

RUF Bible Study – Judges
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Judges 9-10 – Abimelech – My Father Is King?

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

After you watch the first season of *24*, you think you know the way the show works. Each episode is in real time, which means 60 minutes is a legitimate (supposedly) hour. By the end of the 24-hour period, the crisis has been averted and Jack Bauer has saved the day.

So you're expecting more of the same in the subsequent seasons. But the writers know that, so they start to mix it up a bit. As you watch, you think there's no way something could happen because it's only the 10th hour, but then – it happens. So you're forced to reevaluate the way you view the show, and it keeps you on the edge of your seat (to the degree it does this effectively is debatable).

The narrator of Judges has employed a similar tactic. We've read enough chapters by now to come to expect God's people to get in trouble from the outside nations (due to their own failures as a covenantal people) and God to send a deliverer.

But this isn't the "first season" any more. There is change in the script in Judges 9. We have seen the high point of the book, as far as being able to cheer for the Israelites. If we have been calling these cycles of sin and redemption, we're forced now to instead call the rest of the book not a cycle but a plunge to destruction.

God's people are corrupted by the inside now. No longer can they blame the environment or bad parenting or anything "out there." Now it's cancer. It's inside. It's from their own midst, from their own people where they get destroyed.

Let's look at this chapter and in doing so, we'll look at ourselves and how sin gets in our camp to wreak its ruin. We'll highlight Truth and Integrity, the Sovereign Millstone and the Blessing and Curses.

Truth and Integrity – In Short Supply

We begin our story of chapter nine expecting things to follow the normal, established pattern. At the end of chapter eight, we read that, after Gideon's reign of peace, the people of Israel had again whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god.

But we don't get the next part in the cycle. God doesn't raise up for them a deliverer. It's Abimelech, the son of Gideon. There is nothing about God's hand in this. Instead, Abimelech is further confirmed to be a man who comes from the Canaanites, his mother's side of the family. Abimelech wants to be king (the very thing his father "rejected" as we discussed in our last chapter). He appeals to his people that one of their own should be king – not an Israelite.

The leaders agree with Abimelech. It's interesting to note here that the words "leaders" is really the word "baals." This term means "lord" and could be used, as it is here, in an everyday sense. But it carries connotations with it, especially as the narrator gives us the events. The baals of Shechem inclined their hearts to follow Abimelech. The people have said that they are really Canaanites at heart – they will worship and serve the Canaanite Baal gods.

The attentive reader cannot expect good things to come from this.

And that reader is correct. Abimelech hires local riffraff – "worthless and reckless fellows." They round up 69 of the 70 sons of Gideon and kill them on one stone. This harkens to human sacrifice, as each of these men would have been serially murdered on the stone of the altar of Baal in Shechem.

What makes it even worse (as if that's possible), is that this is a sacred site for God's people. God has met his people here in the past, and now this place has been turned into a Baal-worshipping site of human sacrificial appeasement.

What has happened to God's people? They have turned to other kings beside their King. They have worshipped other gods beside their one, true God. They have listened to other prophets instead of men commissioned by Yahweh. They have followed other leaders – baals – instead of waiting for God to appoint them.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block, Wilcock, Redeemer Pres, Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan, and listened to sermons from Brandon Barrett, Shaynor Newseome, and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

One of Gideon's sons escaped the slaughter, and now he comes out of hiding. His name is Jotham. He now stands on Mount Gerizim, crying to the people. He tells them a short story, a metaphor about their choices.

According to Jotham's words, God's people don't have to reject the kingship outright. They can have a king, as long as they choose wisely. He mentions three substances vital to the local economy – olives, figs and the vine, which means grapes and wine. These would be helpful to the life of the people. They stand for men who give, produce and have life. Yet they are reluctant to serve because then they'll be taken out of their natural places of service.

But one "tree" volunteers. The bramble. The bramble is a thorn tree. It doesn't make anything. It doesn't produce. All anyone wants to do with thorns is get rid of them. But the thorn steps up and makes a speech about his shade and his fire. This is an ironic and farcical speech. Briars don't produce shade, and all farmers would want to do would be to burn the thorns up with fire.²

The man that immediately comes to mind to illustrate this point is Adolf Hitler. By all accounts he was both dunderheaded and brilliant. We know now he was megalomaniacal, delusioned and sadistic. He caused the murder, the genocide, of millions of people. And yet – he was wildly popular. He would deliver speeches that send the crowd and nation into a frenzy. What did they see in him?

They saw a solution. They saw a hope. They were distressed, worried and wanted their power back. They were hungry for significance, so they followed someone who promised to give it to them.

Would you have done any differently had you been there?

The people go for a similar leader. In his speech to confront this, Jotham finishes with this: "*Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king... [he recounts the very fact that they have not] then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him rejoice in you. But if not, then let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders...*"

It's a prophecy of doom. We might be expecting Jotham to be our next judge and deliverer, but instead he runs away, hiding out of fear from Abimelech. We're left to wonder what is going to happen in our story, but we know that Jotham at least doesn't think these people have acted with faith and integrity.

Before we continue in the narrative, let's pause to consider how we might apply our first point.

Let's remember we've said (in the previous chapter) that anything could take its place as king on the throne of our hearts. Abimelech means "My father is king."

"Career-is-king" could become your name, leading you to do anything for the sake of your career. You could sacrifice people along the way, at the altar of your success and advancement.

"My-family-is-king" could become your name. You will do anything to make sure your family is at the center of your life, and no one can ever threaten them in any way (you will be the parents of kindergarten children who protest if your child gets only a 99% on a quiz).

Placing comfort, sex, money, or control as the kings and queen of our lives doesn't seem to be such a terrible thing. Except God says isn't as harmless as it sounds. It's not really a kingship, he says, it's a false lover you serve, and it makes you a whore. His assessment is much more condemning than yours. God, as a jealous husband, will not allow you to go along your merry way.

The Bible also shows us that this false kingship, which is an actual whoredom, leads to our destruction. We may be happy for a time – Abimelech reigned for 3 years in peace – but it will crumble down around us in the end. Jotham's prophecy then is true for us.

If you gain your position, your marriage, or your career by means that are not truthful and filled with integrity, you will be forced into a life you do not want to live. It will be a life of fear, and will lead to destruction. Lies will grow. You will do things in a progressive manner that will lead to destruction. That's the way sin works. It is never content where it is, but seeks to spread. It's a cancer *inside* of you, and it wants new areas to control.

The antidote to this is truth and integrity, especially to God. Refuse to do things against God's law or make compromises. Be a man or woman of integrity in your twenties. Cultivate honesty and faithfulness.

I know of many students who crave a position. It might be fraternity or sorority president. Or it may be in student government. They want to change things, to make a difference. But, in the pursuit of that position, they are changed. And, if they get what they want, they are no longer able to make the change they had previously thought of because now they are different people from when they started. Be careful about the pursuit of power and position. God may grant it, but he often does so to those who are reluctant to serve. Not all, but many who crave power want it for the wrong reasons. As commentator Jordan writes, "The point of the parable is that good men do not desire to lord it over others."³

² "Thus we see that the bramble is not oriented toward productive work. Rather, he is oriented toward tyrannical rule. He represents the ungodly man who builds up a society based on taking what others people have labored to produced. His is a socialistic society, based on massive confiscation of wealth of other people, their hard earned savings and capital. His is an imperialistic society, based on the conquest of weaker people and their production. His is a slave society, based on the forced labor of other people." Jordan, 165

³ Jordan, 165

At least we can say Abimelech was such a man. Perhaps he was scarred from his upbringing. Maybe he was unloved by his father, cast off as not a full member of the Hebrews and left to grow up with his mother in obscurity. This may have led to his craving of power, enough so to murder his own brothers and take it for himself.

We aren't able to put Abimelech in the counselor's chair, and we don't know what answers he would give if he were there. But we can ask ourselves why we think we must have what we think we must have. What lies underneath our drive and desire? What motivates our passions?

A Sovereign Millstone – Abimelech's reward

We read here in 9:23 about Abimelech's peaceful three-year reign. That didn't last long. Then something happened – things started going poorly with the various factions of Abimelech's kingdom. The leaders of Shechem "dealt treacherously" with Abimelech.

It appears they realized the killing of the 70 men wasn't such a good thing after all. They started to ambush his men as they came and left the city, robbing them and harassing them.

This makes me think of either the wild west or the inner city. In the wild west, you have men sitting up in the scrub brush hills with their rifles. They stop the stagecoaches, and get away with the loot. Then the nearest city has to send out a posse. You know the movies. But that doesn't happen much any more.

More common these days would be gang wars over a city's turf. I don't personally live in such a situation (that I know of at least), but you hear about it in the news. I live near Oklahoma City, which is supposedly a cross roads for drugs. Three main interstates come through the city, which means if you can get drugs up here from Mexico and Texas, then they can hit the highways and go just about anywhere. So the gangs are fighting it out for who has the power in the city.

Abimelech has such a turf war on his hands. The Shechemites aren't happy. In the next paragraph, a man named Gaal gets his dander up, and he presents a new challenge to Abimelech' rule. You can see the infighting and backbiting in this story. Zebul is on Abimelech's side against Gaal, and they take Gaal down.

Fast forward to 9:42. Abimelech doesn't only kill Gaal, but he takes revenge on the people of Shechem by ambushing them as they go out to work the next day. In the end, he throws salt on the city, symbolically cursing it.

Then he goes after the Tower of Shechem, where the leaders of the city had hidden themselves. Abimelech knows how to get them out. He goes into the woods and chops down a tree, hauling it back to the tower. He tells everyone else to follow him, and they stack the wood around the base of the tower. Once the fire gets hot enough, the tower's stones crack and the whole thing comes down. Abimelech kills everyone.

That's not enough for him. There is another tower in a nearby city called Thebez. Abimelech wants to extend his border even more, so he goes there and implements the same strategy to bring down the tower there since it's a good plan.

He goes through the whole thing again, placing logs at the base of the tower with a match read to light it. You can imagine he looks up. There is a Rapunzel-like woman in the tower. He looks at her with an evil smile. She says, "Don't do it!" He bends down with the match and one of the brambles catches fire. He looks up again. And then...in verse 53 we read this, "*And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull.*"

Wabam! Abimelech is taken out by this woman. She had a crush on him.⁴ He cannot stand the thought of being killed by a woman, so he asks his armor bearer to finish him off, but it hardly matters. Abimelech has been dealt with by a woman who carried a millstone up and dropped it from the top of a tower. Good shot. Abimelech is no longer king.

This is a passage of warning. The first warning comes from how scary a leader Abimelech is. We're told at the end of the narrative in verse 55, "*And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.*" God's people were following this man.

We the reader know Abimelech is evil, but they followed him. There are false teachers and pastors in the church. The books of 1 and 2 Timothy deal with this issue a great deal. There are people who want to be pastors and teachers, leaders in the church for all kinds of reasons, many of which are wrong. It can be a great job – you get paid and you can have a tremendous power and authority over people. You can get respect. You can get people to do things. And that can be corruptive, as it has been time and time again.

We should take tremendous care in ordaining the leaders of the church. We must follow the biblical instructions of elders and deacons (do you know what they are?), and not ordain people just because they are good businessmen or wealthy or great charismatic speakers. Zeal is not enough. Popularity is not enough. Big plans are not enough. None of these are biblical reasons to have church leaders.

It takes a man who knows and loves the Bible. He must be able to teach, meaning he understands the Scriptures and how they work and how they apply. This takes time and must not be a perfunctory examination.

And it takes a man who has character. Most of the qualities mentioned in 1 and 2 Timothy deal with his character. Does he get angry? Is he faithful to his wife? Does he love his family? Does he display self control? These things must be watched over time, observed by the community to see if God's hand is on him.

⁴ Sorry. Bad joke. It comes from Davis' commentary.

I fear that we are too often in a rush to get people into church offices. We should slow down and make sure we have the right man for the right job. *Then* we should follow him.

But we see something else. God will not allow his church to be ruled by a tyrant for long. The narrator takes great pains to paint a picture of God's sovereignty, or we could say his providence. The Westminster Shorter Catechism has a great definition of providence – God's most holy, wise and powerful, governing and ordaining all his people and all their actions. He is in charge.

Do you believe that? It certainly doesn't look that way, does it? It doesn't feel like God is working things for our good. We look around and ask, "Where is God?" Where is God in suffering? Where is God in my hurt? Why did God let this happen to me, to my friend, to my parents, to my family?

It's a legitimate question.

The narrator of this story says God was active in it. But the people didn't know that at the time. He didn't come down and say, "Now I am working." He just worked.

He sent an evil spirit in 9:23. That is what got Abimelech's reign off of its peacefulness and onto its destruction. You may not like that verse, but it's there. God was active. It might have been a rather passive activeness – meaning all he had to do to get things going wrong was to stop things from going right. Sending an evil spirit might be the same as keeping away an understanding spirit.

Regardless, God jeopardized the reign of the king who had usurped the throne. And then in the end, in the final analysis, the narrator gives us his assessment in 9:56-57: "*Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.*"

Who is the main actor of the story? God is. God did these things. God is barely mentioned through this chapter, and yet he is the one who is directing all things for his glory. The millstone woman connected with her shot because God had it happen.

Abimelech's name turned out to be true. By his father Gideon wasn't king. Yahweh, The Father, is king. He rules all.

Blessings and Curses

This news can be tremendously scary. If this is true, if God is really sovereign, providential and controlling everything, then how can we trust him? How do we know if we can survive? After all, one of our points is that we are all like Abimelechs – we all set up our own kingdoms and lead ourselves and other people astray. What hope do we have?

Fair enough. The text leads us to such questions. There are no good guys or good examples in our story, and that makes us nervous. We don't want to be like Abimelech. And then we go from there – Gaal and Zebul are out. We're down to the woman with the millstone and Jotham. How could we possibly apply the example of a woman dropping a millstone from the top of the tower on the head of man who shouldn't be king? Jotham is the most sympathetic character in this story – and yet he runs away after his prophetic speech.

So it's all bad. We can apply the negative. Don't be like Abimelech. But that's just our problem. We *are* like him, at least in some areas in our lives. If we could stop, we would stop. So how can we stop? What do we do?

This is a chapter of judgment, so we need to see and embrace that first. Before we move on, we cannot relieve our anguish and confusion too quickly.

Do you see yourself at all in this chapter, or is it just too gruesome and far removed for you?

For some of you, there are bodies in your wake. You have sacrificed people on the altar of your happiness, your pleasure, and your success. You have hurt people time and time again. You have made fun of people so you would look good. You have used people because you care more about yourself and what you want than anything else in the world.

For some of you, you have set up kingdoms all around you, and you expect people to serve you. Some of you have henchmen that you expect to do your bidding. You think you should be able to snap your fingers, and they will do whatever it is you ask of them. When and if they don't, then you make them pay. You attack their towers and bring them down.

There are all kinds of ways this happens. Can you think of how you fit into this chapter? Do you wind your life around someone else's, trying to gain your significance by making that person happy?

There is judgment for you. You can hear it here in Judges 9. Not just them "out there." But us "in here." We are to blame. We have served "Abimelechs" in our own lives and in our churches. We have not loved God and him alone. We have forsaken and forgotten him.

But. But there is another word. You see, I told you that it was so sad what Abimelech had done because his crimes were committed on a holy site. The previous generation, as recounted in the previous book in Joshua, had heard God speak to them at Shechem. In Joshua 24:26, we read, "*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.*"

This was the place where the Book of the Law sat. This was the place of the stone of remembrance. When Jotham climbed up on Mount Gerizim, he knew what he was doing. This wasn't some random mountain. Mount Gerizim was the mountain of blessing and Mount Ebal was the mountain of cursing (see Deuteronomy 11:29).

So Jetham climbed up on the mountain of blessing and spoke *curses* to the people in the middle of the two mountains. This is all so confusing.

Sure it is. You are inbetween the two mountains, and yet the mountains are more mixed up than they appear. What looks like blessing might be cursing. What looks like cursing might be blessing. It's hard for us when we live in the middle of the mountains to figure that out. We need a higher perspective. And so often we're just trying to make it, down in the town of Shechem. Trying to figure out who the right king is and what we're supposed to do.

Whether you're a Christian or not, you can relate to this. You are trying to make it. Being a Christian can be hard work, and so can living a life without God. It doesn't just make things instantly "easy" with your boyfriend at 1 a.m. when you know the difference between right and wrong but... You are in Shechem and you're wondering if a boyfriend is a blessing or a curse.

As you try to assess your mistakes, and your dreams and hopes, you wonder how to sort them all out. Some are, or seem to be obvious curses. And yet, out of some of those curses you get blessings.

I know a student who went through a terrible ordeal right after the new year. I was scheduled to do her wedding in May, and we were about to start premarital counseling. But she called me distraught because her fiancé said he was having second thoughts and wanted to postpone the wedding. She felt like she was dying.

I thought she handled this crushing blow with a certain painful dignity. Why is this happening? Why is he doing this? Why is God doing this? I didn't have any answers except to remind her that she was God's daughter, that God loved her very much, and if this wasn't the right man for her someone else better was.

She lives out of town and this week she emailed me saying she has a new boyfriend, which I was surprised at. She said her former fiance's breakup with her was the best thing that could have happened. Now she realizes how dysfunctional that relationship was and has a renewed faith in a man actually being a godly gentleman.

So was her breakup a curse? Or a blessing? Or a mix?

If you concentrate on the curse side of things, you see everything as a curse. God doesn't like you. He is constantly judging you. Everything is law, law, law. No one is ever good enough. So you become a judgmental person who loves black and white. You are either incredibly guilty all the time, or you're amazingly proud because you are doing just such a good job by your own assessment.

Or you may concentrate only on the blessing side of things. If you are this kind of person, you have no worries. God loves people and forgives sin, so you are carefree and life is all good. But you become a moral-less person this way. You live in a land of gray fuzziness, with no real right and wrong. Justice is not a consistent concept for you, so why do you get mad when people hurt you? Why do you care about justice at all?

In a large part, this is the very tension of the Bible. I'm not talking about Christians versus nonChristians or even good versus evil. I'm talking about blessing versus curse. Justice versus mercy. Law versus grace. So which is it? That is the question we ask in this passage, in Judges, in the Old Testament and in the whole Bible.

Things are so bad here, why does God even care? Why does he still even bother with his people? Wouldn't he be right to wipe them out? If you go back and read Joshua 24, you hear Israel saying they will never forsake God. They will always remain faithful. That didn't last long. Shouldn't God destroy them? But if he does, then what about his grace? But if he doesn't, what about his justice?

There must be another way. There is. At the cross we find both justice and grace. We find law and gospel. We find blessing and curse. At the cross, we find the intersection between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

Jesus the Messiah Judge came to be the curse so that we might be the blessing. He who was the blessing became the curse for us so that we might become the blessing of God.

That is the gospel. That is how you can make sense of the valley between blessing and curse. When you get confused about which is which, you have to set your eyes on Christ and follow him.

Being or not being like Abimelech isn't the point. Of course we have lessons to learn here. Do not make yourself king. Do not set up tyrannical kingdoms. And don't follow those who do.

So we need to trust in a good and faithful king who loves us and takes the curse due us from our sin and unfaithfulness so we can be made right and loved and blessed before our God.

God is at work. You may not see it. You may not understand it. But he is at work. Trust in him for he alone is worth your trust. Even when you stray. We are prone to wander and leave the one we love. But he calls us back to love and walk with him.

There is a king who you can follow who is a servant. He took brambles upon his head as a crown of thorns. They were placed there by people who hated him and wanted his death to be as shameful and painful as possible. But this king's blood was the very thing that would heal them. His sacrifice on the altar between justice and mercy would redeem them from the tyranny of other kings. His crown was to mock him, and yet it was his glory to be a servant, to suffer and die for his people.

This king was filled with truth and integrity. He was the very Word of God made flesh (John 1). He did what he said he was going to do, and he never sinned along the way (read the book of Hebrews). And yet he still submitted to the crushing blow of God's sovereignty – that he was to die in payment for the sins of his people. God returned *onto Jesus* the sins of those

who had made others their kings. He returned the evil of the ones who had chosen evil in the land onto the head of Jesus. So we could be blessed. That is amazing grace. How sweet the sound.

That is whom we serve. That is a picture of blessing and cursing for you – found in Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.

A King and a Kingdom, Derek Webb

*who's your brother, who's your sister
you just walked passed him
i think you missed her
as we're all migrating to the place where our father lives
'cause we married in to a family of immigrants*

(chorus)

*my first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man
my first allegiance is not to democracy or blood
it's to a king & a kingdom*

*there are two great lies that i've heard:
"the day you eat of the fruit of that tree, you will not surely die"
and that Jesus Christ was a white, middle-class republican
and if you wanna be saved you have to learn to be like Him*

*but nothing unifies like a common enemy
and we've got one, sure as hell
but he may be living in your house
he may be raising up your kids
he may be sleeping with your wife
oh no, he may not look like you think*