

Judges 9

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[0 : 00] There are times, and I know because I've been there myself, when you're listening to something but you aren't really paying attention and you get to the end and sit there and think, I have no idea what I just read. Sometimes you are paying attention and you still get to the end and you think, nope, don't have a clue what was going on there. I just want to say, if you're feeling that way about Judges 9 right now, don't worry. That's exactly how I was feeling when I first read the passage. What on earth is going on here? So the plan this morning is basically to walk through the passage so we can understand what is going on and stop off at various points along the way to pause and listen to what God's word here in this book can teach us. But before we get stuck in, I think it's well worth our time just setting the scene as we're putting this passage into a bit of context. We're in the book of Judges and that means decline. The story of Judges is from beginning to end, just a story of a downward spiral of Israel. Having just come into the promised land under

Joshua, the book begins with Israel relatively united and more importantly, following their God. By the end of the book, there is civil war and the nation has given itself over to idolatry.

So in Judges 9, we find ourselves in the midst of this downward spiral. And if you read through the book as a whole, there appears to be a pretty clear pattern to proceedings. In the main section of the book, what is sort of called the cycle of Judges, you have a fairly obvious formula. The people of Israel sin or do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. God sends oppressors to punish them. Israel cries out for help. God sends a judge.

The judge delivers them. The judge dies. Israel relapses and it starts over again. This happens again and again and again. Israel sins, is oppressed. A judge comes, delivers, dies. Israel relapses. But as you go through the book, Israel becomes worse and worse and worse. And the judges become worse worse and worse and worse. So you begin with the judge, Othniel, who is presented very briefly, but flawlessly. And then you end the book with Samson, who is just an absolute mess of a man.

[2 : 48] But then right in the middle of this downward spiral of judges, it is chapter 9, which doesn't seem to fit the pattern at all. Israel do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord, first box checked, but then it's all about a benelic, who isn't a judge, he's just a wannabe king. So we're in the middle of the downward spiral of judges, and we come across this story about a self-made king and the Shechemites. And you're thinking to yourself, why? Why is this story in the middle of the book all about judges? Well, hopefully we'll answer that question in the next half hour.

So let's get stuck into the story, and we'll begin at the passage we read at the end of chapter 8. So we see there, in chapter 8 and verse, well, 31, our main character is introduced.

Abimelech. Who is he? To begin with, he's just the tack-on son of Gideon. You can see there in verse 30 of chapter 8 that Gideon, or Jerubal, as he was also known, he had 70 sons, in no small part, thanks to his polygamy. And then verse 31 introduces Abimelech. His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelech. There were 70 sons of Gideon's own offspring, and then there was Abimelech, born of a concubine. So Abimelech's introduction is quite unique. I mean, he's highlighted, but he's highlighted for less than fantastic reasons.

And it almost introduces him like he isn't a real son of Gideon at all. Gideon had 70 sons of his own, and then there was also Abimelech over here. Then Gideon dies, and what happens when a judge dies?

Israel relapses, starts sinning again. And verses 34 and 35 really set up everything that is about to happen. Israel set up Balbereth as their god, and did not remember the Lord their god, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show any loyalty to the family of Jerubal, that is Gideon, in spite of all the good things he had done for them. They did not remember their god, and they did not show any loyalty or love to Gideon's family. Hold

those two things in your mind as we come to chapter 9. Didn't remember their god and showed no loyalty.

[5 : 37] And the opening verses of chapter 9 give us the first real glimpse of Abimelech's character. And straight away we can see a couple of things. Abimelech is ambitious, and he's shrewd.

He goes to his mom's family, and says to them, go to your leaders, go to the rulers of Shechem, and convince them that having me as king is a much better idea than having all my brothers rule over you. Now towards the end of Gideon's life, Gideon himself had pretty clearly expressed, I shall not rule over you, and my sons shall not rule over you. But the message obviously hasn't got through.

Because here the rulers of Shechem seem to accept there's only two options. Right? Either Abimelech rules over them, or all the sons of Gideon rule over them. I'm convinced that these are the only two options. The rulers of Shechem agree with Abimelech. Right? A monarchy you know is somehow better than an oligarchy you don't. But notice at the end of verse two, exactly what Abimelech is calling the rulers of Shechem to do. Remember, I am your flesh and blood. Should we be ringing bells? What do we just see the big problem with Israel was at the end of chapter eight? They did not remember their God. And here, Abimelech is asking them to remember him.

Remember who he is. And the rulers of Shechem see a lot of sense in Abimelech's proposition. Sounds like a good argument. I mean, he's not done anything for us.

We have no reason to trust him. He's suspiciously keen for the throne. But he's a distant cousin. So let's go for it. They remember who Abimelech is and totally forget about who God is. People of Shechem have what you might call very selective memories. But they're not alone. This was a nationwide problem. But Israel's big problem with remembering wasn't in the sense of short-term memory loss. They didn't wake up one day and find themselves wiped clean of all that happened. Their big problem was basically their ingratitude.

The problem was their total disregard for what God had done for them and their unwillingness to let that dictate how they lived their lives. If you were to ask them what happened, I'm pretty sure they would have been able to tell you everything from Abraham to the Exodus to Joshua. The problem was their lives in the present were in no way affected by what had happened in the past. All the good things that God had done for them as a people, bring them out of Egypt, giving them the promised land. They were good then, but they've got other problems now. Today's problem was one ruler or 70 rulers. And forgetting all about their God, all about what he's done for them, it's time to focus on the here and now and make whatever decision seems more sensible in their own minds. In one sense, you look at the Shechemites and you think, what a bunch of Muppets. Are you really going to make this guy king just because you know his mum? But like so many of the idiots in the Bible, whether the people of Shechem, the whole of Israel, the disciples in the New Testament, they quite often look like idiots, and they are idiots, but a little bit of introspection and you realize we're just like them.

[9 : 18] And just like the people of Shechem, we have very selective memories too. We know all the stuff, but we don't really let it dictate our lives. We know that Jesus died for our sins, we know he rose again, we know we're united to him, we know what God has done for us, we know those things, but how much do those realities really affect our everyday lives? Do we go about remembering our God?

So often that the great things that God has done for us just get pushed to the back of the cube, because in our own little world, we've got more pressing issues at hand. Are our whole lives really affected by the amazing news of the gospel?

Do we remember what God has done for us through the week? Are we the same at work on a Monday as we are at church on a Sunday? Maybe even read your Bible every morning, which is a great thing to do, but then that box is sort of checked and you go out the door, and you've done your bit for the day, and then you forget about being a Christian for the next 12 hours.

How much in the daily struggle of the Christian life do we really remember our God? The people of Shechem, they didn't remember their God at all. Instead, they remembered Abimelech was their relative, and he seemed like the best viable option.

So what do they do? Well, they give Abimelech 70 shekels to go and kill his 70 brothers. One shekel, a few grams of silver, per life.

[10 : 53] And Abimelech gladly accepts it. He goes and hires reckless men, worthless scoundrels. He marches up to his father's house, that's Gideon's house, where all his brothers presumably

lived.

And one by one, mercilessly slaughters them on a single stone. Pretty grim, right? Doesn't sound like an ambush. This wasn't over in a second.

Abimelech deliberately and purposefully murders each and every one of his brothers, one after the other. Except for one brother, the youngest, Jotham, who manages to escape.

The leaders of Shechem think this is all well and good. Right? Can't see any potential problem here. Seems like a great idea, doesn't it? How could having a murderous tyrant rule over you possibly go wrong?

But because of where their hearts were, because they had no recollection of God in their minds, that they make what is a bafflingly terrible decision.

[12:00] And so in verse 6, Abimelech becomes king. And on hearing what's going on, Jotham, the brother who escaped, he shows up on a mountain and addresses the people with a slightly bizarre story, really.

But if you look down there, verse 7, you can see that he's addressing the people of Shechem. Right? Not Abimelech. Even though Abimelech was the one who'd done all the killing.

The people are responsible for the king they choose. The guy's a lunatic, but it was them that made him king. And they're going to suffer because of it.

So Jotham tells this tale about trees asking other trees to be king. Appears to be some kind of fable. Basically, the first three trees are asked to be king, and they say no.

But they're all the most valuable trees in Palestine. You've got the olive tree, which produces olive oil. The fig, which produces figs, obviously. The vine, which produces wine.

[13:10] All good things, but each of them rejects the kingship. So the trees, desperate for a king, ask a bramble to rule over them. A thorn bush.

The whole point being, can you believe they would do something so stupid? And the bramble says, sure, come and enjoy my shade.

The thorn bushes aren't particularly renowned for good shade. The whole thing's just a farce, and that's the point. But if you look at verse 19, you can see that Jotham is saying, listen, terrible decision.

But, if, big if, if it was an honest mistake, fair enough. I hope it goes well for you, and you enjoy your time under the bramble that is Abimelech, and that you guys get on well together.

But if not, if you knew what you were doing, if you knew the treachery of Abimelech, if you knew he was going to murder Gideon's family, then this whole thing is going to go up in flames.

[14:19] Brambles might not be good for much, but they're good at catching fire. In one sense, it's a kind of covenant slash contract. If you acted in good faith, may it go well.

If you didn't, it's going to go badly. There's a choice. But the problem, obviously, for the people of Shechem, is that they've already made their choice. They knew fine well what Abimelech was, that Abimelech was a pretty dodgy character.

I mean, not only were they aware that he was planning on killing his brothers, they actually gave him the money to do so. There's no innocence here. And so, effectively, Jotham is pronouncing judgment on the Shechemites and Abimelech.

Because they did not remember their God, and they did not show any loyalty or love to Gideon. Despite what both Gideon and God had done for them, that this whole thing is going to end in a disaster.

Then three years pass by, verse 22. Abimelech reigns in Israel, or at least part of Israel, but we're not told anything about his reign.

[15:27] And three years might sound like quite a long time for this guy to be ruling the place. But interestingly, Abimelech's three years are, by some distance, the shortest time period recorded in the Book of Judges.

Not only did every judge judge for longer, but every oppressor oppressed for longer. Abimelech's reign of terror wasn't allowed to last for very long.

And so then we have this long story of Abimelech's downfall. And it's fascinating in many ways. We don't really have time to go through it all in much detail.

Important, though, is the introduction it gets in verses 23 and 24. Everything that's about to come is firmly in God's control. God stirred up animosity between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, so that they acted treacherously against Abimelech.

God did this in order that the crime against Jerubal's 70 sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem who had helped him murder his brothers.

[16:38] If you were to read through the account on its own, you might well be totally oblivious to God's hand in it, that things just happen. Right? But that is so often how God brings justice.

Not usually with thunder and lightning, but by simply causing evil to destroy evil. And it might not look like much from the outside, but God will never let the wickedness in the world go unpunished. He will always, eventually, deal with it. Sometimes it's hard to see. You look around all the injustice, whether in the world or just in your own life, and think, why are things allowed to happen this way? Jotham was probably sitting around for those three years thinking, how on earth is Abimelech getting off of this? We'll never, certainly in this life, understand all the intricacies of God's purposes. But we can be certain that in the end, justice will be done and evil will end. Because we can be sure that God is in control of all. Here in Judges 9, God simply sows some seed of division between Abimelech and Shechem, and they take care of the rest on their own.

[18:06] Just to give a very brief overview of verses 25 through to 57. A rebel appears in Shechem, verse 26.

His name is Gal, and he drunkenly rouses a revolution in verse 29. The city governor is Abimelech's henchman who warns Abimelech of what is going on.

So Abimelech sneaks up in the city, and Gal is forced up, forced to back up his big, bold claims with bold actions. And he basically just gets minced. And by verse 41, you're left thinking, hey, problem solved.

Right? Gal tried to rise up against Abimelech. Abimelech put out the fire. Nothing more to see here. And that, evidently, is what the people of Shechem thought in verse 42.

The events of the previous day, as eventful as they were, that they're past. They're gone. The revolution has been dealt with. Let's just get back to everyday life. So they go out in the fields, ready for another's day work.

[19:13] What they don't realize is that the fire's been kindled. This fire that Jotham promised would come. Because Abimelech, he's just lost it.

He's totally lost it. We've all lost our tempers at some point. And it might begin with a genuine injustice. But the anger in you soon just spills out.

And anyone, I mean, anyone who gets within 20 feet of you is going to be on the receiving end. But very quickly, it's not about righting a wrong. It's just about taking your anger out on anyone or anything.

And Abimelech is in about as foul a temper as you can imagine. The people of Shechem, they amble out for their day's work. And out of nowhere, Abimelech's men come and slaughter them. Cold-blooded, unprovoked, unarmed civilians, and Abimelech just wipes through them. But he doesn't stop his rampaging there. The fire's been kindled, and next, the fire becomes quite literal.

[20:22] Abimelech traps the remaining people of Shechem in a tower. He gets his gang of hooligans to gather up some firewood and then lights the whole thing up. You're thinking, surely by this point, Abimelech's got his revenge.

But Abimelech doesn't stop there. The next stop on his rampage is the time of Thebes in verse 50. But why? Big question for Abimelech seems to me, why not?

It's just whatever's in his way, he's going to get rid of. So he goes off to Thebes, and remember, this whole episode began because of an apparent uprising in Shechem that had very quickly been quashed.

But still, Abimelech marches on. He appears to take the city of Thebes in verse 50 with ease and finds the unfortunate citizens have done the same thing as people in Shechem.

They've locked themselves in a tower. And Abimelech knows exactly what to do with people who've locked themselves in the tower. So he gets the firewood again. But this time, there's a twist.

[21:32] Because there's a woman who happens to have a millstone with her. It's like when the fire alarm goes off, what we all know, you don't take anything with you. We all take something with us.

Right? Whether it's your phone, your keys, your wallet, your purse, a snack from the fridge. But we're all going to take something. And in Thebes, the fire alarm has gone off.

They're equivalent of an air raid siren. You're not supposed to take anything with you. You know that. But one particular woman has decided to take her millstone with her. Just grab it on the way at

the door.

It's an odd choice, but a providential one. This big old hunk of rock used for mashing grain. Up she goes with the tower. Plugged it all the way up. And once she's up there, she's a much easier way of getting it back down as Abimelech approaches the door.

I don't know if you've seen Hot Fuzz. That's probably not a helpful image in people's heads. That's the end of Abimelech. Desperately tries to salvage some pride.

[22 : 39] Fails miserably. And we see again how God has been behind all this. Verse 56, thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his 70 brothers.

God also made people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerobal came on them. But we're still left with a big question.

Why is this story here? Why is this story of rubbish King Abimelech in the middle of the book of Judges? And the answer I think is all about kingship.

We've seen the importance of remembering our God and trusting his justice. But this story is pointing to something much bigger. When you get to the end of the book of Judges there's a clear problem.

In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The judges weren't enough. Israel needed a king.

[23 : 48] And because there was no king, no head, everyone was going around as their own ruler, their own lawmaker, their own king. It was essentially a culture of individualism.

Sounds quite familiar. If you thought something was right you go and do it. And don't let anyone else tell you differently. After all, aren't we all our own king and queen?

And that's exactly what happens when we allow ourselves to rule our lives. We decide what is right and wrong. We decide what is good and evil. And so the book of Judges in many ways has a very contemporary message.

You need a king because if you don't, if you decide for yourselves what's right and wrong, if you decide what is good and evil, you'll very quickly find yourself in this downward spiral where things just get worse and worse and worse with no end in sight.

And if you want evidence of it just look outside. We need a king. You need a king. But Judges 9 right in the middle of this book about the need for kingship says loud and clear not just any king will do.

[25 : 02] You need a king but you need the right king. And the right king will be everything that Abimelech is not. He'll be gentle, he'll be humble, he'll be loving, he'll be kind, he'll be powerful.

Of course the closest Israel got was King David. But we know that we have the perfect king because Jesus was and is everything that Abimelech was not.

We need a king to guide us in paths of righteousness, a king who isn't desperate for power but who's humble. A king who won't burn his people but will give himself up for them.

If we choose the wrong king we will, like the people of Shechem, be held accountable for our decision. For our bafflingly terrible choice. If we let our lives be ruled by anything other than the right king we might as well be camping under a bramble and lighting a fire.

But the king we need is offered to us. Without a king we'll inevitably descend into this downward spiral. We need a king and we need the right king.

[26 : 23] We need Jesus to be the king of our lives. But we've got to trust him in everything we do. Everything we do. But if you're not following king Jesus then you will like Shechem face the judgment that you deserve.

We need to remember our God in everything we do. We need to trust his justice. But more important than anything we need to trust his king. Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your word.

We thank you for the truths contained within all its pages. Lord we pray that we would not be a forgetful people but that we would remember you in all that we do. Lord help us to trust in your justice and your righteousness.

to know that you will not let wickedness go unpunished. Lord help us most of all to trust in Jesus our own great king.

May we follow him in all that we do. Forgive us for when we have done what is wrong in your eyes and right in our own. Enable us to trust in Jesus in all that we do.

[27 : 43] In his great name we pray. Amen.