

“The Road to Decline”
Judges 8:34 – 9:57
(Preached at Trinity, April 12, 2015)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. By now it almost seems like the proverbial broken record. Back when music was played on a round piece of vinyl the needle of the phonograph followed the course of the groove etched into the record. On occasion a scratch would cause the needle to skip at the same place each revolution and play the same portion over and over. This seemed like Israel's history with their sins repeating over and over. Israel sins against God; God in His judgment hands them over to their enemies; Israel cries out in distress; God raises up a judge who defeats their enemy and they live in peace; the judge dies and Israel returns to their sin.
2. Only, as we come to **Chapter 9** we find that sin always progresses with greater and greater wickedness and decline. So far in the Book of Judges we've seen God raise up various pagan enemies in judgment upon Israel.
 - We've seen Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia.
 - Then we saw God raise up Eglon, the rotund king of Moab, to oppress Israel
 - We've seen the oppression of the Philistines
 - We've seen the domination of Jabin, the king of the Canaanites
 - And we've seen the Midianites
3. To read of the oppression and tyranny of these pagan people doesn't really surprise us. Israel suffered greatly at their hands. But in **Chapter 9** we find the downward spiral of sin bringing an ever increasing trial. In this chapter the enemy God raises up to judge Israel does not come from the pagan enemies surrounding Israel. God judges them through the enemy within. They chose to forget God and begin worshipping the God's of the Canaanites. The focus here is Shechem. This was the place where God promised Abraham the land of promise and it was there that Abraham built an altar of worship. Sadly, it is here that Israel now worships Baal.
4. Israel was now being plagued by the enemy within. There is no greater enemy and no more tragic downfall.
 - a. It can happen in a church. A church can go from a vibrant growing body to a church in decline that will eventually close its doors. No one from the outside causes it. It happens from within, and it happens to over 4000 churches each year in the U.S.
 - b. It can happen to a nation. We can see it in many ways with our own country. We have declined greatly but the enemy hasn't come from without. No one has forced it upon us. We have chosen our own path to demise.
 - c. And it can happen to individuals. We can slowly decline to our own destruction. Our worst enemy is the one that looks back at us when we look in the mirror. It is the enemy within.
5. Such decline can happen so gradually that you don't even realize it is happening. We can see in **Chapter 9** three dangers on this road to decline:

- I. The danger of forgetfulness
- II. The danger of poor leadership
- III. The danger of God's judicial hardening

I. The danger of forgetfulness – Judges 8:34-35

A. They forgot God

Judges 8:34 NAU - "Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God"

1. The name Yahweh is found 175 times in the Book of Judges but not once in Chapter 9. God was no longer prominent in their lives. They had fallen more and more under the influence of the Canaanites. They were now worshippers of the Canaanite gods.

Judges 8:33 NAU - "the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god."

(We should note that while God was absent from their thoughts He was surely not absent - **Judges 9:23 NAU** - "Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem")

2. This forgetfulness is the great sin of all humanity
Romans 1:18-21 NAU - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."
3. We saw the danger of Israel forgetting God in **Chapter 3**
Judges 3:7 NAU - "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth."
 - a. It wasn't that they forgot who God was. It isn't likely they forgot God's mighty deeds of deliverance. It's that they were no longer controlled by what they knew. God no longer made any difference in their lives.
 - b. This is the problem we see as we enter **Chapter 9**. Although they knew what God demanded of them they ignored the truth and turned their hearts over to the gods of the pagan nations.
Judges 8:33 NAU - " the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god."
 - c. What they knew about God had no bearing upon their lives. They were living as if God did not exist.
4. Forgetting God is the sure road to destruction.

- B. Forgetfulness of God was not their only failure to remember. The text also tells us they forgot to honor Gideon. They were ingrates.

Judges 8:35 NAU - "nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (*that is*, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel."

1. Had they properly honored Gideon they would not have so quickly forgotten his family. In failing to show gratitude towards Gideon they sinned against God.

Judges 9:16-18 NAU - "if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved-- ¹⁷ for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; ¹⁸ but you have risen against my father's house today and have killed his sons"

Gideon had fought valiantly for them but they showed no gratitude, no honor for him.

2. The Bible gives us clear instruction here.

Hebrews 13:7 NAU - "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith."

3. While God forbids the worship of our leaders He commands us to honor and appreciate them for their work.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 NAU - "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

1 Timothy 5:17 NAU - "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching."

4. Dale Ralph Davis – "Christians frequently show more skill using the critical knife than tendering grateful thanks to parents, pastors, mentors, friends, or educators who have labored to lead them in the grace and wisdom of God. When we ignore the instruments of God's grace we demean the Giver of that grace."

II. The danger of poor leadership – It is a sure road to decline

- A. As long as Israel had strong leaders they continued in faithfulness to God

1. Under the strong leadership of the judges they enjoyed peace
Othniel:

Judges 3:11 NAU - "Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died."

Ehud:

Judges 3:30 NAU - "And the land was undisturbed for eighty years."

Deborah:

Judges 5:31 NAU - "And the land was undisturbed for forty years."

2. But in each case, after the judge died Israel once again fell into sin and idolatry. But remember Israel is continuing to decline. They are continuing their downward spiral away from God. With Gideon as their judge we find Israel forgetting God even during the life of their judge.
 3. It began with the decline in Gideon's leadership.
 - a. We saw his decline last week. Although he refused an official coronation he lived like a king. He gathers financial reward and then makes an ephod which he placed in his town of Ophrah, in essence setting up a rival place of worship.
 - b. It was his divided family that was the beginning of the tragic details of **Chapter 9**. Abimelech was the result of Gideon's concubine in Shechem. If this detail of Gideon's life was excluded the events of Chapter 9 would not have happened.
Judges 8:30-31 NAU - "Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. ³¹ His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech."
- B. After the death of Gideon Abimelech schemes to gain the leadership. Again, Abimelech sees a Gideon dynasty and himself as the rightful heir. He saw his brothers as a serious obstacle.
1. He assassinates all of Gideon's 70 sons except Jotham, the youngest and then convinces the men of Shechem to receive him as their king. He uses a pragmatic argument:
Judges 9:2-3 NAU - "Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh." ³ And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our relative."
 2. He proves himself a most unworthy leader. Jotham describes him as a bramble bush—good only to be cut down and tossed into the fire
Judges 9:14-15 NAU - "Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' ¹⁵ "The bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon."
 3. Abimelech ruled for three years. (**Verse 22**) It led to both his ruin and the ruin of Shechem. We must not miss that they chose him to be their leader.
- C. Poor leadership is always a plague
1. The church has often been the victim of wicked leaders.
 - a. Paul referred to them as savage wolves
Acts 20:29-30 NAU - "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."

- b. John wrote of Diotrephes who was guilty of abusive authority
3 John 1:9-10 NAU - "I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰ For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire *to do so* and puts *them* out of the church."
- c. They can be very deceptive
2 Corinthians 11:13-15 NAU - "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds."
2. We have to be careful how we choose our leaders.
 Timothy Keller: "We are often far too easily impressed by qualities that are unimportant to God. Further, we can far too easily be swayed by pragmatic arguments. God does not prize popularity, humor, or academic intelligence, being an extrovert, and so on. He seeks men who hold to His truth, seek to lead their family rightly, are patient and self controlled."
3. We need Godly leaders who will give great attention to their leadership
1 Timothy 4:15-16 NAU - "Take pains with these things; be *absorbed* in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you."
- C. It is essential that our church will always seek good leaders who will teach sound doctrine. People who forget God will not seek out leaders who lead them to follow God
1. This marks the history of the world. The fall of man was ultimately a desire for autonomy. We find at the close of Judges:
Judges 21:25 NAU - "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."
2. Self-willed people do not want leaders to teach them the ways of God. What would happen if a Godly political leader stood up today and declared same-sex marriage a sin? What would happen if a leader stood up and declared dads to be essential to a healthy family?
3. The same is true in the church.
2 Timothy 4:2-4 NAU - "preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

4. In my ministry I have had times when I've given a clear exposition of Scripture only to hear people declare they don't believe it. In our culture of relativism it's too easy to dismiss a pastor's teaching by saying, "well that's just his interpretation." This is true. It is his interpretation. The issue is if it's the correct interpretation it is God speaking. If not the pastor should be corrected. But neither has the right to turn away from the truth.

III. The danger of God's judicial hardening – It is a fearful thing for God to give us over to ourselves

- A. When a people forget God He will give them over to their depraved mind
 1. This is the history of fallen humanity

Romans 1:21-24 NAU - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them."

Romans 1:26 NAU - "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions"

Romans 1:28 NAU - "God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper"

Psalms 14:1 NAU - "The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."
 2. The more a man suppresses the truth about God the more God hardens his heart. We can see this with Pharaoh. We read that he continued to harden his heart towards God but by the time we reach Exodus 9 we find God hardening his heart.

Exodus 10:1 NAU - "Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants"
 3. This is what we are witnessing with Abimelech and the Shechemites
 - a. Was Abimelech's scheme and the decision of Shechem in **Verse 3** Godly wisdom or the marks of a hardened, depraved mind?

Judges 9:3 NAU - "they were inclined to follow Abimelech"
 - b. By the time we get to **Verses 22-23** we clearly find the answer:

Judges 9:22-23 NAU - "Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³ Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech"
 - c. Whatever the means God turned these evil men upon each other

Andrew Fausset - "God has only to let loose men's bad passions, that evil men may be the scourges of one another."
 4. God turned them against each other to their mutual destruction.

5. The great matter of danger was it all seemed so reasonable and right to those involved. Those given over to a reprobate mind are blinded to this reality.
Churches can split with both factions thinking they are in the right.
Our nation's leaders actually believe their sinful choices are great wisdom.
- B. This needs to sound loudly as a warning to our church.
1. Christ must be the great focus of everything. When a church begins to stray from absolute dependence upon Him and great faithfulness to Him they begin to be hardened. They become blind to His absence.
Revelation 3:17-18 NAU - "Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,
¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see."
 2. We desperately need wisdom from the mind of God. This comes through His Word. This means we need to approach Scripture with a humble mind. We need God's instruction that our minds might be rightly informed.
Romans 12:1-2 NAU - "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Conclusion:

1. These dangers are true for people of every generation. They are dangers on the road to decline and ultimate destruction.
 - a. It begins with forgetting God. This doesn't mean amnesia. It means ceasing to recognize God as God, the rightful Ruler of all things.
 - b. Then people begin to surround themselves with incompetent leaders – the blind leading the blind.
 - c. Finally, God gives them up to a reprobate mind. He judicially hardens their heart and they continue on the pathway to destruction.
2. The only solution is to follow God with all our heart and humble ourselves under His rightful dominion. Of course, this is only possible through the Gospel.