a large stone under the terebinth – or oak – tree (it’s the same Hebrew word) and declared that THIS stone shall be a witness against us. Now, look again at verse 6 of our passage for this morning:

And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, **by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.** (Judges 9:6 ESV)

Here, in the heart of Judges – at the centre of a book that was written to make the case for why Israel NEEDED a king – we are told the story of ‘king’ Abimelech. He was anointed at the very place where Israel made a covenant to obey God. Yet – from start to finish – his reign was marked

by disobedience and treachery. Here's the lesson: Israel didn't simply need a *king*. Israel needed – and WE need:

We need an honest, faithful, covenant-keeping King

It's almost as if the author of Judges is including this story as something of an asterisk – a qualifier of sorts – in the larger argument of the book. 'We need a king! We DESPERATELY need a king! It was UTTER CHAOS without a king! *But – don't be hasty in the laying on of hands – we can't simply settle for *any* king. He must be an *honest* king; a *faithful* king; a king that will uphold the covenant that we made with God.'

The Israelites who first read the book of Judges waited and waited for that king. They thought that they had found him in David, but he shattered their expectations when he became an adulterer and a murderer. They thought that they had found him in Saul. Then in Hezekiah. So many *promising* kings down through the ages, but not ONE of them was the promise KEEPING King that they needed.

Not one, that is, until a miracle baby was born in Bethlehem – the city of the king. This child was a descendant of David. And as he grew in stature and wisdom, his life was marked by perfect honesty, perfect faithfulness, and a perfect obedience to God's law such that he could declare:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them **but to fulfill them**. (Matthew 5:17 ESV)

Through Jesus' perfect, sinless life, the covenantal agreement was upheld. Finally, a perfectly obedient king had come to lead us with honesty and faithfulness!

But, what Israel didn't realize was that there was a greater problem that needed to be addressed. Even though the *King* is a covenant keeper, what is God to do with a *people* who are covenant breakers? We nodded along in approval when justice was served to Abimelech and Shechem for their treachery, but what about the justice that is deserved by our treachery?

This is why – though he was the perfectly honest, perfectly faithful covenant-keeping King – Jesus bore the wrath of God on a Roman cross. He bore in himself the unfaithfulness of his people, and he paid our debt. Through Jesus’ atoning death, the consequence for our covenantal rebellion was satisfied.

The faithless king Abimelech was crushed for his sin. The faithFUL King Jesus was crushed for OURS. Let’s give thanks to him now.