

November 13, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Judges 9:1-21.

1. In the recent election, did you ever get discouraged?
2. Do you think that Donald Trump is God's choice to be our president?
3. What do you think is ultimately going to happen with America?
4. Do you think God is really in control?
5. If you believe God is in control, why do you believe it?
6. If God is in control, why is our nation experiencing such troubling times?

BRAMBLES MAKE POOR LEADERS
Judges 9:1-21

We have just endured the most divisive, embarrassing election in the short history of the United States. The real problem is not that the 600 days of arguing, lying, false accusations, backbiting, and snipping caused a division in the society. The real problem is that the ideological division has existed for years. This election, and no doubt those that follow, will only bring that divide to the surface. Just over 150 years ago our society endured a war that destroyed nearly three quarters of a million of our citizens and destroyed billions of dollars of infrastructure. Most people have been taught that the cause of the

war was a moral issue. However, from the beginning the ideological divide at that time was between a large centralized government with power over the people versus authority of individual states to be governed by the citizens of the states. We are simply witnessing that same ideological divide plastered on the news every day.

Thinking about these things can be quite discouraging. How can the two sides ever agree? They cannot. What can be done? Probably nothing. The whole culture will slowly disintegrate and then, given enough time, will rebuild into a different kind of culture, like scores of cultures before us have done. Wow! It's too bad God doesn't do something about this mess, isn't it? Actually, this is God's mess. Things in the world are messed up and will continue to be messed up and more messed up until Jesus the King comes to reign. The Bible says so.

I suppose there were sincere people who lived in Israel around 1150 B.C. who were plagued by the same kind of conflicting thoughts we have. God had used Gideon in a most astonishing way to deliver the people from the mighty Midianites. In response, the people offered to make Gideon the king and to submit to his family as a dynasty. On the surface, Gideon refused the offer. But then immediately he started acting like the king. In time, Gideon died and the whole culture was turned on its head. Gideon's son who was born through a concubine decided he wanted to be king. He led a coup and killed nearly all of Gideon's sons in order to have the throne that supposedly didn't exist.

Surely there were people alive in that day who either had experienced God's victory over the Midianites through Gideon or had at least heard about it. Surely they wondered where God went. Why would God allow this kind of wickedness to go unchecked? Was God even aware of it? Actually, God was quite aware because He was in control! The people thought they had chosen Abimelech to be their king. God reserved the right to give a king to His people in His own timing. This was not His timing. But Abimelech was His choice. There is an old saying that says: "God generally gives people the kind of leadership they deserve." The people of Shechem and Ophrah deserved Abimelech. That was the conclusion of Jotham, Gideon's one surviving son. He warned the people that Abimelech was like a

briar patch, and as we all know they aren't much good for anything unless they have blackberries on them.

Son of a Concubine; Son of a King (vv.1-6).

Abimelech executed a plan (vv.1-4). His plan was simple. He planned to be king. At the outset of executing his plan, Abimelech focused on particular people. *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 (v.1).*

Did this grand idea come from the fact that the name *Abimelech* means "son of the king" or "my father is king"? Gideon gave the boy this name (8:31). Did Gideon choose this unique name because he thought of himself as king? How did such a name impact Abimelech while he was growing up? Maybe Gideon named him this to make up for the fact that the boy was an outsider and didn't fit with the rest of the family.

Abimelech had a famous father, but his mother was Gideon's concubine. Quite frankly, the only purpose a concubine served was to be the man's sex object. She was like a prostitute on a retainer, which made her available at Gideon's call. She did not live in Ophrah with "King" Gideon, his many other wives, or their 70 sons. Therefore, the fact is highlighted that Abimelech's mother's relatives were not related to any of Gideon's people in Ophrah. Abimelech and his mother were outsiders. They had plenty of relatives in Shechem, but they were not accepted as part of the family in Ophrah. They must have felt like every family's Uncle Wilbur who is related only through marriage and not well accepted by the rest.

Growing up in difficult circumstances, always feeling like an outsider, can cause a person to develop anti-social behaviors. Abimelech was a classic case study in the matter. When he came of age, the boy who had been treated like an outsider decided to make a name for himself. His plan was to divide and conquer. Some very successful warriors or generals have used that plan. So Abimelech went to his mother's relatives and said, *"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" (v.2).

After Gideon's death, the northern region of Israel went into campaign mode. Through Gideon, God had delivered the tribes of Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh from the Midianites. Presumably they also were the ones who asked Gideon to rule over them even down to his sons and grandsons (8:22). However, as things worked out, Gideon ended up with 70 sons who no doubt all vied for the "throne that was not," the position of king that Gideon claimed he didn't want or have. And then there was this one outcast named "My father is king" who decided he would be king.

Obviously, the people in the establishment, the people well situated and recognized in Gideon's immediate family, had the upper hand. They had grown up in the "beltway" of Ophrah and had all the right connections. They probably looked at Abimelech and his people as if they were a "basket of deplorables." Therefore, Abimelech decided to begin his campaign with the people in his hometown of Shechem.

Shechem was about 15 miles directly south of Ophrah where the establishment people lived. It was no insignificant city. Shechem is where God met with Abraham and promised to give all that land to His posterity, Israel. This was the city Jacob's sons ravaged because the leader's son raped their sister. At Shechem Joshua gave his last speech and reminded Israel of God's covenant with them. The leaders of Israel buried Joseph's bones in this town. It was a good place for Abimelech to begin his campaign for the throne.

The candidate's plan sounded good to his relatives. His persuasive speech turned the people's hearts. *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" (v.3).* Having one of their relatives as king sounded like a good idea to the people in Shechem. There were certainly good and capable people living in the city who could make what they considered to be sound decisions. Not everyone there was a concubine or the son of a concubine.

And suddenly it was Shechem against Ophrah, us against them. That is called polarization. Did neither party remember that they were all part of Israel? Because it was Shechem against the old order, the people sacrificed in order to help carry out the plan. *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 (v.4). The people created a Political Action Committee (Super PAC). They contributed a large amount of cash that they took from the First Church of Baal-berith. Apparently Baal worship, the sin that always brought God’s judgment against His people, was back in vogue after Gideon’s death. There was no separation of church and state issue here. That is, unless the folks up in Ophrah decided to take up a collection at the tabernacle to help one of Gideon’s sons. No doubt the Baal worshipers would have cried, “Foul!” But then again, it appears that Gideon had led the people of Ophrah back into Baal worship also.

A few weeks ago, at the height of the warfare we called the 2016 presidential campaign, I received a letter from an organization called Americans United for Separation of Church and State. You might have heard of them. It was two page letter warning me that churches are not allowed to be actively involved in promoting a particular candidate. The warning even went as far as to say that we are not allowed to hand out voter guides. The problem is that everything they warned about in the letter is not true. They simply leveled inaccurate threats in an effort to get their favored candidate elected.

By the way, there is a glaring double standard in this matter. Why are we not allowed to hand out information that might support a particular candidate, but the president, vice-president, and other high officials are allowed to speak in particular kinds of churches and whip up support for the Democratic candidate? Double standard is the rule in a corrupt culture.

Abimelech took the money from the church and hired rabble to help his campaign. Wow! No one would ever do that in America the home of the brave and land of the free, right? There is a name you need to be familiar with. George Soros is a wicked man of Jewish descent, a citizen of Hungary, and a citizen of the United States. When he was a youngster, he worked with the Hitler Youth to rat out fellow Jews who the Nazi’s then kidnaped, tortured, and sent to prison camps and often the gas chambers. Today Soros is a multi-billionaire. He is a globalist who desires one-world government. He is to me the embodiment of Antichrist. Between 1979 and 2011 he “donated” \$11 billion to various philanthropic causes. For Soros, a

philanthropic cause is anything that can disrupt good, peaceful societies in order to turn them into socialistic states that “someone” can control. To that end, it is now clear that his eleemosynary organization “Move On” spent millions of dollars in the last months to hire rabble to show up at various cities to disrupt Trump rallies. If you have seen news reports recently of riots in some cities in response to Trumps’ miraculous victory, realize that those were not spontaneous. The evidence is already in that most of those demonstrations are being financed by George Soros as he has hired rabble to disrupt a peaceful society. As Solomon said, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

Abimelech executed his brothers (vv.5-6). Having been nominated as Shechem’s candidate for the throne, Abimelech killed the members of His father’s house. *And he went to his father’s house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone (v.5a).* Eliminating the competition was a common practice for would-be kings. Pagan societies have experienced this for generations. Even in western cultures like England, Germany, and France, execution of the competition for the throne was common up until just a few centuries ago. Not surprisingly, even Israelites were known to do the same thing when they were out of fellowship with God—which was most of the time.

No doubt Abimelech thought his plan to assure the throne by destroying all competition was foolproof. But one got away. *But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself (v.5b).* Just one got away. No big deal. And he was the youngest. Yes, but often it is that “one” that comes back to haunt the evil man. . . or woman as in the later case of Athaliah who thought she had killed all the heirs of to the throne but had missed Joash whose ascension to the throne spelled her own death (2 Kings 11).

The people chose their king. *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 (v.6).* It looked like things were coming up roses for the folks in Shechem. Their hometown boy was now the king. They were in charge of Israel. Or maybe not. Politics and political victories or losses tend to blind us to the reality that God is in control. This is My Father’s world and we will do according to His plan.

Rejoice in Your Chosen Bramble (vv.7-21).

One day Gideon's youngest son showed up and told a story that illustrated a very important truth (vv.7-15). *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" (v.7).*

When news reached Jotham that Abimelech and his people had declared that he was the king, Jotham went up to Shechem and called a news conference. This was a significant place. The town of Shechem is located in the valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. When Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, he gathered them to Mount Gerizim which is situated right across from Mount Ebal. The leaders of Israel stood on Gerizim and Ebal and read the law, the promised blessings for obedience and promised curses for disobedience to the people gathered in the valley below.

So, too, Jotham addressed the leaders of Shechem regarding their relationship to God. One of God's promises from His law that Joshua and the leaders had rehearsed on that spot was: *You may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother (Deuteronomy 17:15).* Did God choose Abimelech to be king? No. Abimelech and the people of Shechem chose him. They didn't even worship God. Why would they consult Him about the matter. So they got the kind of leader they deserved.

God, who raises up kings and rulers and puts them down, often gives people the kind of rulers they deserve. That was Jotham's message. He pointed out how foolish people choose brambles to rule over them. Now olive trees, fig trees, and grape vines are productive and useful. Jotham said, *"The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' 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?' And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the vine, 'You*

come and reign over us.' But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?'"

The story simply addresses a question of wisdom. The people requested other people to rule over them. One person who received the request was like an olive tree (vv.8-9). Olive trees were a staple resource in Israel. They provided food, oil, and money to the economy. And so in wisdom the tree declined rather than to leave its resourcefulness. The same was true for the person who was like a fig tree (vv.10-11). And also the same response came from a grapevine-kind of person (v.12).

Obviously this is not a reference to God getting drunk. God who gives the gift of the fruit of the vine which was primarily wine is delighted in His creation. God intends for people to enjoy His provision in a responsible way. Being cheered by the new wine was not a matter of getting drunk, since the common practice was to dilute wine with water two to one or three to one in order to lower the alcoholic content.

The common sense response from the useful trees was, "We are engaged in important, useful, resourceful work." Why should we stop being useful in order to rule over rebels against God? I read in a sermon from an old, deceased preacher who said, "If God called you to preach the gospel, never stoop to become the president of the United States."

So if the people who have rejected God and His law in favor of worshiping imaginary gods cannot find a useful, productive leader, who will they get? They will choose a bramble. A bramble! Brambles are part of the curse. *"Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' 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'" (vv.14-15).*

After searching and asking, the trees finally found a willing participant – the bramble. What good are they? It is true that Brer Rabbit likes the briar patch because he is safe from Brer Fox in there. But other than that, unless the prickly bush has raspberries on it, it isn't much good. In fact the Hebrew word for **bramble** probably does describe the blackberry bush. But still this is the kind of plant that God established as part of the curse. *And to Adam he said, "Because*

you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field" (Genesis 3:17-18).

The cursed thing offered something it could not produce. Its relationship with the people will be built on faith. Do the people really trust the bramble (Abimelech), or was it a decision rooted in pride or convenience? If they trust him, they will need to yield to his leadership. He promised that if they yield to his leadership, he will provide shade. How much shade does a blackberry bush provide? Not much. Were the other "trees" listening to this promise?

Consider the other side of the agreement. If the people do not submit to the bramble by trusting him, he will destroy whatever is good. In his arrogance the bramble (Abimelech) promised to burn with fire from himself the most lofty trees even the cedars of Lebanon. Brambles provide little that is useful but are terribly dangerous.

Now in closing, we come to the application of the story (vv.16-21). In the middle of this section we find a long explanatory parenthesis (vv.17-18). Jotham argued with the people that "Dad" had risked his life to help the people. He reminded them, "*For my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian" (v.17)*. Moving from the story about the bramble demanding good faith from those he rules over, Jotham drove home the problem. The problem is that the people had not acted in good faith toward his father and his family. Gideon had risked his life to trust God. Gideon had risked his life to bring deliverance to the people.

Jotham pointed out that the people had showed their appreciation to Gideon by murdering his sons. Dad risked his life "*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"– (v.18)*. They each were personally responsible for the murder of Gideon's sons. They each were personally responsible for choosing an outsider, a ne'er-do-well, a son of a concubine to lead them. What did they have to fear?

What the people of Shechem needed to fear is the principle that time is on the side of truth (vv.16, 19-21). Did the people do right when they had the opportunity? "*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" – (v.16)*. The statement was intended to force the people to think. It is difficult for people who are at odds with their Creator to think rightly and critically. Generally people who are at odds with God make important decisions based solely on how they feel, not based on facts, and certainly not based on truth. For example: "Do I feel like going to work or not?" "Do I feel like a man or a woman?" "Do I feel like this baby in my womb will be an inconvenience to me?"

If they actually had acted in good faith, the people would be able to rejoice in righteousness. "*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" (v.19)*. If our decisions are in good faith, we can rejoice. If our decisions flow out of evil thoughts, wicked choices, unrighteous desires, well then, we just have to live with our unrighteous choice. "*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" (v.18)*.

Choices rooted in error, rooted in the sinful nature, are going to bring trouble. Whole cultures suffer in mutual destruction under wicked leadership. History is full of many examples of this such as how Nazi Germany and Hitler ended in disaster for him and the nation. And so did the Roman Empire, and Babylon, and on and on the list goes.

What can Jotham do? It is difficult for truth and error to live together. *And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother (v. 21)*. Jotham didn't move to Beer because he was distraught with the election results. He moved to Beer for his own safety and because he knew that the unfaithful attitude and practice of the people would always be in conflict with his own lifestyle. The statement means that he moved to a town named Beer, not that the people's decision drove him to the bottle. That is a modern practice.

God is in control. The further we move away from God personally, the more chaotic our life will be. The further a culture or nation moves away from God, the more difficult it is for God-fearing, God-loving people to live there. We rejoice that God has a plan and God is working His plan. While God works His plan with us personally and with our nation, we must consistently serve Him while He provides opportunity.