

If you are a keen gardener, there are two types of problems you have to guard against to protect your plants - first, there are insect pests and adverse weather conditions (such as frost and extreme heat) which can destroy a plant from outside and then there is a disease which can destroy the plant from inside. Ruin can come from within as well as from without. And so it did not require a foreign invader (such as the Moabites, Canaanites or Midianites) to ravage and destroy Israel. So could Abimelech, the Destroyer of Israel, who arose from within Israel.

Abimelech was Gideon's son by his concubine, who lived in Shechem (8:31). This means that from his birth, he had been an outsider in his own family. Unlike Gideon's other 70 sons, he was illegitimate. He did not stand to inherit. As the story unfolds, we see a man who feels that whatever he will get out of life, he will have to get for himself - and who is utterly determined to get whatever he can. Abimelech came from Shechem which was a place of huge importance in Israel. It was the place where God appeared to Abram to tell him that this was the land he had promised to give him, and so it was the first place in the promised land to have an altar built in worship of the Lord (Genesis 12:6-7). And it was also the place where the Israelites (Abraham's descendants) first gathered to renew the covenant with the Lord after they had crossed into the land under Joshua (as Moses had ordered just before they entered Canaan) - Joshua 8:30-35. Historically, then, it is the spiritual centre and thermometer of Israel.

1. The Danger of Forgetting (8:33-35)

When the writer of Judges condemns the Israelites for not remembering the Lord their God, he is not suggesting that they forgot who Yahweh was, is he? Rather what they knew about God did not influence or direct their loyalties, or determine their commitment to him. Whatever factual, intellectual information about God and what he had done for Israel through the judges he had raised up did not keep them from adopting Baal-Berith as their god.

But not only did Israel forget God - they forgot Gideon too (8:35). Had they treasured Gideon and his work they would have dealt loyally with Gideon's family. Note the emphasis in chapter 9 on Israel's ingratitude toward Gideon in Jotham's address to the citizens of Shechem (vv. 16-20) and in the explanations of what God was doing in this horrendous episode in Israel's history (vv. 23-24, 56-57). Of course, the Bible forbids us to glorify God's servants but it does command us to esteem them highly. For example, Paul writes: "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). Christians frequently seem to be better at criticizing and finding fault with parents, pastors, elders, mentors, teachers and friends who have strived to lead them in the grace and wisdom of God than in expressing grateful thanks. I often regret that I did not get around to expressing my deep gratitude to the senior elder at one of my previous churches who modelled so clearly and faithfully what it meant to care for the flock of God. When we ignore the instruments of God's grace - those people through whom he imparts his grace to us - we demean and disrespect the Giver of that grace, the Lord himself. In the fall of Israel in this passage of Judges, apostasy from God, unfaithfulness to him and ingratitude toward Gideon occurred together.

2. The Problem of Leadership (9:1-21)

If only Gideon had not had a concubine in Shechem. But he did, and Abimelech ("My father is king"), the son of that concubine, was both ambitious and treacherous. Every other leader in Judges is called by God without seeking the role. Abimelech grasps it for himself, going to his mother's brothers in Shechem and pointing out that he is a son of his kingly father and a kinsman of theirs. His argument is: "Wouldn't it be better to have just one ruler? And wouldn't it be good to ensure that that ruler is one of us? Wouldn't it be good if your king were me?" When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of

Shechem, they agreed because, “He is one of ours - he’s related to us”. So they gave Abimelech “seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and he used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers” (9:4). His rise to power is facilitated not by obedience to the Lord, but by a false god’s funds! And it is founded on the blood of his half-brothers, 70 of whom he kills in cold blood “on one stone” in Gideon’s hometown, Ophrah. He murders his own family. Abimelech’s authority is not a matter of judging or delivering, but rather is an exercise of naked power. All the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gather beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king (9: 6). Unlike his father, Abimelech makes no pretence not to be a king, nor to be ruling in obedience to God.

But Jotham, Gideon’s youngest son, has escaped the massacre. His name means The Lord (Yahweh) is perfect or blameless. He calls out to the citizens of Shechem from Mount Gerizim telling them a fable designed to show the ridiculousness of choosing Abimelech as king (9:8-14). Olive trees, fig-trees and grape vines were valuable, and produced the main crops of the Israelite agricultural economy. But they pass on becoming king. “Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, “Come and be our king”.” (9:14) Thornbushes were not at all valuable plants. They were too short and scraggy to provide any shade from the heat, and often caught fire, which spread to surrounding foliage and destroyed more valuable trees. The thornbush points this out in agreeing to become king (9: 15), and makes the remarkable claim (given it only grows a foot or two off the ground) that other trees can “come and take refuge in my shade”. The fable does not stress the worthlessness of kingship but the worthlessness of Abimelech. Verses 16-20 explain Jotham’s point. Essentially, he says: “If you’ve been fair to Gideon’s family in making Abimelech your king (and let’s face it, you haven’t, but if you have), then may you find great blessing in the rule of King Abimelech. But if you haven’t (and let’s face it, you haven’t), then I hope you and he get what you all deserve - you burned by him, and he burned by you.” Jotham’s theme is the foolishness and peril of accepting clearly unqualified leadership. Thornbushes like Abimelech make good fuel but poor kings - they burn better than they reign.

There is a good lesson in choosing a leader here, isn’t there? We are often far too easily impressed by qualities that are unimportant to God. Further, we can far too easily be swayed by pragmatic arguments - we haven’t got enough elders we need to appoint some quickly. God does not prize popularity, charisma, academic intelligence, being an extrovert and so on. He seeks men who hold to his truth, seek to lead their family rightly, are godly and self-controlled, who are biblically qualified in terms of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to be elders. The Presbytery can always appoint elders from other congregations to serve as assessors in congregations where there is, at any particular time, no one biblically qualified for the office of elder. What care we, as God’s people, need to take in seeking and selecting our leaders!

3. The Process of Judgment (9:22-57)

What follows certainly constitutes a raging fire. The citizens of Shechem have already shown themselves prone to switch their loyalty, and when Gaal son of Ebed moves with his clan into Shechem, the citizens “put their confidence in him”. There’s great irony in that fact the Gaal uses the same arguments as Abimelech had - “Surely one of us, a local, a Shechemite, should rule”: “Who is Abimelech, and why should we Shechemites be subject to him? Isn’t he Jerub-Baal’s son, and isn’t Zebul his deputy? Serve the family of Hamor, Shechem’s father” (9: 28).

Abimelech, unlike the Shechemites, is fiercely loyal - to his own cause. He fights Gaal (9:30-41), conquers Shechem, capturing it and its people. The place where Abram had worshipped the Lord, and where Joshua and all the people had renewed the Covenant with the Lord ends up barren, salt scattered over it so that its fields cannot grow crops. Over a thousand Shechemites take refuge in the temple of their idol, El-Berith, in the stronghold of the tower, but Abimelech’s thirst for revenge is not fully satisfied. He leads

his men to cut wood on Mount Zalmon and then use it to set fire to the stronghold, burning it down killing about a thousand men and women. It looked as though the town of Thebez would suffer the same fate. But as Abimelech “approached the entrance to the tower (where all the people of the town had fled) to set it on fire, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull” (9:53). Fatally injured, Abimelech (ever mindful of his reputation) had his servant run him through with his sword so that a woman won’t have killed him (9:54). Seeing Abimelech dead, the Israelites went home.

In chapter 9 of Judges, God is not mentioned at all by his covenant name “The LORD”. This is a picture of a society and ruler who desire to push God out of the picture completely. So is God absent? As the Shechemites use idol-money to fund a massacre, and as Abimelech works his bloody way around Israel, God seems absent. As Jotham sat in Beer, “afraid of his brother Abimelech” (9:21), he could be forgiven for wondering if his curse of verses 16-20 had been mistaken. When the Shechemites and Abimelech himself lie prone at the end of chapter 9, it has been as a result of a vengeful feud and a fortunate throw by a woman. God does seem absent.

But in verses 23-24 and 56-57, the narrator lifts the curtain of human affairs to show us a glimpse of what God was doing. “God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem....(he stirred up animosity between them (vv. 23-24)“ and “Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done.... God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness....” (vv. 56-57). God may have been silent, but he was not absent. In what seemed like the natural course of events, he was acting in judgment. So that we don’t miss the point God frames this section (vv. 22-57) at beginning and end with unmissable statements that here God was instigating and executing his judgment on Abimelech and Shechem. There was no lightning bolt from heaven....but there was justice. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness”. God’s judgment is not only reserved for a future day - it is a present reality. This horrific episode in Judges points us to 3 truths about God’s present judgment:

- (a) It comes unseen and with a certain quietness. It is just as well we have the clear statements of vv. 23-24 and vv. 56-57 or we might not realize what is taking place. The people at the time could not have seen the spirit God sent to use the evil in Shechemite hearts for his just purposes. And in our own day, we have no divinely inspired narrator to lift the curtain to tell us where, when and how God is judging people. We know it is happening, but we can never point to any one event and say, “God is judging you for this particular sin you have committed”.
- (b) It comes after a wait. Three years passed between Jotham warning of judgment and judgment coming, three years in which Abimelech ruled and in which his crimes seemed to have paid off. The wait is covered in a single verse in the narrative (9:22), but to Jotham, those three years must have seemed considerably longer! He had to learn patience and trust.
- (c) It comes through the outworking of human sin. Shechem was destroyed because of its disloyalty. Its greatest sin was its downfall. Abimelech was destroyed because of his desire to maintain his position at any human cost. He had no need to attack Thebez. His greatest sin was also his downfall. Abimelech destroyed Shechem and the men of Shechem destroyed Abimelech (with a little help from Thebez). That is evil destroyed evil. God frequently judges in this way, using evil men to destroy evil men, evil nations to wipe out other evil nations. God in his judgment uses the tools of human rebellion against those who rebel. Judges 9 teaches us something very important, namely that there is no fellowship in evil - it does not care for its own but rather only uses its own. It is absolutely self-centred. You can see this in living colour in Revelation 17:15-17, which depicts how the Antichrist and his

offenders will hate and consume the very anti-God culture which they had nourished.

4. Grace Beyond Terror (10:1-5)

In the rule of Abimelech, Israel plumbs new depths. Judges 9 shows Israel that destruction can come from within as well as from without, from Israel as well as Midian. Yet even Judges 9 preaches a word of hope to Israel : God does not abandon his people to their Abimelechs but keeps his people from utter destruction.

And there is more to come “after the time of Abimelech” (10:1). We are told that “Tola....rose to save Israel”, and he “led Israel twenty-three years”. This is the same language used of Deborah, one of the best of the judges (Judges 4:4). God has raised up someone else who saved and led Israel in the way she did. And he is followed by Jair who “led Israel twenty-two years”. Again it is the same language used of Deborah. This is the sheer grace of God. The people have completely abandoned him. They have opted to be led by Abimelech, a man who was chosen not by the Lord, but by himself, and was recommended by his own power. Israel have sunk to the depths and they are not even crying out in repentance - yet God sends them Tola and Jair to be the judges they are not asking for.

But who did Tola and Jair save Israel from? No enemy - such as the Moabites, Midianites or Philistines - is named. Chapter 9 gives the answer. They saved Israel from itself. God’s people, ultimately, need a leader who will rescue us from ourselves - from the failings and ambitions of our own hearts, and from the divisions and strife among us. It is a great reminder that the church’s greatest problem can be the church! When we see churches with gospel-centred unity, with godly, humble leadership and which enjoy and pursue and share peace with justice and love - then we, unlike Gideon and Abimelech, must give thanks to the God who has, in his grace, given us the Spirit of the risen Christ to transform our hearts and restore our relationships.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.