

I must confess, I was not overly excited about studying the book of Judges. If I'm perfectly honest, it is far easier for me to find beauty, truth, and meaning in principles and ideas rather than history. To me, in my fleshly moments, the Old Testament is some sort of obligatory record of events that had to happen in order for us to get to the "good stuff" of the Bible.

However, as usual, I found myself proven wrong, and found myself convicted, yet again, for taking so much of the bible and its beauty, worth, and value for granted. While I may not be the greatest history buff in the room (although I aspire to be), I love a compelling narrative. And what we have found, over and over again in the book of Judges, are not only great stories, but also records that are ripe with refreshing, albeit tragic, humanity.

No one can argue, in their most honest moments, that the book of Judges is not relatable. We may not have murdered, but we have certainly hated with murderous passion. We may not have bowed at the feet of a carved image, but we have taken the wooden planks of opportunity, blessing, and wealth, and instead of using them to build and cultivate have used them to carve out our varied idols of security, approval, and comfort. We live in a very different time, but we are here in the book of Judges, sinning and blundering just as our forefathers did, searching desperately for a good king to lead us.

Over the past few weeks we have looked at the life of Gideon. We have watched his life, from his miraculous and incredible calling, to his great conquests in the name of the Lord. Conversely, we focused last week, with our brother Cody, on Gideon's distracted and half-hearted finish. As we saw, it was hard for him to end his life well. After doing all in the name of the Lord, he ends his life coasting, taking payments from the people of Israel to form his ephod. After living in his house and fathering 70 sons with his many wives, he died in good old age. This seems like a somewhat tidy ending, but as we continue to read, we see a few other key facts about the end of Gideon's life.

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.

First, we see a swift change in the actions and intentions of Israel.

When I first wrote this note, I wrote that we saw a swift change in the heart of the nation of Israel. While the object of their affections may be somewhat new, we saw back in 8:27 Israel was easily swayed. We read that they whored after the ephod of Gideon. This incident aside, how often have we read in the book of Judges that Israel forgot the triumph of their Lord and served other gods? So it comes as no surprise that we read, as soon as Gideon died, that they turned again, quickly, to serve other gods, the Baals and Baal-berith. Just like a child, who longs for cookies on the counter, waits until their parents turn their backs before indulging themselves. Israel did not remember their God, who delivered them from all of their enemies on every side. Israel also turned from the family of Gideon. They did not honor them, they did not remember them with gladness, and they did not respect them. Instead of a nation full of gratitude and glad remembrance, we see neglect and pursuit of personal gain marking the people of God.

Second, we note the birth of Abimelech.

Gideon fathered seventy sons with his many wives, but one of his sons was born to a concubine from the nearby town of Shechem. We know very little about his upbringing as recorded in Scripture, but we are able to note a few things in this context.

1. Abimelech was born into the lawlessness of idolatrous Israel. While God was likely shown to him, who knows what kinds of examples he had around him? Were any of his leaders of peers pointing him to God and his ways of peace?
2. Abimelech was born to Gideon, but not in the same way his other brothers were. Although they were brothers, Abimelech was born to a concubine, while his other brothers were born to wives of Gideon. Scripture doesn't tell us of any other siblings born in the context. Might this not have been a source of insecurity, loneliness, confusion?
3. Abimelech was born into a family disregarded. As we have seen, Israel did not honor Gideon's family and pursued their own desires. Our ESV translation says that they did not show steadfast love to the family of Gideon, but a more accurate translation of the original language would be to say that they were not treated with fairness.

A child born into idolatry, neglect, and dishonor, grows, but he grows crooked. Many of us have tasted this kind of upbringing. He grows from a child, and the gaping wounds scar over. The fears turn into rage, the questions turn into prejudices, and after years in the shadows, a plan of action is hatched. Israel lies dormant, still kingless and stumbling tipsy, filled to the brim with idolatry. Seeking support for his plan Abimelech returns to the land of his mother.

“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, “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.”

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.” And 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.”

Abimelech, seeing his opportunity, puts the crosshairs of his affection on the throne of Israel. If no one is to be appointed king, he ponders, then I will be king myself. He asked his kin from the nearby town: would you rather be ruled by seventy men, many of whom you don't know, or would you rather submit to me, one of your own blood, one who will consider your interests, one who will lend an ear, one who will provide for you? After some coaxing, their hearts bowed to Abimelech, and in short time they gave him the means and the support to carry out his plan. And his plan was treacherous. We read that he killed the seventy brothers with one stone, so that none were left to take the throne. The torment of his life he poured out on the seventy sons of his father, bringing them all down so that none stood in his path on the way to the throne of Israel. His victory complete, the leaders of Shechem came and appointed Abimelech king of Israel. His mission was complete - he would live in darkness and hiding no longer.

Word of the victory traveled, and it reached the years of an unsuspecting survivor - his name was Jotham and he was the youngest of Gideon's sons. He had escaped the carnage by hiding. Though marked by fear, the news of this step-brother's violent rise to royalty stirred him greatly. We read in Scripture that he stood atop a nearby mountain and cried aloud to those celebrating with the newly appointed king:

“Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ 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?’ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ 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.’

“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 — for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, 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— 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; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.” And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.

If Jotham's speech here is proof of anything, it is proof that the spirit of obedience and loyalty to God still exists in the nation of Israel, even if it is hiding in the fearful crevices of the youngest offspring.

Jotham addresses the great sin of his brother and his followers through a fable. We see here the people of Israel, represented by the trees searching for a king. They come to the "nobler" flora, asking if they will lead them. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine are unable, fully devoted to serving in their own good and right capacities: the olive tree's abundance honors God and man both, the fig tree produces good and sweet fruit, and the vine cheers both God and men. Desperate for someone to lead them, the trees turn to the lowly bramble, grown crooked and prickly.

At this point, Jotham questions their integrity with a question he asks not once, but twice: "If you acted in good faith and integrity in the appointing, then may you be blessed, but if not, may the judgement you deserve come down upon you." He reminds them of the ways in which his father Gideon was good to them, and lead them lovingly, a legacy forgotten completely amidst the whorings of their desires. And how was this goodness repaid? Though the slaughtering of all but two of his sons, all for the sake of having a king to rule them.

Having laid his conviction and spoken on behalf of the Lord, Jotham flees, fearing for his own life. His words, while bravely spoken, could not be heard over the hearts beating wickedly with greedy madness, anxious for the dawn of the reign of their new king.

For three years, Abimelech reigned as king... Scripture tells us nothing of this time. Was it fruitful? Who was worshipped? What was remembered, what was forgotten?

We read on...

...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.

After three years of kingship, there is trouble in paradise. God himself places a spirit of disagreement in between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, the very men who appointed him king. In time, they placed an ambush against him. Imagine with me the feelings of insecurity and anger rising up again in Abimelech. The very people who believed in him, supported him from the start, and breathed life into his desires now found reasons to disagree, and so harshly that they kept him at bay with an ambush.

And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. 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. 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.'"

A visitor comes to town, one who has history in the true lineage of Shechem. Gaal, the son of Ebed, arrives in Shechem, along with his relatives, and not long after doing so, the leaders of Shechem put their trust in him. With their newfound deliverer and confidant, they celebrate with feasting and drink, reviling the leader Abimelech, in whom they had once placed all of their hope. Gaal beseeches the leaders of Shechem to denounce Abimelech and serve him, a true son of Shechem. If he were king, Gaal promises, he would remove Abimelech by force, and even goes so far as to invite the imaginary Abimelech to war with his army.

In the flickering shadows of the firelight and feast stands a man named Zebul, another ruler of Shechem. While his coleaders laugh in delight and the hope of a new beginning, he is kindled to anger by the treason against Abimelech. Following his loyalties, he reports what he has heard to Abimelech in secret, warning him:

“Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. 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.”

While the majority delights, the remnant plots revenge and the securing of their hard fought kingdom. As the night wanes on, Abimelech gathers his troops to take back the throne. We read on...

And 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. 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.” 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. And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.

On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. 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.

Here we see a clash that no one thought would happen. Abimelech, once moved in spirit to grab the throne of Israel, was supported wholeheartedly by the leaders of Shechem, seen as a mighty deliverer for their causes. Men who were once brought together with hugs of affirmation are now brought together with gritted teeth, the flashing and clashing of swords. And Abimelech's revenge consumes him: he leaves many wounded, and Zebul chases out Gaal and his family, the man who once spoke so bravely against Abimelech. He doesn't stop here: he kills the city who continues to rise against him. We don't know how many, but razing the city with salt symbolized its transformation into a desolate wasteland. Abimelech's message is clear: he intended for Schechem, and all the inhabitants within, to be no more.

What has happened to this man?

Imagine the insecurity, the doubt, the hurt that must have filled him on that mountain. He must have heard of the feasting, the reviling of his name. As horrible as his actions are, as bloody his intentions... can't we at least *relate* to this hurt? This anger? This shame? Have we not done this to others in our hearts? With our words?

Sometimes we get so angry that we begin to lash our further.
We read on...

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. 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.

Blind with rage and revenge, Abimelech's stampede continues.

The leaders of Shechem, now fearing his might and onslaught, cower up in the Tower of Schechem. Here Abimelech sees his opportunity for revenge
Remember the story of the trees? Earlier on in the story

The brushwood/the bramble that they chose are aiding in their very destruction, symbolic of the choice they made in Abimelech.

And they all perished. The city no more...

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. 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. And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.

The city of Shechem decimated by the work of his hand, Abimelech turned his sights to the nearby Thebez

Scripture is not clear at this point what Abimelech's intentions were. Was he just going to continue forever? Was the hurt so deep that he would just keep marching on, conquering endlessly?

No matter his intentions, his might, and the validity of his former victories, Abimelech met his match. However, his defeat did not come at the hand of a king or a warrior, but at the hand of a civilian, a "certain woman" as scripture tells us. She threw an upper millstone (see picture) which crushed his skull.

There he lay, defeated, soul and body crushed in defeat. And what does he do in this moment? Does he repent. Does he express remorse? Does he cry out to the God of his youth?

No...

Kill me, so that it isn't remembered that a woman killed me.

Even at the very end, his last words were about HIS legacy

And just like his father, Gideon, lost all followers upon his death, so did Abimelech's followers leave him after his death. No celebration of his legacy, no appreciation of who he was, just a return back to their old ways.

Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. 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.

That's the end of the story... Merry Christmas!

What is our application in all of this madness?

1. The dire importance of remembering God.

We must understand this act of remembering.

It is not simply acknowledgement, or remembering in the sense that we are accustomed to. It is a recollection, a memorial, a pillar, a reorientation.

As is often true in judges, we are not the victims in this story. We are Abimelech.

We are hurt, maligned, mistreated, and disrespected, and instead of remembering God, remembering his goodness, remembering that he too suffered just as we have, we gun for the position of security, comfort, or approval that we believe will fill the void in our hearts and lives.

Hebrews 2:14-18

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

We do not worship a God who does not expect us to endure something he has not endured himself.

In your hard moments, remember him, because your thoughts, your actions depend on it far more than you know.

We take time in personal worship, in prayer, corporate remembrance.

2. Justice belongs to the Lord, and him alone.

Romans 12:19-21

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Jotham, Abimelech's baby brother, reminded him with all of his effort that the Lord has seen the great evil he and the other leaders of Shechem had done, and had warned him of the consequences, but his warning was ignored.

And God did bring the promised judgement: the people of Shechem and Abimelech turned against each other and consumed each other. Their evil was repaid.

We as the people of God should strive for justice. We should be active in making sure that people are treated equally the way God sees them. We should join hands with those who need help and fight for their equality. We should speak on behalf of those who can't speak for themselves. But when our emotions, our anger, begin to boil over into desires for revenge, this is when these desires need to be taken to the Lord. Do not repay, he says. By angry, and do not sin, he says. We as fallen people fall on either side of the spectrum. We either seek to repay ourselves through violence, harsh words, or otherwise, or we sit back in indifference. We see both sins on display in this account - may we strive, seek, and pray for the holy balance.

3. Although his people are fallen, God is still faithful

After forsaking God immediately after Gideon's death, an unfit king forced himself into position as head of Israel. God dealt with his treachery and spared Israel further misery by removing him from position.

Jesus as king. born is the king of Israel.

we the wayward need a good and right king.