

Retribution and the Brambleman

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 9:1-10:5

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There are some games that transcend generations. And I think that's because they bring out some of our deepest desires. One of those games is King of the Hill. Just hearing a reference to the game may bring back many different memories of battling with your friends, siblings, or dad to be the one on the top of the dirt mound in the backyard, the creek behind your house, big snow piles, inner tubes in the lake, or even the video game *Halo* as it said, "Hill controlled, hill contested." The thrill of trying to be the one in control of the hill is what makes this game such a success. Every person in the world wants to be the one at the top or the one in charge in some way, shape, or form. Nobody aspires to be the sub on their soccer team or has the goal of being 9th chair in the orchestra. We want to be the one who starts the game or has the chance to dominate the solo on the violin. We may start at the bottom of the corporate ladder, but our goal is to climb higher up and be the one in charge.

This desire can drive us to be better in our lives. This can be good when we keep God as the one in control of our life and the King. When we live our lives for the glory of God, this brings us complete and lasting joy. But more often than not this isn't the way people live their lives. We want control in our lives so that we can be the king and the one in charge. The book of Judges also shows this clearly in almost every chapter and story. We see this in chapter 2, verse 11: "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals." Chapter 3, verse 7: "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth." Verse 12: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Chapter 4, verse 11: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." And chapter 6, verse 1: "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The book of Judges has been on a steady downhill spiral, with the spiral getting bigger and bigger and lower and lower. Our text for this morning shows this downward spiral even more with the rejection of God as King and the violence done among the Israelites. The people do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord, but the oppression does not come from a foreign nation. Instead it comes from within.

If you were able to read chapter 9 last week, thank you so much. I want to reiterate that it will be very helpful for all of us, myself included, to read the upcoming passage beforehand. The passages get longer in the book of Judges, and this will help you to be familiar with the text. We are going to divide our time this morning into three parts as we look at the story of Abimelech and Israel. We will see Abimelech rise to power, Jotham give a sobering warning, and what happens when people refuse to listen.

UNFAITHFULNESS TO GOD LEADS TO HEINOUS AND RAMPANT EVIL. (8:33-9:6)

As I said before, the book of Judges is on a downhill spiral. As the book goes on, the sin grows. Chapter 8:33-35 gives us the context for the events in chapter 9. "As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is,

Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.”¹ These verses echo a similar statement that we heard in the verses before. “The people of Israel did was evil in the sight of the Lord.” But these verses at the end of chapter 8 give us more detail about their sin.

The problem in the judge cycle of Gideon began with the people breaking the covenant of God in chapter 6:7-10. God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and drove out the people of the land of Canaan before the people of Israel, giving them the land. But the people did not obey God. They broke the covenant and were unfaithful to him. Then fast-forwarding a few chapters to where we are this morning, we see that being unfaithful to the covenant and not obeying God is still the problem. Israel has turned and begun to worship a particular Baal—Baal-berith. The name Baal-berith translates literally to “lord of the covenant.” They have made a covenant with a false god. They have forgotten how God delivered them from their enemies and they have forgotten the good that Gideon did for them. They have been unfaithful to the real and true covenant God, Yahweh. The Canaanization of Israel is becoming complete; they look and act completely like the nations around them. They have failed to live holy and obedient lives and show the other nations what God is like.

With all of this in mind, Abimelech comes onto the scene. He is the son of Gideon’s concubine in the city of Shechem, in addition to the other sons and wives that Gideon had. A concubine was a woman in the man’s household who was of lower status than the wife or wives. But this is what the people of Canaan did, not what the people of Israel were supposed to do. Once again they look more and more like Canaanites. Abimelech goes to his mom and tells her to talk to the leaders of Shechem and ask them if it is better for all 70 sons of Jerubbaal (Gideon) to rule over them or for one man to rule over them. Oh, and also to remind them that the “one man” is him and that he is their bone and flesh relative. So his mom does this, and the leaders of Shechem follow Abimelech because he is their brother and relative. They give him 70 pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith, which would be about 1.75 pounds worth roughly \$500 in today’s money. Abimelech takes this money and uses it to hire worthless and reckless men to follow him. So basically he pays some men to be his mercenary army. Then Abimelech and the men go to Gideon’s house and kill his 70 sons, Abimelech’s brothers, on one stone.

The violence in these verses is written so matter of fact. Because of that we can sometimes gloss over it, with an attitude of “hmmm, ok, well on to the next verse.” But this is horrible. The 70 brothers were taken from their homes and to one rock by Abimelech. From here they were killed one-by-one on the rock, and their bodies were tossed aside. As brother 1, 2, 3, 4, died, the others were fighting and pleading for their lives. Then brother 5, 6, 7, 8 were killed and so on until they were all killed except the youngest, Jotham. And the only reason he was left was because he hid himself. The people of Shechem approved of these actions because they gathered together in verse 6 and made Abimelech their king. The people wanted a ruthless, violent, warrior king similar to the kings of Canaan. They are looking more and more like the Canaanites. The sin, evil, and violence are only growing in Israel at this time as they turn further and further from God. Abimelech and the people of Shechem had forgotten God and rejected him as their king. God was the one who was supposed to care for them and provide for them. Instead Abimelech wanted to be his own king and the people of Shechem were swayed by his pragmatic argument

Abimelech was not chosen by God, but he grabbed for the power and authority. He wanted to be the king because of his own pride and arrogance. He wanted to be the one in charge and killed his

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

own family to do it. He had no desire to rule the people in obedience to God. And the people of Shechem had no desire to be ruled by someone who followed God. They wanted to be ruled by what the world saw as powerful. They wanted a king with worldly values. At times we can get sucked into wanting leaders who look good according to America's standards. Because of this, characteristics such as holiness and humility get pushed to the side in favor of policy and platform. But choosing a godly leader in the *church* is so important. Leaders must be chosen by the character traits that God says are important through his Word. God does not care if a person is an introvert or extrovert, or if the person is popular, funny, full of book smarts, or works a white collar job. The characteristics that God cares about are written in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The qualities for pastors and elders are that they be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, a lover of good, upright, holy, able to teach and hold fast to the word, not a drunk or violent or quarrelsome. They must be able to manage their own household. They must not be arrogant or quick-tempered. So church, please pray for your leaders. We believe that prayer is powerful here at First Free and one of the ways that we show that belief is through our actions. Please pray for the ministry staff here at the church and for the elders, deacons, and trustees. Pray with these things in mind, and pray that we would be leaders who live our lives in faithfulness to God and his covenant.

REPENT AND RETURN TO THE TRUE COVENANT GOD. (9:7-21)

As I said earlier, Jotham was the only brother to escape. And he begins to address the people of Shechem about what they have done with a warning from God. Jotham goes onto Mt. Gerizim and calls out to the people of Shechem. This mountain was the mountain of blessing when Israel renewed the covenant at the beginning of the book of Joshua (8:30-35, cf. Deut. 11:29). Jotham goes to warn the people of what will happen if they do not repent and return to the true covenant God. He called out to them "Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you." God will not let the sin that Abimelech and the people of Shechem did go unpunished. There will be consequences for their sins.

The fable that Jotham tells the leaders of Shechem is about trees and plants. The trees want a king to rule over them, so they first go to the olive tree who tells them no. Then they go to the fig tree who gives them the same answer. After this, the trees talk to the vine who responds with no. After this the trees say to the bramble, "You come and reign over us." And the bramble says in verse 15, "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." Abimelech is the bramble king that is not good for anything except fire and burning. Jotham tells the leaders of Shechem that if they have acted with integrity in making Abimelech their king and dealt well with Gideon, then they should rejoice. But remember you haven't, because you killed all of my brothers and made Abimelech king over you just because he is your relative. But if you have acted in good faith and integrity to Gideon, rejoice. But you haven't, and because of that, retribution will happen. The people of Shechem and Abimelech did not believe these words from Jotham. They did not believe God would really punish them for their sin or enact retribution on them for being unfaithful to Gideon and to God himself. Or they didn't care what the punishment would be. Sometimes it's easy to compare ourselves to the people of the Old Testament and think, "What in the world are these Shechemites doing?!" Are they total fools with the shortest memories ever? How could they forget what Gideon had done for them so quickly?

We often live our lives not believing that there will be any sort of punishment or retribution for our sin. Or when this happens and there are consequences for our sin, we are confused and wonder why this is the case. But there are so many consequences for our sin today. And these come from or are allowed by God. The consequences of our sin show us where sin leads to and our need to repent and turn back to God. Are you experiencing any retribution or consequences for your sin right now? If you are, I would encourage you to see this as God's warning to you and repent, looking to Jesus for forgiveness and mercy. All people on earth deserve God's retribution or punishment for the sins they have committed. When we sin, we sin ultimately against God. And because of that there are consequences. But we can take comfort in the fact that God himself, Jesus, took the punishment that we deserved for our sins. If we place our faith and trust in him, putting him as the King of our life we will be forgiven of our sin and adopted into God's family because of his grace, mercy, and love towards us. However, the people did not respond in this way after Jotham spoke to them, and because of that there was divine retribution.

A REFUSAL TO REPENT LEADS TO DIVINE RETRIBUTION. (9:22-57)

Abimelech was king over Israel for only three years. God took action to finish his reign by sending an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. This spirit drove a wedge between the two and the words of Jotham begin to come true. The blood of the 70 sons of Gideon will be on the heads of Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem.

So the kingdom that Abimelech is in charge of is beginning to unravel as the leaders of Shechem put men in the mountains to rob people as they are traveling along the roads. Then Gaal comes onto the scene in Shechem. We don't know anything about Gaal except that the leaders of Shechem put their confidence in him and listen to him. They are all eating and drinking at a feast in the house of Baal-Berith and criticizing and insulting Abimelech. Gaal goes so far as to question why they are all serving him as king, saying they should be serving the true relatives of the founder of Shechem and not this son of Gideon. I can picture the other people at the feast urging him on and applauding the words he is saying with a "here, here!" and raising their cups in approval. Gaal finishes with a final taunt to Abimelech to increase his army and come out for a fight. The only problem with this drunken feast of taunts is that it gets back to Abimelech through the ruler of the city, Zebul. Zebul tells Abimelech that Gaal is stirring up the city against him, so they plan a morning ambush against Gaal and his followers. After a night of drinking and feasting, groggy Gaal comes to the city gate the next morning with a cup of coffee and sees people coming down from the mountaintops. He tells this to Zebul who replies, "You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men." But Gaal comes back with, "No, no, those are people and they are in several groups." Then it is Zebul's turn to take up the taunt; "Look where your big mouth has got you now Gaal. Put your money where your mouth is and go out and fight Abimelech." So Gaal gets his men and goes out to fight Abimelech and gets beat like a drum.

The next day the people of Shechem think that that battle is over and go out to work in the fields. But Abimelech is waiting for them in an ambush and kills them, and then he goes into the city and kills all who are inside and burns it to the ground. Some people fled to the house of El-berith (false god) and Abimelech and his men cut down brushwood and stack it against the building and burn it to the ground killing 1,000 men and women. The words of Jotham and God are coming true as the fire has come out of the Brambleman, Abimelech, and burned the people of Shechem. Abimelech isn't done with his ruthless violence. He moves on with his army to the city of Thebez and captures it. The people take shelter in the strong tower within the city and go up onto the roof. Abimelech in

his arrogance decides that burning the tower worked so well before, so let's do it again. He goes to the door to burn it with fire and a certain woman at the top of the tower throws an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushes his skull. He knew he was going to die but he didn't want it to be said that a woman killed him. So his armor-bearer kills Abimelech with his sword. Now that Abimelech is dead, the men of Israel leave and go home. The battle was over. God worked through Jotham's words and he returned the evil that Abimelech had done in killing his brothers. Even the evil that Shechem had done in supporting Abimelech was returned on them. The divine retribution happened because of their unfaithfulness to the true covenant God.

God worked in what could be seen as a strange way. He sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. This does not mean that God is evil in himself because he is using evil to get rid of evil. Evil nations such as Assyria and Babylon were used by God to take Israel into captivity and out of the Promised Land. This was retribution because of the sinful evil that Israel did in worshipping other gods. These examples show us that God is completely sovereign or rules over the evil in the world. The evil that happens in this chapter does not surprise God and neither does the evil that happens today in our community and the world as a whole. God does not approve or want the evil in the world today but he is sovereign over it. Also as God's people we do not have to be afraid of the evil in the world because we serve a God who is much bigger than it and holds our eternal security in his glorious might. God's retribution and judgment on these evil actions also helps us to see that God is not absent in the presence of evil. People in the world are always asking why did this bad event happen or if God is good why does he allow evil to exist? God does not sit back absent and allow evil to exist and go unchecked. Tim Keller says that "Often times God works through what seems like the natural order of events, but he is acting in judgment. There might not be a lightning bolt from heaven...but there is justice. God's judgment is not only reserved for a future day; it is a present reality."²

As of March 22 my son, Weston, is officially one year old. Whoop whoop! Christy and I have kept him alive for an entire year. One of his favorite books to read is *Dear Zoo*. This book has flaps to lift on each page to reveal an animal that the zoo is sending to the boy. You don't have to just guess what is in the box pictured on the page because the book tells you. Judges chapter 9 works in a similar way with God's judgment. We are not left wondering if the final events that happen to Abimelech and the people of Shechem are mere chance. We are told their death is because of their sin and unfaithfulness in verses 23-24 and 56-57. But in our day we don't have a lift-the-flap-of-judgment book to help us know what is going on. But we do have God's Word which gives us confidence in so many different areas, including God's present judgment.

Paul tells us in Romans 1:18, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." He also tells us in Galatians 6:7-8 "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Shechem sowed unfaithfulness with God, Gideon, Abimelech, and even Gaal. Their unfaithfulness was their demise, as Abimelech was unfaithful to them and burned the city. Abimelech was destroyed because of his evil desire to be king at any cost. It was this arrogance that brought him down. But in addition to the present judgment of God there will be a future judgment. The sin and evil in the world will be punished and many will pay for their own sins and take the justice on themselves. This day will be like none other and not one to look forward. In this passage there seems to be so much bad, but it is the first five

² Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013, p. 105.

verses in chapter 10 that bring us hope. There are many aspects of chapter 9 that we as a church and Christians can resonate with. We are unfaithful to each other and to God, we desire to be the king of the hill and sometimes seek it at any cost, no matter what it does to ourselves or others. Israel was being destroyed from within in chapter 9. The people themselves were killing each other.

Verse 1 of chapter 10 says that, "After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola." The people of Israel did not call out to God for rescue but God raised up a judge because of his love for Israel, he is continuing to care for them. God is saving them from themselves and they have done nothing to deserve this. We today need a leader and king who will rescue us from ourselves. God has provided us with this leader and king and his name is Jesus. He has rescued us from our unfaithfulness to God and taken the retribution on sin that we deserved. You see that the covenant unfaithfulness always has divine retribution even when it comes to Jesus on the cross. Romans 5:8 tells us that he did this while we were still sinners. Jesus did the work of saving us from our sin while we were still sinning against him, we had not cried out to God for rescue yet.

If you have never placed your faith in Jesus do so now. If you have done this know that the Holy Spirit lives in you and is active in changing your life. We have been given the Holy Spirit as Christians and are "being transformed by the renewal of our minds, so that we may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)