

November 20, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
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GOD CAUSED THE WICKEDNESS TO RETURN Judges 9:22-57

Abimelech was Gideon's son through a concubine who lived in Shechem. After Gideon's death, Abimelech decided he wanted to be king over Israel. He stirred up the people of his hometown who gave him a lot of money which he used to hire some rabble to support him. With this support firmly in hand, Abimelech trekked up to Gideon's town of Ophrah where he killed Gideon's 70 sons, his own half brothers.

Now the wicked man could be king. But he never was. The people of Shechem might have considered him to be their king, but he was never the king of all Israel. Abimelech was apparently unaware that one of his 70 half brothers had escaped the massacre. But he did, and one day Jotham showed up on Mount Gerizim and told the citizens of Shechem a pointed story about how the trees of the forest chose a bramble to be their ruler. Jotham used the story to point out how the people had supported gross injustice and wickedness by supporting Abimelech. He concluded with this warning. *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 9:15).

At no point in that story did Jotham claim that God gave him the message, that he was a prophet, or that his story was inspired. But it was. This was one of those odd cases in life when God spoke a prophecy through a person who was not even aware such was the case. Within three years, this dire warning came to pass. By then it was too late for the people to change their minds. God became

actively involved in their lives and life was a disaster or worse for many of the people.

There are many lessons for us in this story. We will work our way through the details and along the way point out some important lessons God has taught in the story.

A Man Reaps What He Sows (vv.22-40).

In a turn of events that is hard for human wisdom to grasp, we learn that things for Abimelech changed quickly when God sent an evil spirit to stir up trouble (vv.22-25). The would-be king had a short reign. The text tells us that *Abimelech ruled over Israel three years* (v.22). Most of the judges' stories end with a statement about how long they served. Many of them served a long time, and most of the stories concluded with a long period of rest and peace.

Not so with Abimelech—if indeed God ever intended for him to be a deliverer. Up front we learn that his reign lasted only three years. From the Bible record, we discover there was no peace in sight during this man's reign. Furthermore, he was never really the king of Israel. God did not choose this man for the task. The people of Shechem chose him to be their king (9:6). In reality, he was more of a dictator, or tyrant, or a war lord.

To the human eye it probably appeared in that day that this so-called kingdom unraveled miraculously (vv.23-25). *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. 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* (vv.23-25).

The dream kingdom unraveled because God sent an evil spirit. This does not make God guilty of tempting people to sin as James 1:13 tells us can never be true about God. God did not create the evil spirit. It was already in existence. It did and continues to do evil all the time. We might call it one of Satan's angels or a demon. That being true, God had created this angel to serve and worship Him for

His own glory. But the angel sided with Satan in sin and was cast out of God's presence to go about doing evil along with Satan. Nevertheless, God still is the ultimate authority over Satan and demons. In this case, God simply opened the door for it to go to the people of Shechem and do its dirty work.

This is much the same as God giving Satan permission to put Job to the test. Satan was the agent of evil and temptation to sin. God simply used Satan's evil to accomplish His good of tempering Job's righteousness.

This time, God sent the evil spirit to the people in Shechem where it caused treachery (v.23b). Practically speaking, the work of the evil spirit probably came out as distrust, or envy, or jealousy, or a sudden dislike of Abimelech by the people. Maybe when the evidence began to arise Abimelech thought, "What in the world? Where did that come from? What is wrong with these people?"

Sometimes when we have difficulty trying to figure out how a relationship soured, we need to think like David did when Shemei cursed David and threw dirt and stones at him. Abishai desired to protect his king and requested permission to take off the guy's head with his sword. But David responded: "*If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'*" (2 Samuel 16:10).

Because the spirit was satanic in origin, it would be divisive and cause conflict. We are wise to remember that some of the most obvious traits of the natural sinful condition of people are well stated in Paul's letter to the Romans. *They use their tongues to deceive (v.13); The venom of asps is under their lips (v.14); Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness (v.14); Their feet are swift to shed blood (v.15); In their paths are ruin and misery (v.16); The way of peace they have not known (v.17), (Romans 3:13-17).* More ideas are found in Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians. Sins like *enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions (Galatians 5:20)* will cause conflict.

When the evil spirit went to work, peace and cooperation between the people of Shechem and Abimelech was impossible! And so also, when the traits of sin are at work through the desires of our flesh, discord and conflict will be the rule. But in this case, conflict was not just a normal coincidence. It was supernatural, authored by

God. The treachery was payback for the violence Abimelech had done (v.24). God did not forget what Abimelech had done to his brothers.

An important lesson for us to learn or to remember here is that God knows and God repays. God's Word warns us, *Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Galatians 6:7).* And so, God held Abimelech responsible (see the words, *their blood be laid on Abimelech*) for his brothers' death. The situation was much like the first murder in which God called Cain into account for Abel's death. And God also held the people of Shechem responsible – those who encouraged Abimelech's evil.

Here is another lesson from the text. To encourage others to do evil brings as much guilt as doing evil. Speaking about people (even religious people) who are controlled by sinful desires God warned, *Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things (Romans 1:32-2:1).*

A second lesson that goes right along with this one is that for a person to be complicit in another person's sin is to be just as guilty. God told Ezekiel, *Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me (Ezekiel 3:17).* We are not supposed to blindly let people with whom we have influence live in sin. We are supposed to expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11).

The God-sent treachery was manifested as mutiny (v.25). *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 (v.25).* As far as we can tell from this story, the leaders of Shechem authorized men to sit at the mountain pass on the road through Shechem to ambush people. Those "guards of the pass" robbed merchants who were traveling through central Israel. They probably robbed people who were taking tribute to Abimelech. That idea comes from the words telling us that this action was *against him*. We assume "him" was Abimelech. Either way, ambush and robbery outside the "king's" city was a slam against his administration.

Then, to make matters even worse, a guy named Gaal showed up and acted a lot like Abimelech (vv.26-35). The new guy in town made a familiar offer to the people. We are not sure who Gaal was and where he came from. We do know from the story that *Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him (v.26).*

It seems that right away after his arrival, the evil spirit was using the man to sow discord among the people against their chosen leader. *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 (v.27).* No one, including Gaal, would suspect that this reviling of Abimelech and this switching of confidence from Abimelech to Gaal was supernatural. Probably the man just appeared to be sharp, funny, attractive, smart, and a good leader. Like the shrewdness of Absalom, satanic sowing of discord is convincing in any age, including ours.

The new guy in town offered virtually the same offer Abimelech had sold to the people of Shechem three years earlier. *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? Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out'" (vv.28-29).*

Notice that Gaal did not come right out and admit that he was there to replace Abimelech. He simply expressed his wishes. Having already pointed out Abimelech's deficiencies (*they reviled Abimelech, v.27*), now Gaal offered a better choice. He explained to the gullible people that it would be far better to serve the sons of the founder of Shechem (Hamor) than to serve the son of concubine whose dead father was from Ophrah. That is virtually point for point what Abimelech had offered the people. Three years earlier Abimelech had offered that it was better for the people to serve the "home town boy" instead of the sons down in Ophrah.

Not everyone in town was swayed by Gaal the interloper. Apparently, this fellow named Zebul was Abimelech's representative in town. *When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled (v.30).* Hearing the rumblings

against Abimelech and hearing this new fellow's offer, Zebul sent a warning to his boss. *And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, "Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you" (v.31).*

Zebul advised Abimelech regarding the most effective means to stop the mutiny. *"Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do."* So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies (vv.32-34). Now there was going to be a very real and very damaging fight between the ruler and the people who had made him the ruler. This sounds so much like so many local churches across America.

In God's planning the time had come for Gaal to eat his boastful words (vv.35-40). Sometimes the approaching storm is obvious, as was the case for the interloper. The braggart saw his whipping coming when *Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, and Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush (v.35).* It is likely that Gaal's response was not positive. *And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops!" And Zebul said to him, "You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men."* Gaal spoke again and said, *"Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the Diviners' Oak" (vv.36-37).* It does not sound like Gaal thought these people were arriving to crown him king. It sounds more like he was a bit concerned.

This is the picture of a person who has been living in sin, been warned to abandon that sin, but has chosen to snub God and good advice. Then one day he goes to work, where he has been sowing discord, and he receives a note in which the president of the company wants to talk to him in his office immediately. If the man has any sense at all, he is going to walk to the office in fear and trepidation.

When God sends retribution, it is a little late to repent. *Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your mouth now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the people whom*

you despised? Go out now and fight with them.” And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate (vv.38-40). Gaal could have acknowledged his sin against the ruler and could have told the people who he influenced against the ruler that he had been wrong. But that didn’t fit his plan. Now his words came back to haunt him. In fact, Gaal could have surrendered at the last minute. He and the people chose to fight.

The Wages of Sin is Death (vv.41-57).

Fire came out from the bramble (vv.41-49). At this point it is good for us to stop and remember Jotham’s prediction. He warned the people of Shechem, *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. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo (Judges 9:19-20a)*. In spite of Jotham’s warning, the people had chosen to take refuge in the bramble’s shade for three years. Now things had changed, they did not want his shade any longer. Would fire come out of the bramble?

Fire came out of the bramble. First, the bramble ruler and his people got rid of the troublemaker. *And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem (v.41)*. Now everyone could get back to normal life. Everything was fine, right? No, the people of Shechem had sided against their ruler, reviled him, and robbed citizens of money that was supposed to be his.

It seems clear from the story that there was no sign of repentance. That brings us to another important lesson. When there is repentance, there is fruit or evidence of repentance. John the baptizer told the hypocritical Pharisees to *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8)*. What does that look like? Isaiah explained it. *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the*

widow’s cause (Isaiah 1:16-17). Repentance always looks like a change of lifestyle.

Instead of repenting, the folks in Shechem went out to work like any other day. *On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told (v.42)*. Maybe the lack of repentance was also the work of the evil spirit. Because there was no repentance, the bramble burned them. Abimelech thoroughly destroyed the city of Shechem. *He took his people and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them. Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the field and killed them. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and killed the people who were in it, and he razed the city and sowed it with salt (vv.43-45)*.

Having subdued the main part of the city, Abimelech and his army moved on to the fortified part of the city where the leaders had taken refuge. *When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together (vv.46-47)*. The text reveals that the fearful people sought shelter in the stronghold connected to the temple of their false god. It appears that this was some kind of basement shelter. The Hebrew word for **stronghold** speaks of a cave or pit which makes us think of a bomb shelter or tornado shelter. That might explain Abimelech’s next move.

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.” 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 (vv.48-49). End of problem. Completion of Jotham’s prediction. Well, not entirely.

The bramble was cut down as well (vv.50-57). Again we do well to remember the second part of Jotham's prediction: "*And let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech*" (Judges 9:20b). Not taking into consideration what Jotham had said, Abimelech concluded that if fire worked once, surely it would work twice. *Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. 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. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire* (vv.50-52).

When God is controlling the circumstances, mere humans cannot guarantee the results. Thinking he was invincible, the bramble was burned up. The proud and boastful ruler died shamefully. *And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. 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 (vv.53-54).

In ancient times it was always a defeat for a warrior to be killed. For a warrior to be killed by a woman in that culture was an embarrassing defeat. At this point, Abimelech's closest associates and friends were probably trying to grasp how everything had unraveled so suddenly. His defeat was so unexpected. Especially hard to take was the ruler's defeat by someone as unexpected as a woman with the equivalence of a small kitchen appliance. How can such unbelievable things happen?

The defeat of the would-be ruler was God's work. When the people who followed Abimelech saw that he was defeated, they rioted in the streets . . . or maybe not. *And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home* (v.56). Mature men understand defeat and respond like adults. Spoiled rich kids prefer to express their hurt and anger instead of dealing with it like adults. When God works, unexpected changes surprise the world.

God specifically extracted payment for Abimelech's wickedness. *Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers* (v.56).

God extracted payment for the wickedness of Shechem's citizens. *And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads* (v.57b). Obviously, God had given Jotham the words to speak even though he was likely unaware of it. *And upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal* (v.57b).

We often say that God is in control. That is true. He is. But still we are sometimes surprised when God brings to pass the promises and the warnings of His Word. That a sinner reaps the fruit of the sin he or she sows is God's law. Sometimes we might fear that God has forgotten that He established that law. However one lesson we learn through observing God's work is this: "The wheels of God's wrath might grind slowly, but they grind mighty fine." Abimelech kind of people and Shechem kind of people might appear to have escaped payment for their wickedness. However, we must not forget that the eternal Judge has the final say in the end. God's law stands fast. Because that is true, our best response is to confess sin to Him, repent quickly, and stay in fellowship with Him.