

The Book of Judges

Lesson 16 - Chapters 9 and 10

We'll continue today in Judges chapter 9, the story of Avimelech (known more as Abimelech in English) the son of Gideon born of a Shechemite concubine.

Let's briefly review: Gideon had 70 sons by his legal wives and one son by a Canaanite woman from the city of Shechem. This meant that Gideon became a very wealthy man and lived a kingly lifestyle. Gideon's 70 legal wives were Hebrew women; his concubine (Avimelech's mother) was the exception. As Avimelech matured he became brutally ambitious and wanted to begin his own kingdom, so he strategized and decided the best place to start was with the ethnically mixed city of Shechem, his mother's family's hometown.

Shechem was a city that called Ba'al its god. There was a temple to Ba'al built there, and both the Canaanites and the Hebrews who lived in Shechem bowed down to this god. Avimelech convinced his mother's family to back him in approaching the townspeople with a proposition: let me be your king. They agreed; the underlying reasoning was that Avimelech appealed to both major ethnic groups since he was half Canaanite and half Hebrew.

This step of his plan accomplished, Avimelech took the Machiavellian approach to obtaining and maintaining his hoped-for power and authority by hiring some thugs from Shechem to help him murder all 70 of his brothers; however one brother, the youngest, escaped the slaughter. This surviving son of Gideon was named **Yotam** (Jotham is the usual English rendering) and when **Yotam** found out that the people of Shechem intended on crowning Avimelech as their king, he climbed up Mt. Gerizim (that overlooked the city) and shouted out a prophetic parable of warning to the naïve citizens.

This parable consisted of the story of a forest of trees (representing a group of people) that were looking for a king to rule over them. The trees approached an Olive Tree, who refused the offer, then a Fig Tree who also refused, and then a Grapevine who did the same. Each had the same reason for their refusal of what seemed like such an amazing honor and raise in status: God had created them for their own special purpose, they were each bearing the fruits of that purpose, and to abandon that divine purpose merely to rule over some other trees was a misuse of their God-ordained gifts.

So as a last resort the trees approached the loathsome Bramble; a sticker-bush that grew upon the soil as a carpet lays on a floor, low to the ground and nothing but a menace (serving no good use whatsoever). The Bramble jumps at this opportunity to rule over these mighty trees but adds a not-so-subtle warning that it will expect the trees to fully submit to it and to fully depend upon its goodness and mercy as it sees fit. If the trees do not submit the Bramble will

destroy the trees.

Yotam then ended his parable with a curse: as a result of Avimelech's murder of Gideon's sons God will intervene and cause Avimelech to destroy the people of Shechem and the people of Shechem will do the same to him.

After 3 years under Avimelech's selfish and oppressive rule, the people of Shechem had had enough and friction between them their king was reaching a point of combustion.

We'll continue from there. Let's re-read Judges chapter 9 starting at verse 22.

RE-READ JUDGES 9:22 – end

I think it is fitting that as the 2008 campaign for the Presidency of the United States is (mercifully!) winding to a close that we are studying the book of Judges, which has as its root the issue of national leadership. Up to chapter 9 we saw that the problem for Israel was not just a lack of leadership but also a lack of leaders. What few leaders they had didn't lead, they just enjoyed the benefits of their position (most of which the leaders obtained by birthright and not merit). Thus the essentially leaderless Israelites would follow their own human nature, which was invariably to pull away from Yehoveh and His commands, and to adopt the sensually attractive gods and customs of their neighbors. In response God would send some foreign nation to oppress Israel, then Israel would call out to God for help, and finally the Lord would raise up a Shophet, a Judge, to deliver Israel from their oppression. Finally that Judge would rule over Israel for a time.

The various Judges (all God appointed) generally provided godly, albeit imperfect, leadership over Israel for some number of years during which time Israel prospered and enjoyed peace. But here in Judges 9 Israel (actually just a small portion of Israel) found itself under some satanically inspired leadership, and we're reading about how that happens and the inevitable results.

Avimelech was not God's chosen leader for Israel, so Gideon's sole remaining son used his own cunning and violent ambitions to gain power. And in this we learn some valuable lessons about leadership especially as regards the ruling over a nation.

It is interesting that Avimelech knew that he could not FORCE himself upon the people of Shechem; instead he had to convince them to CHOOSE him. Avimelech didn't march into Shechem with an army and take the city; he didn't threaten the city with violence if they refused. Rather he asked the people to make him their king because he convinced them it would be to their benefit. He made promises to them that sounded good to their ears, but nobody considered his true character and even after he murdered every last one of his own flesh and blood siblings, Shechem STILL wanted him as their king.

Now it is self-evident that not every last citizen of Shechem agreed with the choice of Avimelech, nor participated in the mass murder, nor even wanted a king. Yet centuries before there was even the concept of democracy the majority often ruled and that is what happened

here. The majority can exert tremendous peer pressure to twist the arms of the minority to go along with them. In tribal societies going against the will of the majority could be a matter of keeping or losing your livelihood, your family, or even your mortal life.

The problem is that even though likely many within Shechem didn't choose Avimelech, they went along with the crowd and accepted his rule (we certainly read of no overt opposition). And as we see in this story those who did NOT choose Avimelech suffered and died alongside those who did. From a spiritual standpoint perhaps some of those who objected will receive divine pardon; but from an earthly standpoint there would be no distinction. All would share in the fate of the nation's choice of leadership, and in the results of that leader's decisions.

People born under a king or a dictatorial ruler have little or no choice in the matter of national leadership, but as we've seen in the Bible and in secular history it matters not; the innocent usually die beside the wicked. Those who have true freedom to choose their leaders (as we do in America and in several Western democracies) therefore carry the utmost responsibility for not only the choice of our leaders but then their decisions and actions. We are not able to choose a leader and then divorce ourselves from his policies and actions even though we might like to.

Never in history has there been a freer, more open, non-threatening system of choosing national leadership than in America. We also have legal means to remove leaders who have deceived us. And I can tell you with absolute confidence that WE as individual citizens of America (and we as Believers in Jesus Christ who live and vote in America) bear more responsibility before God for our leaders and their choices than for any population in the history of mankind. So we had better look beyond a candidate's lofty rhetoric, promises, campaign slogans and endless series of 8-point plans because we will all bear a common consequence of his or her decisions. In the end that leader's harmony with God and understanding of who God is, his personal history, his personal ambitions, his moral compass and (especially in our day) his stance on Israel's right to their own land will determine whether we have made a wise national choice or a suicidal one.

Shechem ceased to exist as a national entity for a long time after they so unwisely chose the amoral and ungodly Avimelech to rule over them. I tell you again: history is cyclical and we are today reliving the era of the Judges.

Verse 22 explains that for 3 years the Shechemites continued to follow Avimelech (Abimelech), as he desired, despite Yotam's warning. And now the judgment of God that had been patiently in abeyance begins to descend. The timing was God's not man's, even though the men of Shechem were totally unaware of it. The Lord planted the seeds of discord between the citizens of Shechem and their chosen king by sending a LITERAL evil spirit (a demon) to excite their evil inclinations.

Avimelech had chosen **Arumah** as his personal place of residence, and placed a handpicked governor to rule in his stead over the city of Shechem. **Zevul** lived in Shechem, guided the city, and made regular reports to his boss, Avimelech. That Avimelech chose to live elsewhere was the greatest insult to those who made his reign possible. His very own family lived in Shechem,

put their own reputations on the line to get Avimelech coronated, and you can be sure there was an implied understanding that here would be his seat of government over his kingdom.

But after 3 years the people of Shechem caught on to Avimelech and realized that only his personal agenda for power mattered and they were but a means to an end. These people (who were hardly particularly moral or just themselves) made plans to counter Avimelech's efforts as a first step towards deposing him. Among those plans was the one stated in verse 25 where they stationed "liers in wait" in the mountaintops above Shechem. In other words they put some willing men upon the twin hills of Ebal and Gerizim so that they could look down upon the main trade highways running through Shechem that connected the east with the west and north with the south, and robbed the caravans.

Not only did this give these robbers a boost in their personal incomes, it caused a great deal of trouble for Avimelech (which was the intent). The kings of this era forced taxes and tolls from the traders and merchants who traveled the trade routes that ran through their territories. Part of the reason these traders agreed to pay these tolls was that they were to receive the king's protection from thieves and nomads. If the local king failed in providing security and the thievery got too out of hand, traders would avoid the area and the king would lose a major source of funds for his treasury. Avimelech soon learned of this, understood immediately what was happening, and so the stage was set for a showdown.

About this same time a new character enters the scene; his name is Ga'al son of Ebed. Now without doubt, this was not this man's real name, it was a rather nasty epithet or nickname that he became known by at a later date for it means, "the abhorred son of a slave".

This Ga'al led a band of men who bore no allegiance to any particular tribe or king. Rather they were like pirates or privateers that would ride into an area they thought they could control and take charge. Or they could be like a hired mercenary army and do the bidding of a king or a group of people if there was sufficient gain in it for themselves.

Under Yehoveh's providential guidance this group of thugs arrives at Shechem at the time of the grape harvest and the accompanying festival; since we now understand the rather amoral character of the residents of Shechem, Ga'al and his bunch fit right and the townspeople trusted Ga'al.

Ga'al showed up at a very auspicious time: the Great New Year event of the pagan Mystery Babylon religions. The main event of this celebration was the gathering of grapes, fermenting their juice into wine, and then having a long drunken party in honor of Ba'al. Its counterpart in Israel was Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, when we look at the original Hebrew in verse 27, where it says in English that, "they went into the house of their god to eat, drink and make merry", (depending on your translation) what it actually says is that they went to the house of their god to "give **Hillulim**"; this means "praise offerings" and is directly connected to the Hebrew word **Hallel** (praise) that is central to Feast of the Tabernacles celebration. So here have words reserved for describing the singing of praises to Yehoveh, but they're being used to sing praises to Ba'al!

Under the influence of the Canaanites Sukkot melded with the pagan New Year wine fest and became nothing but a time of over-indulgence, decadence and it lost all spiritual meaning. Sound familiar? We're now on the cusp of the Holiday season when Christians choose to commemorate the birth of our Savior (a worthy occasion of remembrance to be sure), but it has been so heavily influenced by secular ways to the point that at least outwardly, and to a majority of our population, it's simply party time with no spiritual meaning. Fir trees and ornaments, lavish parties, Santa Claus and Reindeer, going into debt to buy unneeded but desired material possessions, all melded with praising God for sending His Messiah. How very strange and how very sad.

There is not one meaningful shred of difference between how our Messiah's advent is celebrated today by most of His followers and what we are witnessing in verse 27 of Judges 9, because the Israelites represented the majority population of Shechem and they felt perfectly justified in adopting these completely pagan practices in lieu of the God-ordained ones Moses gave to them. A valuable lesson that we should act upon.

At this time of feasting and drinking Ga'al used the moment to challenge the people of Shechem to openly revolt against Avimelech. He says, "who is this Avimelech that WE should bow down to HIM"? After all Avimelech is nothing more than a son of Yeruba'al. Remember: Yeruba'al is a nickname for Gideon, and it means, "Ba'al fighter". Here the people of Shechem (Hebrew and Canaanite) were having a drunken bash in honor of Ba'al, and Ga'al says, 'why should we have a king over us who is the son of a man who hates Ba'al's and broke down his altar'? Ga'al goes on to say that if they're to have a ruler he ought to be from "Hamor the father of Shechem". Remember that Hamor was a Hivite king who founded the city of Shechem. So now whereas Avimelech used his Canaanite (or Hivite) blood as a reason for the people of Shechem to invite him to be their king, now Ga'al is reminding the people that Avimelech is also ½ Hebrew and so Ga'al is using his Hebrew blood lines against him. Oh what a tangled web we weave, when we first decide to deceive.

Then Ga'al throws out a not so hidden hint: "If I were in control of this people, I'd get rid of Avimelech". In other words, if you'll agree to help me dispose of Avimelech, I will become your leader. Then in his inebriated state he throws down the gauntlet to Avimelech and challenges him to come to Shechem with whatever loyal army he has, and fight.

Well when **Zevul**, the governor of Shechem (who is loyal to Avimelech) hears this he sends a message to Avimelech of this pending revolt. That **Zevul** was able to continue on in the face of this growing and unhidden rebellious mindset speaks to the divided nature of Shechem; just as there was no consensus in choosing Avimelech 3 years earlier, there is no consensus to revolt against him now. **Zevul** suggests to Avimelech that he get his army together, come to Shechem under the cover of darkness, and then lie in wait out in the fields that surround the city. Then when dawn breaks, he should attack. Ga'al's men are bound to respond in kind, and by drawing them out from behind the city walls into the open, if Avimelech is properly prepared he should be able to defeat Ga'al. Avimelech acted in accordance with Ga'al's advice.

In the morning **Zevul** and Ga'al were standing inside the open city gate, both (for different

reasons no doubt) looking to see if Avimelech was anywhere to be seen; obviously Ga'al didn't know that **Zevul** had sent for Avimelech. When Ga'al saw Avimelech's men moving on the mountainside, with the morning light still dim and the shadows being long, **Zevul** tried to convince him that he was just seeing things just give Avimelech's men a little more time to get closer before they were discovered. But when it simply wasn't possible to conceal the plan any longer Zevul turned and flung Ga'al's boastful comment right back into his face: "Where's your mouth, now?"

Now Zevul turns the tables and provokes Ga'al to leave the safety of the thick defensive walls of Shechem to go out and take on the man he had so little regard for. No details are given of the battle, only the outcome. As says verse 40, "But Avimelech gave chase, and Ga'al took flight; many fell wounded, strewn all along the way to the city gate".

Avimelech went back to Arumah, and left Zevul to drive out what few members of Ga'al's gang remained inside Shechem. With Ga'al now banished from Shechem Avimelech could do almost as he pleased in bringing full destruction to those who rebelled against him. The morning after the last of Ga'al's men were expelled, the regular townsfolk of Shechem went out the city gates to tend their fields figuring that the fighting was over and it was time to get back to normal life. Wrong. Avimelech and his men were laying in wait to take revenge and as soon as all the Shechemites were in the fields and deep into their hoeing, pruning and harvesting, the attack came.

Avimelech used the rather standard battle tactic of dividing his men into 3 groups; the one he led immediately headed to the city gates where he secured the entrance into the city. By doing this the townsfolk, caught out in the field, had nowhere to run. They were slaughtered out in the fields. When this wanton act was completed Avimelech led his troops inside the city to begin destruction there. The text says the fighting and destruction went on all day and he effected a rather senseless slaughter of all the inhabitants of Shechem, destroyed the buildings, and sowed the land with salt. Sowing the land with salt is not literal, although it may have been ceremonial. It simply means that the land, and the city, became a wasteland, unusable.

Now as happens in an aristocracy, while the common folks were fighting and dying the upper class (who lived in another area of the city) made a mad dash to a place for their special protection. They fled from their normal quarters inside the city to the fortress-Temple of their god, here called El-Berith (meaning, covenant with El). El was the Canaanite word for "highest god", usually considered to be even above Ba'al. Of course we find that the Hebrews borrowed that word to refer to Yehoveh early in the Bible. While the move from inside the city was obviously because the "lords of Shechem" and their families felt that the Temple fortress was the strongest building now available to them, without doubt the main reason they went there was the hope that their god, El, would protect them.

When Avimelech observed this he took counter measures; he led his men to a nearby hill that had a dense growth of fir trees. He and his men chopped off branches, brought them to this Temple-Tower now packed with the upper crust of Shechem, laid the branches against it and then light them on fire. The greenness of the branches would have made for horrific choking smoke while it burned through the wooden door and wooden roof that were standard in that

time, thus killing many where they sat huddled together and driving others out to be struck down. Over 1000 men and women were killed at the base of the El's Temple.

With the central city of Shechem now in ruins Avimelech moved against the neighboring city of **Thebez** (or **Tevetz**) that lay about 9 miles northeast of Shechem who apparently had acted in sympathy with Shechem. The central part of the city of Tevetz was taken rapidly and many of the city people (not just the aristocracy as in Shechem) fled to the refuge of what is called a fortified tower. Never one to waste a successful tactic, Avimelech used fire to force those who took refuge in the tower to come out. But, this time there was a different result. As Avimelech approached the side of the tower to take hateful revenge by personally setting the branches laid against it on fire, a woman on the roof flung an upper millstone over the edge, striking Avimelech on his head and crushing his skull.

An upper millstone was around 15 inches in diameter and 3 or 4 inches thick; it would have weight around 20 pounds. It must have struck a glancing blow because if it had hit his cranium bluntly he would have died instantly. However he was aware enough to know that it was a woman who had done him in, and so asked his armor bearer to run him through so that he didn't suffer what was seen as the humiliation of being killed by a woman in battle.

Verse 56 and 57 needs to leave an indelible mark on our memories: God pays back. Perhaps we, as His followers, are not to pay back but God does. God repaid Avimelech and the men of Shechem for all the wrong they had done. If God does not pay back, then His justice system is a farce. What is "justice" if there is no punishment for a crime? Paul brings this exact principle forth in Galatians 6.

CJB Galatians 6:7 Don't delude yourselves: no one makes a fool of God! A person reaps what he sows.

God's law of retribution will not be foiled; it may not happen in this world, but it will in the next.

Let's move on to chapter 10.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 10 all

As a preface to this short chapter let me mention that by all rights we probably ought to pause and study the book of Ruth at this point because this is about the time in history that the story of Ruth occurs (although it may have been as early as towards the end of Gideon's life). That's right; Ruth's adventures took place during the time of the Judges, before Samson came onto the scene. But for the sake of continuity we're going to stay in the book of Judges and then at its conclusion we'll immediately study the book of Ruth.

Chapter 10 begins by briefly introducing us to 2 of the 5 so-called minor Judges **Tola** and **Ya'ir**.

There is really very little detail about either. We are told that **Tola** arose to save Israel but that's about it. He ruled them as a Judge for 23 years and was from the tribe of Issachar but

he lived, interestingly enough, in the hills of Ephraim. In other words he did NOT live in the territory given by allotment to Issachar. This fits with the more and more better understood geopolitical map of those days in which Issachar only occupied a few cities and towns within their own territory and otherwise moved into and shared places in their brethren's territories. The reason for this is quite simple: the Canaanites that occupied their allotted land were just too strong for them to dislodge.

Tola resided in the general area where Avimelech operated, so that he "arose to save Israel" could have had something to do with dealing with the aftermath of the Avimelech debacle, but that's just my speculation.

Ya'ir (Jair in English) is only identified as being from Gilead, and no family heritage is given. Some think he was of the tribe of Manessah, but that's only because Gilead was in the area of the ½ of Manessah that was on the eastern side of the Jordan River. We have to be very careful with these identities especially by this time in Israel's history. Much intermarriage among Israelite tribes had taken place, and much movement of families and whole clans from their allotted territory into another had also occurred. Being from Gilead could mean he was from the tribe of Gad, or simply that his family of whatever tribe was living in Gilead and thus he was identified more by where he lived than what tribe he belonged to.

What we do know is that **Ya'ir** came from a high social status. He judged his area for 22 years (one less than **Tola** before him), and that he held sway over 30 cities, each one run by one of his 30 sons. If he had 30 sons he would have had at least as many daughters, meaning he had many wives. This also means he lived as royalty and that is further confirmed by the statement that his 30 sons rode on 30 ass colts. Asses were highly esteemed as riding animals and often carried special recognition. So we have here a well-known and large royal family, even though the patriarch **Ya'ir** was only officially known as a Shophet, a Judge and not a king

This small mention of Ya'ir and his royal lifestyle gives us every reason to believe that he followed in the kingly lifestyle observed by Gideon and his sons, and then fully brought into play as overt royalty by Avimelech. This ought to help us see the significant sea change that occurred with Gideon, when he elevated himself into a status and lifestyle well beyond any Judge before him. And of course this was prodded along by those who Gideon had delivered pleading with him to assume the role as their king. He refused to take on the title but it is self-evident that he easily accepted the trappings of royalty. **Ya'ir** therefore had a precedent and likely was also asked to be a king.

Ya'ir was the first Shophet to operate in the Trans-Jordan. There were many fewer Hebrew people on the east side of the river and generally more isolated from the Ba'al worship centers that were more concentrated in Canaan where the 9 ½ tribes lived. Very probably the 2 ½ Israelite tribes who took up residence on the east side of the Jordan River had considerably less temptation to fall into idolatry than their brethren on the west bank.

Yet, the mere fact that **Ya'ir** was raised up as a Judge says that idolatry eventually came to the Trans-Jordanian Hebrews. We also know that during **Yai'r's** time there was no oppression from a foreign enemy; so the trouble that **Ya'ir** dealt with was strictly "in-house" so to speak.

The Midianites had passed through this region but they didn't stay or conquer it.

So as I mentioned early on, each Judge had different conditions to deal with than any of the others, and it's difficult to give a perfectly standard definition of a Judge (as we'll especially see with Samson).

We'll continue in Judges 10 next week.