

JUDGES & ROMANS: RUINED TO RIGHTEOUS

Lesson 11: Ruin of Judgment

Key Verse: 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.~ Judges 9.56-57

Nepo babies are the children of powerful and wealthy people. Differing from trust fund babies, nepo babies have the advantage of instant access to power and unparalleled careers/opportunities because their talent is judged on the basis of their famous and/or powerful parents. This “unequal advantage” is decried for its ability to take away opportunities from people with more talent. The legitimacy of their advantage can create discord within their industry colleagues, and even more, can produce controversial behaviors leading to well-earned judgment and criticism. Likewise, Abimelech’s life as a nepo baby led to controversial behaviors and decisions that earned God’s **judgment**. Then, as now, God’s holiness is the legal and moral standard by which He is humanity’s **Just Judge**. Though in this passage God’s judgment is focused upon Abimelech, God is forecasting His most severe judgment as Just Judge through the nepo baby lifestyle of Jair’s sons: refusing to save His people! (Judges 10.11-14)

Just Judge, we praise You for Your judgment against sin. We Thank You for bearing the judgment we deserved through the crucifixion of Your Son. We worship You as our God and our Savior. Holy is Your Name.

Judges 9.1-10.5 Abimelech: 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.” **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.

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. **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.’

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-millo 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. **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. **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 say 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, saying, "Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up 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 mistake 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.

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. **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.

CH 10 Tola: After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. **2** And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.

Jair: **3** After him arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. **4** And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. **5** And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

Diamonds: Abimelech's story begins in Judges 8.22-34. Abimelech is a classic nepo baby: entitled with an arrogant disregard of anyone other than himself. While murderous tendencies are not represented among all nepo babies, the truth is that growing up privileged and with unparalleled status – his name means "my father is king" – shaped him. Abimelech's pursuit of his namesake's destiny is sought through the lineage of his mother's family tree rather than his father's, Gideon/Jerubbaal (Judges 9.1).

Abimelech doesn't linger too long at his father's post-funeral meal¹ in Ophrah (Judges 8.32). Instead, Abimelech quickly

¹ Or Gayle's Good Cookin'

returns to his birth country (Shechem) to seize on his namesake's destiny: king.

1. Read Judges 8.22-9.5. There seems to be contradictory and confusing information about the religious orientation of God's own people threaded throughout the final verses of Judges 8. What role do you imagine the religious *disorientation* of God's people played in the rise of Abimelech (Judges 9.1-5)? In other words, as you consider and ponder all that happens in Judges 8.22-9.5, what do you imagine allowed the rise of Abimelech?

Like his father, Jotham must go into hiding to save his life (Judges 9.5). But unlike his father, he was hiding from his own brother's murderous intentions! Jotham comes out of hiding to attend Abimelech's "coronation"² to pronounce what is later revealed as a "curse" (Judges 9.57). Theologians point out Jotham's strategic and acoustical advantage on Mount Gerizim. Even more so, this is the location of "a solemn covenant renewal ceremony" led by Joshua upon Israel's arrival in Canaan³ (Joshua 8.30-35). What a contrast God's people have become on this mountain, from their past covenant ceremony under Joshua's leadership to their present installation of a king who is best described as "bramble", or a wild, unpredictable, thorny, combustible vine or shrub!

Jotham's insult is underscored in his comparison of "bramble" to productive olive and fig trees (Judges 9.9-10), championship wine vineyards (Judges 9.13), and the soaring heights of the "cedars of Lebanon" (Judges 9.15). Jotham's final insult to his captivated audience is their willingness to surrender their worth to Abimelech's threats of destruction in Judges 9.15. While it is understandable that these leaders would be cautious in dealing with someone willing to hire "worthless and reckless fellows" to help kill his own brothers, Jotham's curse is based less on Abimelech's character but instead on the character of those willfully anointing Abimelech as their king.

2. Jotham's disgust is expressed in Judges 9.16-19. This is also the basis of his curse in Judges 9.20. What challenge to the *character* of the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo does Jotham make? How does Jotham challenge them to see their own treachery in this situation?
3. What is Jotham's curse in Judges 9.20?
4. Through Jotham's curse, how do you see the leadership of God's own people willfully giving themselves over to their own depraved, sin-filled thinking and justifications (Romans 1.28, 32)?

Interestingly, God made Abimelech His tool to render the judgment of Abimelech and of his own people⁴.

5. From Judges 9.24 and 9.56-57, what is the purpose of God's intentional discord through the "evil spirit" He sent?

God's sovereign plan and how He wills His plan is a complicated matter (Job 1.21)! His Sovereignty assures us that we are firmly within His plan for all of humanity and creation, however the finite details of how He wills His sovereign plan are often difficult to comprehend as they occur and even more so in the aftermath of the collateral damage permitted by His will (Judges 9.45, 49). We know our obedience to God's commands is His will ("preceptive will"). However, how He wills His plan is sometimes counter to the obedience we know He wills and wants from His people ("decretive will"). Soon, in the story of Samson we will again wrestle with the complicated nature of God's sovereign plan and how He wills His plan (Judges 14.1-4).

6. What does Paul teach us about God's will and His sovereign plan in Romans 9.14-24? (*It is helpful to read this*

² Davis, p. 120

³ Webb, p. 160

⁴ Davis p. 124 & Webb pp. 161-162

passage using additional translations.) Paul's focus in Romans 9 is on why God's own people were unable to recognize God's Son. Paul established his argument in both God's sovereignty and His will. As such, what are the basic truths Paul teaches us about God's sovereign plan and how He wills His plan through Romans 9.14-24 (or, if you like, throughout Romans 9)?

7. What comfort and/or assurance do you find in these basic truths about God's sovereign plan and how He wills His plan, most especially when His sovereign plan ("decretive will") counters how He wills His plan for our lives ("preceptive will")? (See Judges 9.24 and 14.3-4.) In other words, what comfort and/or assurance will you find through these basic truths when your obedience to God's commands (His will) are blocked by circumstances or situations God has placed in your life (His sovereign plan)?

Tola saves Israel from itself!⁵ Abimelech left Israel dysfunctional and abysmal while Tola "judges" Israel towards stability and safety from enemies⁶. Even though he is a minor judge (meaning less is said of him than others), the volume of what is unsaid about Tola's time is loudest. No wars, no disputes, no nepotism. Assumed in this is that the LORD provided 23 years of sustenance, safety, and productive leadership. His role is to contrast the character and leadership of Abimelech.

Jair's ascent is on the heels of Tola providing Jair a land already settled into productivity and growth⁷. However, the failed leadership pattern of nepotism repeated itself with his 30 nepo baby sons ruling 30 cities. In addition, the pagan tradition of acquiring concubines is implied by the number of sons Jair sired (Judges 10.4). It's clear Jair had a tendency towards self-interest and oligarchy in his family's collection of 30 donkeys and 30 cities. Like a root bound plant starving itself to death, Jair sets the stage for Israel's grotesque and unconscionable abuse in the final chapters of Judges.

Deity: Just Judge~ (Judges 9.56) "Just" means legally correct: faithful to an original: conforming to a standard of correctness; "Judge" means to make an official decision about: to act with authority to reach a decision.

God is our Just Judge (Deuteronomy 32.4; 2 Corinthians 5.10). He can be trusted to do what is exactly right and legally correct (according to God's holy standard) with every human being (Genesis 18.25; Romans 2.1-16; Revelation 20.12-13).

As Just Judge, God alone is the final authority in knowing whose heart has been circumcised, changed by the Holy Spirit to seek His praise alone (Matthew 13.24-30; Romans 2.17-29). We are cautioned not to usurp His authority by judging others using standards that we too transgress, thus inviting condemnation (Romans 2.1-3).

8. Recall God provided His final "rest" for the land during the time of Gideon (Judges 8.28). Recall that Judges 2.11-23 tells us how this story ends without us having to read the last chapter of this book! In what ways do God's people in Judges 8.22-10.5 accelerate the downward spiral of depravity? (Paul discussed this in Romans 1.28-2.13!)

9. Why do we all need a Just Judge?

⁵ Webb, p. 171

⁶ Davis, p. 128 & Webb, p. 172

⁷ Davis, p. 129 & Webb, p. 173

Doctrine: Judgment~ (Judges 9.56-57) “He who is the Word of God speaks all things into existence and also pronounces judgment – He is Lord at the first as Creator, then Lord as Savior, and Lord at the end as Judge.”⁸

“The holiness and righteousness of God demand that He execute perfect justice on the final day. At the end of human history, God will judge the world, and His eternal purpose for redemptive history will, at last, be fulfilled.”⁹

“The Son of God, as the Son of Man (a messianic title from Daniel 7.13), will judge the wicked and the righteous (Matthew 25.31, 41; John 5.22-23, 27)...Who better than the one person of the Godhead who is truly human and who has experienced life as a man in a fallen world and remained blameless, without sin (John 9.39; Romans 2.16)?...On the other hand, Jesus says that, in His first coming, He did not judge those who do not obey His words, because He “did not come to judge the world but to save the world (John 12.47). However, “on the last day”, at His second coming, the words of Jesus will judge those who reject Him and do not give heed to His words. Jesus did not speak on His own authority; the Father commanded Jesus what to speak (John 12.49). Because He is one with the Father, His judgment is always just (John 5.30) and righteous.”¹⁰

“...although justification is indeed by faith, judgment will be according to works...the day of [God’s] judgment will be a public occasion (Romans 2.9). Its purpose will be less to determine God’s judgment than to announce it and to vindicate it. The divine judgment, which is a process of sifting and separating, is going on secretly all the time, as people set themselves up for or against Christ, but on the last day its results will be made public...And the only public evidence available will be our works, what we have done and have been seen to do. The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives...authentic saving faith always issues in good works...”¹¹

This doctrine rightly produces a mixture of fear and angst. However, as the psalmist says, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your Throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before You.” (Psalm 89.14) God’s judgments secure both truth and worth in a sin-marred world, and in eternity to come. As such, *every* person’s worth is cemented before God, and *every* person’s actions carry eternal significance.

The arrival of two prophets thus far and their messages has set the stage for God’s people’s deplorable decline in the final chapters of Judges. While there is (perhaps) a brief interlude in the downward spiral in the concluding half of Judges in Chapter 10, in truth, God’s warning to His people remains clear: “you have not obeyed” (Judges 6.10). His progressive judgment against their persistent idolatry reveals their stiff-necked nature and hardened hearts against God.

10. Recall God’s intervention using a prophet He sent to His people in Judges 6.7-10. What was the message from God to His people through His prophet? How does this message mirror what God had said to His people through another prophet in Judges 2.1-3?

11. For what is God bringing judgment on His people in Judges? How does God’s judgment in Judges prove Psalm 89.14? Even as this doctrine produces fear and angst, what about it also produces anticipatory joy?

⁸ MacArthur & Mayhue, p. 245

⁹ Lawson, Stephen J., “*The Moment of Truth*” (Sanford, Florida: Ligonier Ministries, 2018)

¹⁰ MacArthur & Mayhue, p. 245

¹¹ Stott, p. 69

Your Scripture-Soaked Prayer: Take some time to reflect and meditate on the idea of judgment producing anticipatory joy. If it is appropriate, write your SSP using anticipatory joy before your Just Judge and His judgment of you.

Lecture Outline:

Aim: God's justice will ultimately triumph over all evil.

- I. Abimelech's Rise (Judges 9.1-21) **T1:** God's justice is assured, even when He is silent or seems absent.
 - a. What wrongs or injustices are burdening your heart today?
 - b. What is your peace-producing strategy when God is silent or seems absent?
- II. Abimelech's Reign (Judges 9.22-49) **T2:** God's justice is assured, even when circumstances appear hopelessly evil.
 - a. What circumstances in your life or in our world today appear hopelessly evil?
 - b. Which truths about God do you need to remember as you wait for His justice to be revealed?
- III. Abimelech's Ruin (Judges 9.50-10.5) **T3:** God's justice is assured because He remains faithful even when we are not.
 - a. How does that truth convict you of your unfaithfulness to God?
 - b. Which thoughts, words, and deeds do you need to repent of to live in more wholehearted obedience to God?
 - c. How does His assured justice and unflinching faithfulness comfort you as you live in this broken and often dark world?

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