

Sermon 8: Judges 9: The Rise and Fall of Abimelech

OUTLINE

The rise
The fall

INTRODUCTION

Where is God when things go bad? Judges chapter 9 with the rise and fall of Abimelech is the perfect chapter for us to consider if we are wrestling with this problem. The reign of Abimelech is a dark stain even in the book of judges which is a book that highlights moral degradation. It is a high point in the Canaanization of Israel. This chapter is inserted deliberately to highlight to dark time that followed Gideon. Gideon you will remember began well. He turned from Baal worship; followed God's instructions to gain victory; but the wheels came off. Gideon was approached to become king and in his words he rejected the offer but in his life he set himself up as a type of king who did as he pleased, shaped the religion of God's people as he willed. Now it is not a sin for Israel to want a king. God had made provision in the Law for a king. God always intended for there to be a king, in fact the office of king like priest and office would serve to foreshadow Christ as the King who would save us. The trouble with Israel is that they did not want a king to lead them in God's battles, and enforce God's law, being an example in God's will, they had sinful and selfish reasons. They wanted someone to believe in that was not God; they wanted security without trusting in God; they were interested in results and not holiness. Sadly they followed Gideon in his false worship and when Gideon died we see that they revealed where their hearts really were and turned to Baal-berith. The end of the last chapter introduced us to Abimelech, the son of Gideon whose name means my father is king, the son of a Canaanite concubine. In this chapter Israel is given the king it deserves. There are some striking aspects of the chapter that we need to note. Firstly, this chapter is atypical because instead of the usual problem of an enemy from without afflicting the people and God needing to raise up a deliverer, the enemy comes from within. Instead of Israel having to wage war with outsiders we see a case of civil war where Israelite wars against Israelite. Instead of the clear distinction of the people of God going about the will of God fighting the battles of God, Israel simply resembles the other nations around it. Secondly, the mention of God only appears four times in this chapter. There are some indirect references to what could be a god in Jotham's fable, one true reference by him; but the most significant references to God are all as theological commentary by the narrator which also give us the proper perspective to interpret this chapter. V23, 'And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech.' V56-57, '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.' You will notice that the name of God is not capitalized, the comment has been made that the avoidance of God's covenant name to a more generic reference to God may be deliberate on the part of the narrator to reinforce the state of affairs. These verses which mention God but only from the narrators perspective are our guide into this chapter. God looks absent, the project of Israel inheriting the land looks like it has failed; worship is corrupted, Israel is Canaanized, the people are no longer about the Lord's business. Where is God, what of His promises, what

about justice? This chapter answers these questions in the typically biblical way. God may be silent but He is not absent; sin may appear to be flourishing but not outside God's sovereign and just purposes; sin may look like it is winning the day, but God will have the final word. Right now we may feel like Jotham or some of the other people that would have been on the ground in this chapter, we need to remember the narrator's perspective, the analysis offered by God's word when evil seems to be flourishing. We will look at this chapter in 2 parts, Abimelech's rise and his fall.

The rise

V1-2, '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." Abimelech goes to his mother's relatives who live in Shechem. Shechem was likely an important place because it was where God made the promise to Abraham that his offspring would inhabit the land, Gen. 12:6-7; and the place where Israel first worshipped under Joshua after crossing the Jordan Josh. 8:30-35. Abimelech hypocritically makes his appeal to his relatives on the basis of family, if this truly mattered he would not murder his other family. Maybe because it was better to have one of your own rule you, and maybe because the taxes would be less to support one person instead of 70 the people of Shechem went along with Abimelech. V3-4, 'And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him.' We see that the hearts of the Shechemites were inclined to follow him. We cannot help but think about the qualifications of leaders and what sort of leaders it is that we should want. If a man came to you and said, vote for me as president and I will assassinate the competition, is this the sort of ruler you would want? In a section where we are wanting to pay attention to how God is present and sovereign over evil we must not miss this reference to their hearts doing what they wanted. They freely pursued their own evil and we will see to their own judgement. God's judgment as a form of passive allowance handing us over to our own hearts is seen here. It looks like God not caring, God doing nothing, but God doing nothing to restrain our sin is a scary judgement. We can see how idolatrous the people are as these leaders are also associated with the worship of Baal-berith and take money from the temple as payment for the assassins. V5, '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.' This verse paints a very dark picture. A stone typically used for slaughtering cows is used to kill 69 of Gideon's 70 sons. This means that it was not a surprise attack and everyone was killed suddenly in a panic but a cold drawn out slaughter one by one. And so Abimelech paves his way to being king, v6, '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.' Pillars were often used in Baal worship.

V7, 'When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you.' Jotham Gideon's only remaining son hears about this coronation and makes his response. Here is a man who is powerless but who

speaks and whose words will prove to be prophetic. I am not sure we could hold Jotham up as the saint in this picture, he was after all of Gideon's 70 sons and his household was not faithful in worshipping God. His name means YHWH is perfect/honest. But his fable speaks of gods not YHWH. It is not clear whether he is a good guy or just an unwitting instrument in this scene. He does remind us however how our position as Christians in an unbelieving world often looks. There we are persecuted, in the minority, having no power but words, and those words look like we are shouting into the wind, but by the power and working of God are instruments in His hand to accomplish His will.

Jotham tells a fable, a fable is a story where a plant or animal has human characteristics towards a moral end. We see the trees, the people of Shechem seeking someone to be a king over them. V8-15, 'The 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.' The olive tree, the fig tree and the grape vine were all native to Israel, and they were all too busy being useful and serving to become a king. The bramble was good for nothing but as kindling. It is a humorous picture of the bramble inviting the trees into its shade. But this reveals the irrationality driving the wicked in this chapter. The leaders of Shechem were established and had power, Abimelech only had ambition and a willingness to kill. From a political economic point of view they were basically hiring a hit man who brought nothing to the table but the removal of someone not a relative ruling over them. The friends we choose, the groups we identify with, pointless selfish actions; when we are in sin and God lets us go our own way, we do irrational things. Jotham speaks about fire coming out of the bramble to devour the trees, this will prove prophetic.

V16-21, Jotham spells out the wickedness of what has happened and says, if you have acted in good faith in participating in what has happened, fine. But if not, may you devour each other. "Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved— ¹⁷ for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, ¹⁸ and you have risen up against my father's house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative — ¹⁹ 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." ²¹ And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.'

The fall

An ominous note is struck as the plot unfolds, v22-24, 'Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³ And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. That the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers.' Those three years where things looked bad and evil looked like it was flourishing; those three years here Jotham lived with the injustice of what had been done to his family hanging over him everyday. Here we see God was working. How does God work? God sent an evil spirit. This is likely a demon that God allowed to affect this situation stirring up hatred and distrust. One of the characteristics of God's providence over evil is that God allows evil to be itself as evil is used to punish evil. There is no violation of the will of creature, no bypassing of secondary means, the evil person does all that is in their heart, yet while carrying out the holy and just purposes of God's will. In this instance God sought the judgement of Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. We see that the leaders in Shechem undermined Abimelech's reign by encouraging crime, v25, 'And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to Abimelech.'

A new character enters onto the stage, Gaal, a full blooded Shechemite not a half-blood like Abimelech. He becomes a crowd favorite. They say that what you win them with is what you win them to, well Shechem had been won with loyalty to blood, and so here they are following Abimelech's blood doctrine, but this time following a full shechemite, v26-29, 'And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. ²⁷ And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards and trod them and held a festival; and they went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. ²⁸ And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "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.' Once again a sinner is given full sail and his pride uses his tongue to dig a grave for himself.

Zebul who was included in the drunken slander in v28 hears about what was said and decides to tell Abimelech and comes up with a plan to overthrow Gaal. In v30-33, we see Zebul encouraging Abimelech to storm the city to provoke Gaal to meet them head on, but set up some hidden reinforcements to ambush them. In v34-41 we have a very detailed retelling of the event as deception and baiting are used to goad Gaal into doing what he said, attacking Abimelech. Gaal leads the leaders of the city out to fight and are defeated. In v42-45 we see that the people of the city still want to fight so Abimelech defeats them and destroys the city except the tower, sowing it with salt. V46-49 fulfill the prophecy where fire will come out of the bramble to punish the people of Shechem, 'When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. ⁴⁷ Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸ And Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. 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.'

It all could have ended there and Abimelech could have lived, but we see that he does not stop. With no provocation he decides to attack Thebez. V50-55, 'Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. ⁵¹ But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city fled to it and shut themselves in, and they went up to the roof of the tower. ⁵² And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³ And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ Then he called quickly to the young man his armor-bearer and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him.' " And his young man thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.' The most important verses in this chapter are the final verses. They tell us why everything happened the way that it did. It is only when we get to the end that the various details become intelligible, v56-57, '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.'

How does this chapter help us?

Firstly, it reminds us that God is absent when we think that the flourishing of evil is a sign of His absence or non-existence.

Secondly, it shows us a little of the mechanisms of how God is sovereign even when evil is flourishing. God hands sinners over to their desires and they bring punishment upon themselves. We see the agency of those who pursue evil is upheld but God's sovereign purposes are done.

Thirdly, we are reminded that we need the word of God to give us the interpretation of our situation because sometimes from where we are sitting it doesn't make any sense.

Fourthly, we are shown that in the end evil will be punished even though right now it seems to be winning.

Fifthly, I think there is a deliberate pointing to Christ in this darkest of chapters. When the evil man has his head crushed as the result of a woman, what does that remind us of? Gen. 3:15, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' We can't help but be reminded of this promise. We see the weak overcoming the strong.