

“THE THORN WITH GOD’S CROWN”

THE CHURCH’S NEED FOR A KING

JUDGES 8:22-9:56

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In our passage this morning, we see revealed man’s depravity, and the inner-heart condition that can lead to great sinful acts and division in the visible Church. In summary, things sinfully fall apart in Judges 9; we will witness mass-murderous bloodshed, deception, conspiracy, manipulation, and all other manner of evil.

Even though sin may reach a heightened intensity both in the world as well as in the church at times (as we see in the passage this morning) God is in control and is sovereign over both the world and the church as Ruler and King. God has the final word in judgment, and his judgment is fire and retribution against our sins if there is no repentance.

What is God’s retribution? Retribution is the opposite of mercy and grace. Retribution is getting what one deserves for one’s sins: wrath, fire, judgment from God in this life and the next.

In Judges 9, we have recorded for us the lowest spiritual decline yet in Israel! Things are so bad in the mind of the author of the Judges that the LORD’s name is not mentioned again until chapter 10 (the generic name of God is used *Elohim* rather than his covenantal Name YHWH, see 9:22, 56-57). In our passage, Israel got the king she sinfully deserved (retribution).

We learn that the Israelites continued to repeat their sins against God and would never learn. In our passage this morning, God allows the people’s sins to unravel and for them to decline to such a low point that his justice, his retribution against sin is all that is revealed.

This means that what we should notice as readers studying this section is that it is not God calling redeemer-deliverer-judges, nor is God raising them up to save the people. Sin has separated the people and the peace they could have with God and so they are at war now with one another.

Not only is God not mentioned, but after Gideon there is no more rest or shalom-peace noted in the *Book of Judges* at all after chapter 8 (8:23). Gideon also is NOT the name used for him, rather *Jerub-Baal* or “*Baal contends*” is used throughout this portion of the narrative section (“Jerubbaal” begins to be used more frequently in the text after Gideon’s idolatrous mistake at the end of chapter 8, 8:29, 35; 9:1-2, 5, 16, 19, 24, 28, 57, 10 times *Jerubbaal* is used). Remember that the reason Gideon was named *Jerubbaal* was because he fought against Baal, a false god who is no god at all (but Gideon didn’t completely win this spiritual warfare).

History definitely repeats itself (as the familiar saying reminds us!). This passage is about the constant failure of doing what is evil in one's own eyes. The consequences that follow our evil deeds and unbelief against God can cause great damage. ***Our sins have great consequences!*** William Shakespeare once wrote:

"The evil that men do often live after them; the good is interred with their bones."

Gideon's evil would live on through Abimelech, while much of the good he had done was buried with his bones. God is a merciful and faithful God but he is a God of justice as well. God will set all things right, and sin will be punished, as we see in our passage this morning. So, I think to best get at this passage, we should start from the end, and then read the middle, then begin:

ESV Judges 9:54-57: 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. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. ⁵⁶ Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ 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.

Then to the middle:

ESV Judges 9:23-24: And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, ²⁴ 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.

It does not pay to do evil against God; God will have the last word on the matter! God will repay according to the deed in order to warn men from heaven that God is King and Judge!

In chapter 8 we read after Gideon's deliverance that the people desired him to be their king; Gideon confessed rightly that neither himself nor any of his sons should be king (although in a hypocritical manner as we learned) - -only God alone should rule Israel (see 8:23: "The LORD will rule over you"). The Bible then tells us immediately after this that Gideon had many sons (because he had many wives) and one son who was from Shechem named Abimelech was born.

Judges 9 and the account of Abimelech should be understood as a sequel to the story of Gideon. It is about how Abimelech, Gideon's Canaanite concubine's son became king.

Judges 8:30-35: Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring,¹ for he had many wives. ³¹ And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. ³² And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ³³ As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. ³⁴ 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,³⁵ 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.

This transition in 8:33-35 connects the two stories. What happened after Gideon? Sequel: It got really bad!

We should note how far specifically the Israelites have declined spiritually. In chapter 8:33ff (which should be understood as the prologue to the Abimelech cycle) we learn that Israel has now turned specifically to **“Baal-berith”** and made him their God. **“Baal-berith”** is the god whom they worship and serve and God the LORD, YHWH, has been completely turned from so that they can worship and serve a substitute.

“As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god.” – Judges 8:33

People of God: “Baal-berith” means “Lord of the Covenant”. Rather than being faithful to God’s covenant with the people as they were commanded by God, they have made a covenant in Shechem with an idol and named him “Lord of the Covenant”. In fact, the text tells us specifically that “Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies...and they did not show steadfast (covenantal) love to the family of Gideon...” This is covenant theology that’s gone bad!

Israel was ungrateful for God’s deliverance; Israel was not even thankful to the family of Gideon. The Israelites should have been grateful to the man and his family that God did indeed use to deliver them! So committed to Baal-berith that he will also be the god who finances Abimelech’s slaughter of Gideon’s family (9:4).

^{ESV} Judges 9:1-3: 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, ² "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." ³ 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."

Abimelech desired to be king and goes to Shechem to convince his mother and relatives to bow down to him as king and leader of the people.

The name “Abimelech” (*Abi-melech*) means literally in Hebrew: “Father-King” or more precisely “My father is king”. Gideon had said one thing with his mouth: “God alone should be king” but he lived like a ruler-king, and even pridefully sought his own glory by naming his son “My father is king”.

Notice in chapter 9 verse 2 that regardless of how much Gideon rejected verbally the thought of being king, he was indeed king; he was considered king and Abimelech’s appeal to his mother’s side of the family tells us that.

“Which is better for you, that all seventy sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?” The question is asked to them because one of the sons of Gideon’s “dynasty” would succeed him and rule; that is the assumption to prove beyond a doubt that Gideon had set up a kind of “dynasty” for himself that was not part of God’s call and commission.

The setting of the text is important; “Abimelech went to Shechem...” (9:1). What is the redemptive-historical importance of Shechem? Shechem is the place where Jacob and Joshua believed and trusted in YHWH (Genesis 35:4; Joshua 24:1, 26). Shechem is where “Father” Abraham first had God promise to him and all who believe the covenant blessings of grace. Shechem that once was a place of memorializing God’s covenant was to become the place of covenant breaking and murder—adultery had been committed at Shechem.

ESV Genesis 12:6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

ESV Joshua 24:1 Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God.

ESV Joshua 24:25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem.

The problem now in redemptive-history was that the leaders of Shechem (9:3) were now committed to Baal-berith as their true husband and god. This would be like a man who had covenanted before God and man in a particular church building on a very special wedding day to one woman, who later comes to that same building to commit adultery with another woman, to break covenant, and to marry another (while still wed to the first wife). This place was where murder happened- -the place of adultery is also the place of murder!

⁴ 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. ⁵ And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself.

Abimelech hired “worthless and reckless fellows” who were assassins (9:4) and they killed all of Gideon’s sons- -all except one, Jotham, the youngest, who hid himself (69 deaths!!).

Abimelech slaughtered his 69 brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, “on one stone” (9:5). Body after body was piled up on this one killing stone! The stone could have been a stone for sacrifices, and if so, it might be that Abimelech is making a sacrifice to Baal-berith?! Fratricide was committed by Abimelech and these “wranglers” (“worthless and reckless fellows”).

Forget about for a moment the names of Ed Gein, Hannibal Lecter, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and the “Son of Sam”. Let’s focus on their “spiritual father”: Abimelech. When we hear about Abimelech, we should be reminded of his cold-blooded serial killings in order to seek his will and build his own kingdom (just as his father “My father is king” - where did he learn some of this? Unfortunately, from Gideon’s mistakes and sins).

Here is revealed the height of covenant unfaithfulness and the breaking of God’s Law. Here is revealed the height of great arrogance in thinking of yourself more important than others, and coveting position and lusting for power over the people!

And Abimelech was crowned king!

ESV Judges 9:6 And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

Funded by the idolatrous treasury from a house of idols, Abimelech, the son of Jerubbaal (“he who wars against Baal”) was crowned king at “Baal’s right hand” (9:4-5). By the very covenantal tree “by the oak of the pillar” (also “terebinth tree”) where Abraham was promised the land by God, the promise of God was far from realized at this point in Israel’s history (Gen. 12:6).

Abimelech was an idolater, he had made images of God, he had taken God’s Name in vain by honoring and calling upon Baal-berith, he had not honored his father Gideon (or the memory of his father, 9:16-17); he killed, he coveted the position as king... on and on the list of his law-breaking, covenant unfaithfulness was revealed- ***-and a stack of bodies was the result.*** Apparently Abimelech did not know the truth of Psalm 19 that would be written later in redemptive-history:

ESV Psalm 19:7-11: The law of the LORD is perfect,¹ reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

We have learned with the other Judge-Leaders of Israel that they represented Israel spiritually, and reveal God. Abimelech as king also represented Israel as those who are Law-breakers, and revealed a God who will punish sin. Abimelech was a revelation of the Church’s sinful heart- -of the desire to get things when we want them and to murder in order to obtain. Remember James 4?

ESV James 4:1-5: What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

We must be very careful with what remains within us. We must resist sin and fight against the passions and inordinate desires that still remain in us. James calls our natural sinful disposition to be “friendship with the world”; that is, to be “worldly”. But when we are worldly in our thoughts and actions, we are acting as enemies of God.

Sin has great consequences; here was revealed a war that was within one man that became the foundation of a slaughter house! The Bible speaks of man’s depravity by describing it as “swift to shed blood”:

ESV Isaiah 59:7 Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways.

ESV Romans 3:15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood..."

⁶ And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

In his greed and folly, Abimelech was made and received as King of Israel by the leaders of Shechem (by the oak of the pillar at Shechem was the coronation service of the new king).

At the very oak-terebinth at Shechem where the people of God under Joshua had promised covenantally to be obedient to God- -at this very place, Abimelech was made king and death was brought to many in Israel. It is significant that Joshua said to the people in Joshua 24:16:

ESV Joshua 24:14 "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." ¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods..."

ESV Joshua 24:24-25: And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

Wow! Israel got the king they sinfully deserved! He was a bad man, but the government of Israel was upon his shoulders. Israel could have confessed in light of Abimelech’s reign:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Serial Killer, Enemy of God, Everlasting Reprobate, Prince of War and Sinful Strife. Of the increase of his government and of war

shall come to an end. He will seize the throne that belongs rightly to David and over his Kingdom, to establish his kingdom with injustice, fear, oppression and every abominable act imaginable.”

But one of Jerubbaal’s (Gideon’s) sons was preserved. God in the midst of the idolatrous bloodbath, allowed a remnant to be preserved. God is always committed to preserving his people. God is always faithful to provide at least one voice of reason: a preacher, a prophet, a spokesmen for righteousness in the midst of an evil generation.

God provided Jotham. Jotham climbed up Mount Gerizim to take the pulpit of Moses and Joshua before him (Gerizim was described as the “Mount of Blessing”; Deut. 11:29; 27:12; Joshua 8:33).

Like Moses and Joshua before him on Mount Gerizim, Jotham spoke of blessings for covenantal good faith and integrity and curses of fire for covenant disobedience (9:15ff). Jotham was God’s covenantal spokesperson-ambassador at this dark time in redemptive-history. Jotham’s covenantal curse would come to pass because of the lack of repentance in Abimelech and Israel (9:57).

Now comes NOT a judge-deliverer-warrior-savior raised up by God to save the people from their enemies; but one that was to save the people of Israel from their own- -from Abimelech (!). God was not specifically speaking to the people from His Word, or sending the Angel of YHWH into this situation- -but there is a voice of reason and perhaps the closest we have in these chapters of wisdom from God.

Jotham’s Fable-Parable

⁷ When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. ⁸ The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' ⁹ 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?' ¹⁰ And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' ¹² And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹³ But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁴ Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹⁵ 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.'

Meaning of parable: The good kings in the fable-parable are represented by the olive and fig trees, and the vine who were men who might have been worthy kings to rule over Israel but were busy producing good for the people already and who rejected the position. The bramble or thorn bush-shrub (big thorns and not much shade- -a false tree if you will) has nothing good to offer man (but thorns to cut and harm both man and animal).

The bramble does not produce good...and accepts the position of king; something worthless desired to rule over Israel. Abimelech of course is the worthless bramble or

thorn bush-shrub that does no good for man or beast. Israel should have been able to recognize a tree by its fruits. As our Lord Jesus taught: ***“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”***

Abimelech is the one who wants the other “trees” to submit to his ruthless and reprobate rule (9:15):

“If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade...” And when they do, they will get cut. Abimelech was like the worthless and reckless fellows who helped him murder Charlie-Manson-style his own brothers (9:5). Abimelech was like a thorn, or bramble, worthless to the good of both man and beast.

The one son of Gideon to escape the slaughter, Jotham, spoke in a fable, and warned the people about lacking covenantal faithfulness, truthfulness and integrity in their actions.

It is important to note that Jotham’s name is indicative of his message and mission (from God!). Jotham’s name is a combination of God’s covenantal name YHWH and the Hebrew word for blameless or integrity. “Jotham” means the “YHWH is perfect, blameless, honest, and has integrity” (NIVAC, pg. 222). In contrast, the people are imperfect, sinful, dishonest, and treacherous- -particularly Abimelech and his ruthless entourage.

Jotham was courageous, a true man of valor, and the son of a man of valor who spoke as a mouthpiece for God. Jotham spoke about good faith and integrity in verses 16 and 19. Jotham is a representative of Israel who doesn’t have as much written about him as his father Gideon, but nevertheless his stand here is brave and courageous and he dared to confront the people to challenge their lack of good faith and unfaithful, incorrigible ways.

Jotham is bold enough to question to choice the people’s choice for king. Through the parable-fable of the trees, the heart of his message is about the bramble tree. Jotham questioned the people’s integrity and wisdom about making Abimelech king. Jotham appealed not to the desires of man’s sinful heart but to higher values and morality, issues concerning honor, integrity, and a divine standard of justice (NIVAC, pg. 221).

Particularly important is what Jotham says about the people’s motives and morals when they made Abimelech king (9:16-22):

16 “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-¹⁷ for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian,¹⁸ 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-¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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-

millio and devour Abimelech." ²¹ And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother. ²² Abimelech ruled over Israel three years.

“If you have acted in ‘good faith’ and ‘integrity’” (both in 9:16, 19) [אִם-בְּאֵמֶת וּבְתָמִים] is how Jotham confronted the people’s sin. Jotham interestingly enough also mentions “fire” that will consume (9:20); fire is a Biblical motif of judgment and God’s consuming wrath (and the consequential fire will consume through God’s judgment later in our study; incidentally, Joshua 24:14 uses the same phrase at a covenantal ceremony at Shechem).

In judgment upon Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, God allowed an evil spirit to divide Abimelech and the men so that he would receive his just reward as punishment for his arrogance and sins against God. Jotham’s “fable” or “parable” would not be heeded and so God’s “fire” of retribution would consume the wicked like stubble (as we will find out at the end of the passage).

And in God’s sovereignty, the retribution began:

²³ And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, ²⁴ 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.

As mentioned earlier, although God is not mentioned by His covenantal Name of YHWH in this portion of Scripture (similar to the Book of Esther); nevertheless he is in control of the entire event. God even sends an evil spirit, or allows an evil spirit so that Abimelech will get what is coming to him as retribution for his many sins against God and the people (cf. 1 Samuel 16:14-23; 18:10-12; 19:9; 2 Kings 19:7; God is the Supreme Being over all evil, Job 1:12).

Some folks have a hard time with this particular revelation of God. Some folks find it hard to believe that God “would send an evil spirit” and do not want to take the text as it clearly stands (some translators translate this merely as “spirit of ill will”). For some, they don’t accept this because it accentuates God’s sovereignty too much. For some, they don’t accept this because it seems to imply that God can do evil to people.

But this is retribution; this is God’s judgment against sin and sinners. God in his sending an evil spirit shows the fact that he is King of kings and Lord of lords, the Sovereign God who rules and reigns authoritatively over all earthly kings and creatures as well as all spiritual beings.

There is no dualistic nonsense like the Greek or Persian kind in the Bible! God is sovereign over all creatures—including evil spirits! And because God can use evil men to accomplish his purposes, he can also use evil spirits to achieve his ends if he so desires it as God!

It is important to note that all God has to do in “allowing evil” is to remove his hand of restraint and evil men (and evil spirits) will do what evil men (and evil spirits) do: continue to be evil against one another! This is the meaning of “God sent an evil spirit...”

ESV Genesis 18:25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

Thus God’s judgment began against Abimelech and the citizens/lords of Shechem as God caused them to divide and turn on each other, allowing their sinful hearts to implode (a house or kingdom divided against itself cannot stand).

God does no evil nor is he the author of evil, but he is sovereign king and ruler over all of evil (all of the principalities and powers we read of in Ephesians 6:10ff).

God brought about his retribution and justice so that evil is divided against itself, and Satan’s Kingdom is divided and God would be glorified as true LORD and KING! God is revealing himself as the True King and we should be reminded of Gideon’s statement in chapter 8 (whether Gideon meant it or not- -it was a fact!):

“The LORD will rule over you.” (8:23). God showed forth his awesome power and glory by using the wicked to accomplish his good. Even while Abimelech is the king of Israel, God is displaying his power over his kingdom.

God is dividing Abimelech’s kingdom because Abimelech is NOT the king of God’s own choosing who will sit at his right hand. Every kingdom divided against himself shall not stand, as Jesus said very clearly! In fact, God will divide every kingdom, all kings who set themselves up against His own rule and reign (they are in reality anti-God, anti-Christ kings).

Thus began the fall of Abimelech (and out of all the leaders of Israel in the Book of Judges, we are told specifically that he only reigned for three years, 9:22). Here in this passage the people of Shechem initiate hostilities against Abimelech. This happens as a result of God’s sovereign act of sending an evil spirit (9:23). God divides this Kingdom and it comes to ruin through more sin, death and treachery.

In verses 25-52, we see sinful men doing sinful deeds: conspiracy, conflict, war in the Promised Land- -there is no peace in Israel- -only division. In fact, this passage describes Abimelech’s kingdom as a divided one.

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. And it was told to Abimelech. ²⁶ And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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? ²⁹ Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say¹ to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out.'"³⁰ When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled.³¹ And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly,¹ saying, "Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up² the city against you."³² Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field.³³ 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."³⁴ So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies.³⁵ 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.³⁶ And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops!" And Zebul said to him, "You mistake¹ the shadow of the mountains for men."³⁷ 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."³⁸ 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."³⁹ And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech.⁴⁰ And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate.⁴¹ And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.⁴² On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.

Sowing salt in the ancient world was an attempt to make the land forever desolate and barren. We read of this in various places of the Old Testament (Deut. 29:23; Psalm 107:33-34). Abimelech had sought to make Gideon's family line barren, now he seeks to make the City of Shechem completely barren - a family and an important city are committed to barrenness.

⁴⁶ When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith.⁴⁷ Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together.⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it.⁵¹ 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.⁵² And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire.

To summarize this lengthy passage, God's judgment began and continued to unfold against Abimelech and sinful Israel. God's retributive judgment is enacted against His enemies.

What is God's retribution? How should we understand it from this passage of Scripture? God's just retribution is granting to sinners what they deserve: justice. God's retribution is more particularly paying back sinful men for their sins. Rather than God revealing His grace, he withholds his mercy, and shows forth his punishment.

Could God have shown Abimelech grace and mercy? Was it possible for Abimelech to also make it to chapter 11 of Hebrews? Why Gideon and not Abimelech? Because of God's sovereign purposes and will. We must accept this and glory in God's will and goodness and wisdom. God showed and revealed grace to Gideon, but withheld this grace and mercy from Abimelech, and gave him rather what he deserved for his sins.

⁵³ And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. ⁵⁶ Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ 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.

In God's retributive justice, Abimelech got what was coming to him. As he slaughtered 69 of Gideon's sons (his brothers!!) on one stone, so now a stone is used to crush Abimelech's skull! Abimelech's head is crushed ***by a woman***- -not only Abimelech's demise for his sins, but also humiliation- -because his head is crushed by a woman! Like Jael before her, God's work is accomplished in spite of the woman's intentions and plans (Judges 4).

What is the lesson here? Watch out for women with tent pegs and mill stones (see Judges 4)! No, it's more than that: God is revealed as the true King of Israel; God's rule and reign is sovereignly and powerfully established even when competing and sinful kings attempt to seize His throne!

And the wide angle lens shot from the air shows us a king laying among his former subjects with a crushed head, a sword in his gut with blood spilling all over the ground around him. And his blood was for no one but himself. This was not blood that redeemed; this was blood that was required of him because of his own sins.

The justice and retribution of God was revealed. With the Abimelech cycle there has been no repentance and calling upon the Name of YHWH from Israel. There has just been unrepentant sin, moral degeneration and the consequences of one's sins, and God's judgment upon that sin.

Yet God is still revealed as faithful and gracious to His visible Church! In spite of his people, Abimelech is killed by a woman, which is nothing but the very hand of God in justice against the sin that so easily besets God's people. Although God is not specifically mentioned in this deplorable cycle, both His justice and his covenantal mercy are revealed for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. We are told specifically about God:

ESV Judges 9:56-57: Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ 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.

“God returned the evil of Abimelech...God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads...”

How is God's retributive justice particularly revealed? Abimelech conspires against his brothers (9:1-2); Gaal later incited leaders to conspire against Abimelech (9:26-29); Abimelech brutally murdered the 69 sons of Gideon “on one stone” (9:5, 18) and later Abimelech is himself slain beside one stone that had been dropped on his head (9:54).

As Prof. Barry Webb writes: “...In the outworking of the plot act answers to act, and evil to evil. The evil spirit sent by God to set the whole process of retribution in motion, itself answers to the evil committed by Abimelech and the men of Shechem later in 9:56-57. This evil spirit is not exorcised until the chief instigator of the evil is struck down, whereupon his followers, as if waking from a bad dream, down weapons and go home without completing their assault on Thebez” (*The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, pg. 155).

God is King- -not Abimelech- -this is the truth revealed here. God opposes all kings and kingdoms that oppose His rule and reign and do not recognize his Anointed One (see Psalm 2). God turns evil upon its head and shows that wickedness **will not prevail.**

God in His sovereignty rules over His people even when it seems that a treacherous and murderous man has abdicated the throne in Israel. Even when Israel wars against each other from within their own sinful hearts and arrogance and unfaithfulness is tolerated and blatantly practiced, God is still King and Lord and Ruler of His people!

The covenant lord “Baal-berith” may have an altar in Shechem, but it is YHWH, the True and Living Covenantal God who is King and Lord of the covenant. Although the Israelites have rejected YHWH as Covenant LORD and King by worshipping and serving Baal-berith it is actually God himself who contends with Baal and is victorious.

God is truly “Jerub-baal”, the One who contends with Baal- - the Spiritual Warrior who never fails!

Although the people of Israel have become thoroughly Canaanized spiritually by cutting a covenant with “Baal-berith” which is in actuality making a deal with the devil, God can redeem his people and make them those who worship him in spirit and truth.

Although this passage reveals a God of both justice and grace, from the human side of things, we should also take note of the sins and the consequences of sins. All of the treachery and bloodshed of Judges 9 began with Gideon's sins in chapter 8:27-32. In Gideon's arrogance, hypocrisy, and disobedience began the later trouble for Israel the visible Church at this time.

The Bible has no problem of holding these two things of God's sovereignty and man's freedom together without apology and tension. God is sovereign; he is gracious and merciful and just, and he is in control of all events. But God is not the author of sin; and although God can bring good out of sin in his great sovereignty, we should never forget that there are consequences to our sins- -and so we do not keep on sinning so that grace may increase as the Apostle Paul says from the New Testament perspective (Romans 6:1-14).

There are many things in our lives that we sinfully sow that we don't reap as much as we should- -because God is gracious and he watches over us and keeps us, and prevents sin in us, and he often holds back the spiritually sinful tailspins that all of us would find ourselves in if given the opportunity. Yet God is also a God who is King and to be feared.

Our fear of God helps us to remember that He is our Father- -and our King. As our King he demands that we be obedient in reliance upon His grace. As King he demands that we live as we are called to live in Christ, and that we avoid carefully the sins that so easily beset us.

We must live knowing that God is a Gracious Father for those who believe, but He is also a King who allows our sins to have consequences that add to the sin and misery already in the world and the Church.

This does not leave us without hope. For God is a God who calls us through His Word to repentance. Each day of our lives should be lived meditating upon God's commandments and understanding His Word and Will for us, and living repentantly in light of the places where we fall short.

Sin does indeed have consequences –and sin can kill us. The apostasy of God's people then and now cannot rob God of His sovereignty and the sovereign accomplishment of his will and purpose! Even when God's people do not acknowledge him, or openly acknowledge other gods, or grow complacent toward God's love, God remains in control. How he will move toward those who act as if they are unbelievers is also in his sovereign will (that is mysterious).

Let's remember again what we asked at the first of this study: **What is God's retribution?** Retribution is the opposite of mercy and grace. Retribution is getting what one deserves for their sins: wrath, fire, judgment from God in this life and the next.

Will he work in our hearts to bring about repentance? Or will he allow us to continue in our sins and receive his just retribution as punishment? This is God's will- -but from the human level, or side of things, we must repent; we must live obediently by God's grace and seek to worship and serve him alone!

We see clearly in Judges 9 that sin is destructive to ourselves, to the Church, to our children, and those we come into contact with every day. Let us live sober, watchful, careful lives, being obedient because of God's grace to us- -let us never cheapen grace as sinners where we live as if there was not a heavy price to pay for our sins.

How is it possible that the Church survived this?

Because God preserved a remnant by His grace throughout redemptive-history! Even during the awful treacherous reign of Abimelech, God was preserving His True Church! The gates of hell even through a wicked and arrogant king could not prevail against the Church.

God preserved Jotham, and this man was faithful to God's Word. You could say that the Gospel was still preached even in this deep dark period of Israel's idolatry and apostasy from God.

What we should have observed by now in our study of Judges, and the way God reveals himself in this book is that if it had not been for his providential care of his people Israel would never have survived. How would God's people survive in the midst of these kind of people and these kind of destructive and sinfully heinous events?

Israel could not survive as God's people without God's gracious and sovereign protection and care of them. For us today as well, if it were not for God's loving care and Christ's powerful resurrected-ascended glory reign, the Church would not last even for a moment if it were not for God's protection, love and mercy to her!

ESV Psalm 85:10 Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

When our Lord Jesus Christ was crowned king by sinful men, he was crowned with a crown made from thorns or a bramble bush. Both Jew and Gentile formally rejected the Lord Jesus as the King who would reign over them. For sinners, both Jew and Gentile, we only deserve a king like Abimelech and sometimes throughout redemptive-history the Church got the king we deserved.

Sinners cannot rightfully choose their king because we would choose Abimelech and reject the one God provides. When God in the fullness of the times provided the real thing, His real King, who acted covenantally in good faith and integrity toward God and man, we rejected Him and placed a crown of thorns on His head.

God in his mysterious sovereignty and providence must have allowed sinful men to place a crown of thorns on our Lord's head in order to point us back to the king we truly

deserve in Abimelech; to remind us of Jotham's parable, and the thorn who wore God's crown.

Abimelech sinfully seized God's throne that did not belong to him; Jesus humbly laid down his life in order to gain the throne that rightly belonged to him.

Abimelech was the sinful thorn who wore God's crown; Jesus was the Righteous Vine who deserved God's crown.

Abimelech was the bramble-thorn who was crowned king falsely by sinful men; Jesus was the True Anointed King of God crowned by sinful men with a bramble-thorn.

Abimelech received God's retributive justice that he deserved for his sins; Jesus received God's retributive justice that *we deserved for our sins*.

Abimelech died for his own sins; Jesus died for the sins of those who repent and believe.

Abimelech's blood was a memorial of sin and filth; Jesus' blood was a memorial of redemption and cleansing from sin.

Our Lord Jesus Christ took the sins and consequences of our sins upon himself when he laid down his life for our sins and transgressions, our covenant breaking before God. God's retributive justice was meted out for his people upon the back of His most holy and beloved Son.

He who had no sin became sin for us so that we might be the righteousness of God in Him!

God sent Christ the "Lord of the Covenant" to redeem us from our idols, and all the things we so cherish here in this world, so that we could glorify the LORD and serve Him forever!

Let us live as those who have been redeemed from sin; let us in Christ seek to live obediently so that we will only sow and reap joyously from the rich bounty of God's grace and goodness!

Abimelech is the king we all deserve because of our sins; but God gave to us the very King of kings and Lord of lords, the Lord Jesus Christ as the gracious and powerful king who rules and reigns over his people.

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Scripture Lesson

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 9:3** This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

^{ESV} **Romans 1:28-32:** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² 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.

^{ESV} **Romans 2:1-11:** 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. ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man - you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself - that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking¹ and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

^{ESV} **James 4:1-8:** What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions¹ are at war within you?² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.