

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Judges 9 as we continue our study through the book of Judges.

We've told you (I know, more than once) that Judges, from a chronological standpoint, just follows the book of Joshua. But whereas Joshua is a twenty-five year time span, this book is about 340 years. It takes us all the way from the death of Joshua to the birth of the first king in Israel, Saul. But it isn't a happy book. There're a lot of good lessons to be learned, certainly. But it is a very depressing book because we find a people of God who, through generation after generation, just kind of do their own thing. And, as such, there were years of neglect and waste. There are fifteen leaders (they're not all judges; the one we're going to look at tonight certainly is not) who the LORD will use during these generations that arise after Joshua's death.

The problem, certainly - and one of the big problems coming out of this second generation - is that no one passed along their relationship with God. So even the generation right after Joshua found a group of folks who didn't know the LORD Himself, personally, and they weren't very aware of His power. Joshua's group was. They were not. And, as a result, because they didn't pass that along, you find this habit that is indicative of the nation away from God that they go from a good time of rest to rebellion - ultimately with the people they left in the land (the idolaters and all) - to a time when God pays them for going in that direction. The retribution comes because the LORD is interested in being close. So He puts fire under their feet. He shows them the difficulty of a life like that. And at some point - sometimes quickly, sometimes very slowly - they come back to the LORD. They repent of their sin. They admit that He's right, and then the LORD sends them a deliverer, a judge. There's repentance, there's restoration, rest settles in again for twenty years, thirty years, forty years, sometimes two generations, and then it's right back to the same kind of thing. And so it's a tough book to read, but it is one that, unfortunately, can be repeated in our lives as well. God is gracious, but the Bible says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31), and that's because God doesn't just let you lay there. He really does want to move you forward and is interested that you do well.

For the last couple of weeks, we've looked at chapters 6, 7 and 8 through the life of Gideon. He was the fifth judge. We saw a great lesson - how God prepares weak people to do His bidding. Gideon, early on, was a very humble kid. He was weak in his faith. God did everything He could to build up his faith. When he needed proof, God gave it to him. When he was growing, the LORD put him to the test and asked him to do certain things, and yet He continued to help him even when he hesitated. Great victory over a very predominant threat (the Midianites, through chapter 7). And then, unfortunately, later on in his life Gideon kind of fell off the wagon spiritually. He didn't finish very well. He did so well that the people asked if he and his children could be their king, and he said, "No. God wants to be your King. Not me." And so that was the way he left it. But he said, "But I would like to take up an offering," and he did. Made a huge statue of something - maybe to honor himself. We don't know. But it was tons of gold, and it caused his house to stumble; it caused Israel to stumble. And a man that, early on, was such a help to get them back on their feet turned out with a great lapse of faith towards the end of his life.

So tonight we pick up one chapter, and it's only one, and this guy's not a guy I like very well, but we've got to learn from Abimelech. He was one of the sons of Gideon. His name means "my father is king." Now you think about that. They came to Gideon and said, "Be our king, you and your sons." He said, "Oh, no. God wants to be your King." And then he has a son, and he names him "my father is a king." So he's reaching a little bit, isn't he, for glory. And yet the idol he made, like I said (at the end of chapter 8), is to honor himself.

The background of our chapter tonight begins in verse 29 of the previous chapter, where it says, "Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem" (that's Canaanite land) "also bore him a son, whose name he called" ('my father is king') "Abimelech. Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel." So that's the setting. Jerubbaal means "may Baal contend for himself." It was a name that his dad had given to Gideon when he had come, at

the direction of the LORD, and wiped out that Baal altar in his dad's backyard. You remember? And the men of the city came and said, "Send your boy out here. He destroyed our gods," and dad's eyes were opened, and he said, "Well, wait a minute. Why does a god need your protection? Let him fight for himself. Let him contend for himself." And he changed the name of his boy to Jerubbaal, and it is in this rest of this chapter because all of the Jerubbaal followers who make themselves prominent in this chapter go the same way of Baal - they can't protect themselves. They ultimately have to answer to the LORD, and so you'll find Gideon's name, but it is used (that Jerubbaal name) throughout chapter 9. So, Gideon has seventy kids from a lot of different wives. That's a fairly good flaw. Right? And weakness. And then he has another son - a number seventy-one, if you will - with a concubine, a Canaanite woman who dwelt in Shechem. But it is this one son from this Canaanite woman that takes center stage tonight, not as a judge; and he's in your list (that we gave you) of judges because he ruled over the people at this time. So, you have them in order. But this isn't a guy that God raised up to help His people; this is a guy that raised himself up to help himself. And, like I said, he's a real creep, and I think we'll learn that.

Maybe the lesson of the chapter is - here's life in the midst of a nation that is far from God more often than not. Except for the periods when they're led well by godly folks in response to cries from the faithful few (and it isn't even always the whole nation), here's the way life is when everyone does whatever they want to do in their own eyes. So, this guy was not called by the LORD, and so you don't read, "And the judge died, and the people did evil, and then they suffered at the hands of so-and-so, and then they cried out, and the LORD brought them another judge." That's how it's kind of happened up until this point. But not now. So, this is the end for Gideon. But, because of the way he ended, and what his son (I think) saw in his life, he left these boys behind (at least this one) that was a great detriment and a stumbling block not only to his household but to the nation.

So verse 1 says this, "Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem," (or he went back to the house of his mother, if you will) "to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, 'Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: "What is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?" Remember that I am your own flesh and bone.' And his mother's brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, 'He is our brother.' "

Like I said, this guy was not the fellow that was chosen by God. This was a guy who really had an ambition to make a name for himself. He is distinct from all of the other judges by the fact that God did not choose him. There was no national repentance. It wasn't a response to the people finally saying, "Gosh, we're going in the wrong direction," which they were. But he wasn't a judge, like I said. You can write "creep" across the chapter if you want. He seeks power with extreme violence. He is very sinful in his ambition. He had the taste for the life of his dad's. And so here's one of the, I think for me, saddest chapters in one of the saddest books in the Bible. William Penn, years ago, wrote, "If we're not going to be ruled by God, then we're going to be ruled by tyrants." And here's a guy that, because the nation was unwilling to let God rule, really tasted that truism; that tyrants then come to the top.

I think about that in terms of our own nation tonight - that, if we continue to set the LORD aside, we'll be ruled by someone other than the LORD Himself. And God, as much as He wants to bless, calls us out. This was a time in Israel's history - 1380 to 1040 B.C. (so, 1400 years before Jesus) - where there was no leadership, no king, no counsel. "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." You'll read that very phrase in chapter 17:6 of this book; at the end of the book as well, chapter 21:25. Twice the LORD said this is the life that these folks, in this time, were leading. It's pure existentialism, which means that there're no absolutes. Everyone has their idea of how things should be. Everyone determines what's right. Everyone seeks to follow what they believe they should do at the time. David, in about 1000 B.C., wrote Psalm 11, and he wrote, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (verse 3) And the word "foundation" is the word, in Hebrew, for moral standards. The word is literally "underpinnings," "*shathah*." It means to hold up. If what holds up a society is gone, what are you left with? What can the righteous do? You know, it's kind of our way of life, and you see it reflected here. If you pull money out of your pocket and look at it, it'll say, "In God We Trust." But that's not true of us anymore - not as a nation. Or we might say, "Which God do we trust in?" In reality, I think we're not only not a Christian nation anymore, we've just simply redefined what a Christian means. Right? So we've decided that we can deify our way of life and choose what's important to us and leave God completely out of the picture, and that's just the way that we live. We didn't start that way. I wasn't a big history buff. I was big into biology and sciences, but the Mayflower Compact, which was written onboard a ship back in the 1600's, their initial statement was that they had come by the grace of God to this land "for the glory of God and for the advancement of our

Christian faith." That's what drove us, at least, initially. That was far different than what we have now. Even the Declaration of Independence talks about all men being equal (created equal, by the way, not evolved equally), endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So here we come, at least historically, into a time of Israel's history - God's people - to a time where the moral and spiritual underpinnings for the nation had all but been set aside, which allowed, then, the rise of a guy like Abimelech who literally could find support for the slaughter of seventy descendants of his father so that he could take the throne for himself. That's the same kind of climate that we find ourselves in. We redefine what being a Christian we call ourselves a Christian nation, but I think you'd be hard-pressed to find that, from a societal standpoint, you could make a list of things we are actually doing as Christians; not in the church, but in the nation itself.

So Jerubbaal, and that's why I said the name is used because that really is, "let Baal defend himself." And here comes Abimelech, and his proposal to his people - now Gideon was dead, and his thought was, "We need to replace him." And by the way, no judges have succession rights. You don't find that in the book of Judges. You do find that with kings. You don't find that with judges. God just hand-picked individuals. It didn't mean that their descendants would serve after them. So here comes Gideon's boy, Abimelech, who, though there is no right of familial succession, seeks to exploit the relationship he has with the Canaanites for his own benefit. So he goes to his mother's family, he goes to his mother's country. I don't doubt that, as an outcast of the family, being born to a prostitute or a courtesan, if you will, he was set aside from the other seventy guys. I'm sure there was some hatred back and forth and some isolation, if you will; maybe some mistreatment as well by the other seventy sons of Gideon. Gideon put this boy in a difficult place. But, at the same time, concubines were usually (at least in the Old Testament) owned by or used by the rich to show their power or their ownership. But they lived with their own families. They didn't live with their husbands. They lived with their own people and amongst their own families and just received, sometimes, visits, if you will, from the man of the house.

Shechem was a city that was right at the crossroads between the Via Maris (the Via Maris is the road along the coast of the Mediterranean) and the King's Highway, which was inland along the Jordan River. So there're these two very big roads that go north and south in Israel (there was at the time), and then there's this middle ground where it is intersected by the main road. And Shechem is on

that main trade route. Shechem was the place that God appeared to Abraham and said, "This land is going to be yours." It was a pretty important place in Israel's history. It was a place that Jacob moved. He bought some land. He dug a well. It turned out to be the same well that Jesus would sit at (in John 4) in Sychar (or in Shechem, if you will) and have a discussion with a Samaritan woman about who the Lord was; and He would share the gospel with her. It was the place Joshua brought the whole nation when he came into the land - to stand on those two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim (Joshua 8) and declare God's promises to those who would walk with Him and God's judgment to those who would not.

So here's Abimelech. He lives in Ophrah. And he goes thirty miles to Shechem where this concubine, his mother, lives with her family and makes them an offer based on blood and options. "Here's your choice. You've got me, and I'm on your side. We're like this - we're family. Or you've got those seventy sons, over there, of Gideon who really want to destroy us. Who would you rather rule over you? Many or one? What would you rather choose?" I guess, in principle, I would rather have a good leader than a bad committee. I don't know about you. I remember hearing, years ago, that old joke about a camel is just a horse put together by a committee. Nothing went in the right spot. So, Abimelech speaks to his Canaanite family in Shechem and gives them the choice between him and these seventy sons of Gideon. Now, mind you, no one had the right to the throne. Judges were chosen by God. But, "You want me or one of your own?" And the implication was, "You get favored status with me." It sounds like a line politicians still use. Right? "Just vote for me. I'll give you everything you want." Until you vote for them, and then they forgot.

Verse 3 tells us that it didn't take long for the family to decide he's the guy. "He's our brother." And "So they gave him," verse 4, "seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men;" (political committee) "and they followed him." So all the uncles thought this was a good idea. They even financed his campaign with money that had been given to their false god. Interesting, isn't it? They're going to donate false religious funding to be the murder of everyone else for their benefit. This really is Saddam Abimelech. Here is a guy with such lust for power, locked up in a false religious system, that he just knows no bounds to his wickedness. He's the Hitler and the Marcos and the Duvalier and the Gaddafi and Hussein and Arafat and Al-Assad and Khomeini - all of them wrapped up into one. These are men that come to power on the blood of many others, and they're able to do it without checks and balances.

They're self-seeking individuals. And you find that kind of climate in this time of Israel's history in the book of Judges. So unlike Moses or Samuel or Joshua, who denied themselves for the sake of others. So Abimelech gets money from the false god temple. He uses it to buy "worthless" men. The word "worthless" means devoid of moral character. The word "reckless" means pretty much what it does in English - impulsive or reactive. They weren't very much thinkers. And they gave to him seventy shekels of silver. Now that's not very much money, even in that time. But I think, from a symbolic standpoint, it was kind of like saying, "We'd rather give seventy shekels to you than give one to these other seventy boys, and we're voting for you."

Now notice the name of the place of the offering at the false temple - the name Baal-Berith. The words Baal-Berith translate "lord of the covenant" which, unfortunately, is now, here, taken by a false god thriving in the heart of the land of Israel that God had given to them, while twelve miles away from Shechem is Shiloh. And Shiloh is the place where God had put His name. It's where the children of Israel came to worship and to sacrifice. It was the only place they could offer sacrifice. And twelve miles away stood a tabernacle where God was known as the LORD of the Covenant (exact same name as assigned to this false god). And that happens a lot, doesn't it? The enemy just comes, and he tries to take and ascribe to his false deity that which we know about God. And so a little bit of truth when mixed with a lot of lies makes it look like the truth. And that's exactly what was going on here because they'd left these false gods in the land. If we let it percolate around us, Satan's going to take as much as he can get because his goal is to defeat you and the God that you serve and be recognized as god in the eyes of the people. That's exactly what is going on here with Abimelech. So he's got money from a false religious system. He's got people that are standing with him for ethnic and relational issues. They stand against God and His people. We can blame some of it, I guess, on Gideon's years of life after he had done well. But certainly he'd done a lot of good for Israel, too. The LORD marks that out - even marks his life and some of his choices in Hebrews 11:32 as ones of faith.

Verse 5 tells us, "Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed" (so he makes a thirty-mile trip) "his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself." So, "on one stone" would suggest in one place, ritualistically, barbarically, they took these men - threats to the throne, in his mind - and they killed them all in one place. Years ago it was Plato, the Greek philosopher, who wrote, "Might is

right." But I'll tell you what - might in the hands of a wicked man is not right. Right will take a backseat when wicked men rule. There's that Scripture in Proverbs 29:2, "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan." I think that's right. That's what you'll find here. When the righteous rule, then there's blessing for all. But when the wicked come into power, and I think you've seen that even in our day today - I might say to you, "Have you been groaning lately?" - it's because the wicked, when they rule. Well, here's this young man who sees sixty-nine of his brothers slaughtered by this Abimelech. He escapes with his life. He hides from the wicked men of Shechem who had come the thirty miles.

And we read, in verse 6, "And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem." So notice what they did. They wanted to make him king. No one called anyone king. "Who died and made you king?" But that's what he was after. So he escapes - this young man, Jotham - and then, in this place in Shechem, very well known, they go by the tree, and they declare - they do a little ceremony, and they say, "You are our king." You might want to write in the margin Genesis 12:6 because you will read (way back in Abraham's time) that, when Abraham passed through the land, he came to Shechem "as far as the terebinth tree" (which is mentioned here). "And the Canaanites lived in the land. And the LORD appeared to Abraham there and said to him" (next to this terebinth tree), " 'This land is yours. I'm going to give you this land.' And he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him." But here we have the same mention of the same terebinth tree at a monument or at a pillar, which was marked in Shechem. And I suspect that it might very well have been there all of this time to mark out that place where the LORD had made promises to Abraham.

We read, in verse 7, "Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them:" (these men of Shechem and Abimelech, down in the valley) " 'Listen to me, you men of Shechem, that God may listen to you! The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, "Reign over us!" But the olive tree said to them, "Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway over trees?" Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us!" But the fig tree said to them, "Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over trees?" Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us!" But the vine said to them, "Should I cease my new wine, which

cheers both God and men, and go to sway over trees?" Then all the trees said to the bramble, "You come and reign over us!" And the bramble said to the trees, "If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon!" ' ' " Now, understand this young guy goes up to the top of Mount Gerizim. It maybe is a fifteen-minute hike. It's very low. It overlooks the city. But, because it's positioned right across from Mount Ebal, there's a valley in between. And, like I said, when the children of Israel came into the land, they walked between these mountains. And from one, they would hear the blessings of God, and from the other, cursings of disobedience. And so it's in that same place. The acoustics are wonderful. And I think that Jotham wanted to call upon the LORD to deal with these guys, but he couldn't talk long. He'd have to speak and get out because they could run up and get him. He seems to have delivered his message and bailed. But he gives them this short little parable. And notice (from verse 7 down through verse 15 here) he personifies trees in his parable, and he brings up all of the important and fruitful trees in Israel - the ones that would give them oil for their lamps and make wine for their consumption. And so he speaks to the trees who just, all of them, say, "No, no, no, no." The olive tree, the fig tree, the vineyard, "We're supplying good things to God's people. We're not going to stop to rule or seek that position. We've found our place, and we're fruitful in the place that God has put us." And so they were busy serving others. And finally, notice the trees cried out to the bramble bush, the only thing that was left - a worthless kind of tumble weed found in abundance in the Samaritan hills. In fact, there are plenty of stories of the heat being so hot during the summer that, because these are dead bushes, they combust and actually burst into flames because of the heat. So these are not food sources. This is a dead weed kind of rolling along. And so the boy of Gideon's, Jotham, says, "Finally they come to you, and they call upon you to be their king," and you say, "Well, if you want to vote me in, I'll provide shelter for you. But, look, if you're not there legally or rightfully," Jotham says (at the end here in verse 15), "may fire come out of you and devour the cedars of Lebanon," these folks that have tried to take power, "and may you be destroyed by them." And so he ends by saying, to this low kind of growing weed - this tumble weed, this thorny bush that's dead, "You're the one, now, that's going to reign over us? You're dead to the things of God."

He gives the application in verse 16. He said, " 'Now therefore, if you have acted in truth and sincerity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done to him as he deserves - for my father

fought for you, risked his life, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian; but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and killed his seventy sons on one stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother - if then you have acted in truth and sincerity 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 from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and Beth Millo; and let fire come from the men of Shechem and from Beth Millo and devour Abimelech! And Jotham ran away and fled; and he went to Beer and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother." So he's the last guy left. He was the only one left. So the application, "If you've really been honest about this, you men of Shechem, then rejoice in your decision. If you've treated us horribly, if you've done this wickedly, in murdering my family, then may you destroy each other." That's really what his it's pretty specific, isn't it? And then Jotham hightails it out of there. He doesn't want to be caught.

Verse 22 is interesting because it says, "After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years, God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech." So put yourself in little Jotham's place - the one kid who's looking to the LORD, and he's cried out for God's judgment; and three years take place, and nothing happens. This guy literally gets away with murder. We always say, "Well, the LORD'll take care of it," but at some point, we go, "It'd be good if You could do it now." And I don't know how he could wait. Abimelech hadn't faced the consequences of his actions. We read three years. I'm sure that, for Jotham, it seemed like thirty years. God's not in a hurry. He'll have the last word. His judgment will prevail. His ways are beyond our finding out (Romans 11:33). But it took three years. Longfellow (I remember having to read Longfellow in school) once wrote that "the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind very fine." In other words, He gets to the bottom of it, doesn't He? So, in time, God's judgment now begins to come. And as we were paying attention, it is exactly the thing that this young man had cried out for prophetically. "If you guys are wicked, may you destroy each other." And then three years later, the LORD sends a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem who had financed him and supported him and stood by him and helped him hide out as he had done this heinous act. So, there was no retribution or responsibility seen for three years. But then God sent a spirit of ill will, and in Greek it reads "mutual mistrust." God put a dividing antagonism between Abimelech and the men that once supported him (of Shechem), and God began to stir up difficulty. I know sometimes we wonder how the LORD works, and, "I didn't

see what He did." But isn't it interesting that God gets credit here for stirring up animosity between two very hateful folks who've done some pretty awful things, and the LORD's using them to destroy each other while the righteous young man sits and watches from afar. So the spirit of ill will begins to work amongst these wicked men.

And the way that it worked, it says (verse 23) that "the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech." How did they do that? Verse 24, "that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers. And the men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech." So, here's the spirit of ill will. The men of Shechem who had helped Abimelech come to power now seek to use the place that he is ruling for themselves. They're wicked guys. They start to put people along the road, the crossroads. They begin to rob travelers. Abimelech gets a bad name. People are saying, "Don't go through his neck of the woods. It's not safe there." He begins to lose income, if you will. And they created this tension and mistrust between Abimelech and these men who had kind of propped him up that were now using him.

While that's going on and Abimelech (verse 25) hears about it, verse 26 tells us, "Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brothers and went over to Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him," this guy that kind of just showed up, if you will, this upstart, this vagabond kind of criminal. "So they went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and made merry. And they went into the house of their god and ate and drank," and they got together in their drunkenness, "and cursed Abimelech," the guy they elected last time. Verse 28, "Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, 'Who is Abimelech, and who is 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? If only this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech.' So he said to Abimelech, 'Increase your army and come out!' " ("Let's go at it together"). Verse 30, "When Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was aroused. And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, 'Take note! Gaal the son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem; and here they are, fortifying the city against you.' " Spirit of ill

will. God is at work. Sometimes you wonder where the LORD is? Look what He's doing.

Well here comes this, like I said, vagabond or this scoundrel, if you will. He arrives in Shechem. The people embrace his outward behavior. He brings drinks for everyone. He begins to curse whoever's over them and exalt himself. "If I was in charge, man, we could handle it." And then he begins to yell out loud, "Hey, have Abimelech show up, man. We'll work it out in the backyard or in the alley. Let's just meet together and find out who could be who." And one of the notable political figures at the time in Shechem was an officer named Zebul, and he happened to be working for Abimelech; and he's offended and goes and tells his boss and says, "Look, there's this loudmouth upstart, man. He's planning, he's laying for you. You'd better deal with it."

So we are told, in verse 34, "So Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies. When Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance to the city gate, Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from lying in wait. And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul," (this political figure who worked for Abimelech) " 'Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!' But Zebul said to him, 'You see the shadows of the mountains as if they were men.' " So he was buying them some time. Verse 37, "So Gaal spoke again and said, 'See, people are coming down from the center of the land, and another company is coming from the Diviner's Terebinth Tree.' The Zebul said to him, 'Where indeed is your mouth now,' " (big mouth) " 'with which you said, "Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?" Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out, if you will, and fight with them now.' " Go check out who he is! He'll show you who he is. Verse 39, "So Gaal went out, leading the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled from him; and many fell wounded, to the very entrance of the gate. Then Abimelech dwelt at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers, so that they would not dwell in Shechem. And it came about on the next day that the people went out into the field, and they told Abimelech" all that had taken place. So this guy is pushed to a fight. He wants to fight.

Abimelech comes to fight him, and in the mind of Abimelech, he's furious. He gets rid of this guy. But now he has to look at this. "Everyone in Shechem turned on me in a moment! I can't trust any of them!" So he's not about to leave quickly. He's already killed for this position. He doesn't mind killing the entire city, if

necessary, to maintain his power. And so he now intends to bring everything upon the city itself - its leaders and all of the people making choices.

And so we read, in verse 42, that the people came out of the city on the next day, and they spoke to him. "So he took his people, divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the field. And he looked, and there were the people, coming out of the city; and he rose against them and attacked them. Then Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city; and the other two companies rushed upon all who were in the fields and killed them. So Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people who were in it; and he demolished the city and sowed it with salt." Wow! This guy can't be stopped. The practice of the people in those days was that they would stay in the walls at night (it's safe), for protection. They would come out in the morning, into the neighboring fields, to do harvesting and work in the fields; and then they would come in again at night. They thought with Gaal taken out and the overthrow of the men of Shechem, that the roads were no longer being ambushed, you could go back to work, and they thought it was safe. What they didn't realize was Abimelech blamed them all. And so he and his loyal men waited, slaughtered the people, took the city, salted it so nothing would grow, and left everyone for dead. This in a country that it's God's people and God's land, and yet God is nowhere to be found. Sad.

Verse 46, "Now when all the men of the tower of Shechem had heard that, they entered the stronghold of the temple of the god Berith" (the lord of the covenant). "And it was told Abimelech that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together" (these are the big shots, now, in town; they were hiding in Washington, D.C.). "Then Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it and laid it on his shoulder; then he said to the people who were with him, 'What you have seen me do, make haste and do as I have done.' So each of the people likewise cut down his own bough and followed Abimelech, put them against the stronghold, and set the stronghold on fire above them, so that all the people of the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women." Terrorist, this guy.

Verse 50, "Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez" because, apparently, he thought this town (six miles away) also had something to do with the conspiracy. He wasn't done with his anger. So Abimelech went to Thebez,

he encamped against it "and took it. But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women - all the people of the city - fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower." Abimelech said to himself, "Well, I know how this works." Verse 52, "So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire. But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull." Kind of the end of him. "Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, 'Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, "A woman killed him." ' " (So the young man said, "Fine, here you go"). "So his young man thrust him through, and he died." So, live by the stone, die by the stone. That's what I'm thinkin'. He killed seventy people on one stone. You remember reading that? Now he got hit in the head by a stone. And look at the depth of his foolish pride. He's worried about being remembered as dying by the hands of a woman. Well guess what? It's written right here in the Bible! (Laughing) You can't hide it. As if this isn't enough, if you go forward to 2 Samuel 11:21, there is a question that the LORD is asking and speaking, and He said, " 'Who struck Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman?' " So there's even a quotation there, so he didn't get away with it. But here, in the picture, look what the LORD does in wiping out the enemy. One guy wiping out a whole group and city of people who are all enemies of God's people. So, inadvertently so, even as the people were not walking with God, God is still very good to protect them and to keep them from evil. But notice the evil that kind of destroys from within, doesn't it?

Verse 55, "And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed, every man to his place. Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers. And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal." So, in the end, both evil men of Shechem and Abimelech meet God's judgment. God will have His way sooner or later. With the same measure you measure out, it'll be measured to you again (Matthew 7:2b). But understand that this is the culture in which these things could take place.

By the time we get to chapter 10, notice it begins with the words, "After Abimelech there arose to save Israel." Not Abimelech. He didn't save anybody. But then God begins to raise up these folks that we know very little about: verses 1 and 2, a fellow that reigns for twenty-three years; verses 3, 4 and 5, another fellow that reigns for twenty-two years; and then we will find ourselves with

Jephthah for, really, the next couple of chapters before we spend five weeks with Samson, who I can't relate to at all. (Laughing)

Submitted by Maureen Dickson

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