

Thoughts From Other Minds:

Though Gideon refused the title of king, he seems not to have vanquished the temptation. In retirement, his household exhibited all the indulgence of a developing dynasty, with his many wives and seventy sons. In addition, there is the one son of his concubine, Abimelech, who will prove, as history has done so often, that the illegitimate sons of princes make the best usurpers.

Parallel to this kingship theme runs that of Israel's growing idolatry. Again, it is partly Gideon's responsibility, through his setting-up of the golden ephod in Ophrah (8:27-33). If their deliverer encourages the people to prostitute themselves in superstitious idolatry at an unauthorized shrine (8:27), then perhaps we should not be surprised to find a temple in existence in Shechem dedicated to a pagan deity, Baal-Berith - "lord of the covenant" (9:4).

The provocation to the Lord is as horrifying as it is tragic. ... At Shechem generations before, the living God had renewed his own covenant commitment to Joshua and the people of Israel, ... (see Josh. 8:30-35). And it was here at the end of his life that the people answered Joshua's challenge, "We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God" Josh. 24:18). To build a shrine to Baal, at Shechem of all places, was to be guilty of trampling the covenant grace of God under their feet and provoking the God of the covenant to rise up in judgment, to defend His holy name and honour.

The theological significance of chapter 9 is to teach the doctrine of divine retribution ... Twice in the chapter the point is made. In verses 23-24, "God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. . . . that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech. . . ." ... in verses 56-57: "Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech ... and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads. . . ." ... Israel may turn her back on the Lord, but ... God ... loves them too much and too persistently to allow them to continue in their sin unchecked. ...

There is a recurring biblical logic about this. If people choose deliberately to live without reference to God, then God may well leave them to their own devices. It is the same chilling possibility to which Paul alludes in the opening chapter of Romans. Three times he tells us that when human beings chose to worship the created order rather than the Creator, "God gave them up" (Rom. 1:24, 26,28). It is as though God says, "You can have what you want, but there will be consequences."

A generation that is obsessed with sexual gratification reaps a harvest of devastating abortion and divorce rates, incest and child abuse and an AIDS epidemic, on a world-wide scale. God is allowing sin to work itself out. Hell itself is the end of the road. If the whole of life is spent refusing and denying God, rebelling against His laws and distancing oneself from Him as much as possible, why should we expect God to reverse that process, after death?

David Jackman, *The Preacher's Commentary, Judges/Ruth*, pp. 145-146.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

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Sermon: "Abimelech – God's judgment on self-made kingship" (text: Judges 8:33-10:5)

Scripture: Judges 8:29-9:21, 9:22-10:5

Sermon Notes

Introduction: People say 'How can judges, with all its violence, brutality, war and murder be part of a book about God?' We say that description is not prescription; that what happened does not mean that it was good, or that we should do likewise.

Some say 'But didn't God tell the Israelites to devote the Canaanites to complete destruction, and didn't they do it?' We say yes—but as an act of judgment for their wickedness; when their iniquity was complete (cf. Gen 15:16) God could have judged them by flood or fire, but he did so by the armies of Israel.

This is the key to Judges 9—it's about the judgment of God upon wickedness, not by flood or fire, but by evil; God used evil to bring about judgment on evil people who had done evil (vs. 23-24, 56-57).

1. Judgment deserved

In the wider context of Judges this is judgment on kingship that was not from him. The disorder violence brutality and wickedness in Judges was because there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (17:6 etc.).

So a king was needed—but the Lord was king over his people, and it followed that any human king must be the man of his choosing. Gideon was not that man; he refused kingship when Israel offered it to him (8:22-23). But he began to live like a king; he had many wives and a concubine, and a son, Abimelech, 'my father is king'.

Abimelech wanted to be king, and he became king as men often do, by grasping for power, by intrigue and murder. He appealed to the self-interest of the men of Shechem (9:2); not that Gideon's sons aspired to rule; it was a scare tactic; one king would be cheaper than seventy; a kinsman would be better than strangers.

This is the way of the world; the bloodshed was unfortunate, but necessary; better seventy dead than civil war; better a strong leader than rival leaders or no leader. But God judges murderers; besides, Abimelech was a self-made king, not a God chosen king! This was an act of treachery, and deserved judgment by the Lord.

2. Judgment promised

Jotham, the only son of Gideon to escape, announced God's judgment as a call to repentance, a fable of the trees, who foolishly asked the bramble, a worthless, useless good for nothing bush, to reign over them; the bramble invited them to take refuge in his shade, and threatened them with fire.

The bramble grows along the ground, and offers no shade, only thorns to tear those who get too close; but the danger was real, for in the heat of summer fire travels at great speed only the dry branches of the bramble. So it would be with Abimelech and the men of Shechem, who had not acted in good faith (vs. 19-20).

3. Judgment delivered

In spite of Jotham's curse and his crimes, Abimelech reigned over Israel three years—but God had not overlooked what had happened. We should never suppose that because God does not judge quickly that wickedness will not be punished; God gives sinners space to repent, and then, if not, he certainly punishes as deserved.

God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and through wickedness God's justice was done. This began with treachery against Abimelech by the men of Shechem; they attempted to undermine his authority (v. 25), and then they put their confidence in another, Gaal the son of Eber (v. 26).

After Gideon had died the people whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god (8:33); Gaal put himself forward as supporting the 'old' religion, and reminded them that Abimelech was son of Gideon, who had destroyed Baal's altar; he said if he were in charge, he would remove Abimelech by defeating him in battle.

Treachery was met with treachery; Zebul pretended friendship with Gaal, but turned on him; when Gaal had been defeated by Abimelech, Zebul drove him and his out of Shechem. Then Abimelech destroyed Shechem and its people—but at Thebez, a woman crushed his head with an upper millstone, and he died.

4. Judgment applied

That even evil serves God's good and holy purposes reminds us of the cross, the supreme example of his using evil for good (Acts 4:29). Knowing that evil is under the hand of our sovereign Lord, that it serves him, gives us a sure anchor of peace in our turbulent times, when evil appears to flourish unchecked.

Within Judges, this judgment is the death knell of self made kingship, of every king not chosen by God. When kings were appointed in Israel, they were men chosen by God, Saul, then David. Judges 9 is the death knell to every king in God's kingdom but Jesus, for he is God's appointed king (Ps 2:1-5, cf. Acts 4:23-28).

Rejected and crucified, Jesus, in the overruling plan and purpose of God, became our Saviour from the wrath we deserve for having another god and another king. By nature and practice outside of faith in Jesus, the prince of this world is our leader, and we follow him, submitting to his authority (Eph 2:1-3).

God waits to be good to us if we will have Jesus as our king; he is good—even after Abimelech, he gave his people others to save them (10:1, 3). We may feel secure under another king, but if Jesus is not our king, then God will judge us for our sins. Jesus, who loved us and died for us, saves us by his reigning power.

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does a right understanding of God's command that Israel devote the Canaanites to destruction (Gen 15:16, Deut 7:1-11) connect with a right understanding of the big picture of Judges chapter 9? (esp. vs. 23-24, 56-57). How is this both a warning and an encouragement to us?
2. Why did Abimelech deserve God's judgment of for becoming king over Israel? How did he fall short of the scriptural requirement for king? (Deut 17:14-15).
3. How does Jotham's story about the trees appointing a king 'fit' the circumstances in which he told it? It is described (v. 57) as 'the curse of Jotham'; how is it a curse, and how did it 'come upon' the men of Shechem?
4. Reflect on the God sending an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem (v. 23—cf also 2 Chron 18:21-22). How might we find comfort in this?
5. How is our state by nature like that of those who made Abimelech king? (cf. Eph 2:1-3). Who is God's king, that we should make our king? How does he save us as our king (cf. Shorter Catechism Q. 26 and reference)? What will happen to us if we do not have the blessings of his saving reign?