

Abimelech - everything a saviour is not

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[0 : 00] Okay, the repeated cycle, God sends a saviour. We have a period of peace with God. Then the people abandon God when that judge dies. Then they're punished by God for their abandoning him.

And then they cry out to God for help. This cycle reflects what judges is about and it kind of forces us to ask the question, well, who can save us? It keeps going over and over again.

Who can save us? But what actually drives that judges cycle? What drives it? Well, from God's perspective, the cycle is driven by God's mercy. His willingness to save his people is what actually keeps it going because the people are unfaithful over and over again.

So from God's perspective, it's God's willingness to provide that saviour. But from a human perspective, what drives the people of God to move on to the next stage?

From a human perspective, the judges cycle, is driven by their punishment. When Israel is punished, they start to look around for relief.

[1 : 08] When they suffer loss, that's when they begin to experience regret. It's when they lose the things that they really value that they start looking to God for help.

Not straight away. They try everything else first. But God is so merciful that even though in a roundabout way they come back to him, he still saves them.

The story of Abimelech is about the detail of this big picture of the judges cycle. The detail. It's what happens, we kind of zoom in now, what happens when the judge dies.

It's the only example we have of this really, of the judge dying and then things descending into chaos. This is the only part of judges that actually gives us a glimpse into the kinds of things that might have been happening all along, but we see them in real detail here.

It zooms in on the detail of what happens when Israel turns its back on God. It's about that abandoned God face. But it all starts with Abimelech and his father Gideon.

[2 : 16] You see, Gideon was the last judge. He left a legacy as a last judge as well. He was offered and refused a dynastic kingship in chapter 8, verses 22 to 23. They offer him the kingship and Gideon says to them, I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you.

The Lord will rule over you. He declared that the Lord alone should rule Israel. And yet, here's his legacy. Gideon lived like a king.

He had many wives. Many sons. Seventy sons. That wasn't one wife. He had many wives. You imagine how many wives that would have taken, particularly with the kind of death rate amongst babies at that point in time.

Seventy sons. Even a concubine. Abimelech. Abimelech. And not only that, but Gideon called his son by that concubine Abimelech.

Or, what was the other pronunciation? That's how I'm saying it. So, who knows? I'm not sure which one's right. But he called that. He called his son by his concubine Abimelech, which means literally, my father is king.

[3 : 31] I will not be king, says Abimelech. And then calls his son, my father is king. Gideon's legacy was that he ruled in everything but name.

And he wasn't even subtle about that. So, we have on the one hand, Gideon's legacy. On the other hand, we have Abimelech's inheritance. Abimelech inherited this legacy.

He bore the name that told the story. He was the son of Gideon's concubine. A concubine was, at best, a second-class wife. At worst, a woman kept for pleasure in those times. So, he was kind of bottom of the heap.

Abimelech was last in the line to inherit, just like his father had been, the least of his tribe. Seventy sons all the way down the line, and then Abimelech.

And if things weren't bad enough for him at that point, we read in verse 33 of chapter 8. As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-barit their god.

[4 : 39] And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their god, who would deliver them from the hand of all of their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

When Gideon died, the people of Israel did exactly what they'd always done. They abandoned faithfulness to the Lord their god. For Baal-barit, of all things.

Baal-barit actually means, literally, Lord of the Covenant. So they had a Lord, and they had a covenant with that Lord. And they abandoned it for an idol. Not only did they abandon faithfulness to the Lord their god, but they abandoned faithfulness to Gideon and his family.

And Abimelech was the bottom of the pile of that family that was abandoned. That pile had come crashing down around his ears. So what could he do?

Well, what the heart wants? The heart wants. Abimelech's world was falling apart around him. He had a choice to make. He had two choices, really. He had the choice that every Israelite had.

[5 : 49] The choice we all have. He could choose to be faithful to the Lord, regardless of what was going on around him. Regardless of that. He could choose to trust the Lord.

Trust the Lord to act. Trust the Lord with his future. But if he did, this future would be uncertain. He wouldn't know how that would turn out. It's certainly up to this point, he was at the bottom of the pile. What would happen next? So he could choose to be faithful to the Lord and trust him. Or he could choose to take matters into his own hands.

He could act to shape his future. He could act to provide the stability, the security, the success that he wanted for himself. And what the heart wants?

The heart wants. Abimelech chose to take matters into his own hands. And the story of Abimelech is the story of this struggle. The struggle to choose between trusting a God who has proven to be faithful, to be good, versus trusting ourselves with our future.

[6 : 55] Taking matters into our own hands. Seizing control of circumstances to guarantee a favorable outcome for me. To secure those things we really miss when we suffer loss.

Notice in the cycle, they abandoned God. They didn't miss the peace they had with God. They weren't struggling until things that they did love were taken away.

Abimelech had two choices. He made the bad choice. And he was crafty in how he did it, wasn't he? He appealed to everyone else's desire to control outcomes.

To get what they want. Genesis, he appeals to the Genesis. And there's a lot of parallels with the Genesis account as well of the fall. The early chapters of Genesis in these verses.

You see, Abimelech went to his mother's home in Shechem and he kindled their desire as well for stability, security and success. He said to his mother's family, Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, Which is better for you?

[8 : 01] That all 70 of the sons of Jerubal rule over you? Or that one rule over you? Remember that I am your bone and your flesh.

Verse 2, chapter 9. Abimelech appealed to his deep connection to them. He was their flesh and blood. Do you recognize these words, these two words, bone and flesh, where they first appear in the Bible?

Genesis, chapter 2, verse 23. These are the words that Adam used to celebrate the bond he felt with Eve when he first saw her. This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

He was saying, I'm not just your friend, I'm your family, your intimate family. Surely, the people of Shechem are thinking, a ruler from amongst us, a ruler like this, with this kind of connection, surely he is going to favor us.

So they helped him to seize control in a way that's reminiscent of Genesis 4. In verse 4 of chapter 9, we read this, Genesis 4, just as Cain killed Abel.

[9 : 28] Abimelech sees his brothers in the way of the thing that he wanted and lines them up and kills them. He took money from the temple to Baal.

He hired worthless men and he killed his brothers in a horrific way. Must have just lined them up and slaughtered them one after the other.

All his brothers, that is, except for Jotham, who escaped by hiding. Then in verse 6, we read, once this was done, all the leaders of Shechem came together and all Beth Milo and they went and made

Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

This, friends, is what life looks like without God. It's a brutal scene. What could possibly move a person to do that kind of thing? Why would you want someone like this to be your king?

Well, Abimelech's story spells out the answer for us. You see, when we seize control like this, we replace God. Something else, becomes our first delight. Paul described this in Romans 1, verses 18 and following, and you can read that later if you like.

[10:48] But what he says in those verses is as we turn away from our Creator, our hearts turn toward created things and we pursue them. And we pursue them with increasing energy.

And as we do, Paul describes, we descend further and further into our ignorance and depravity. Without God, whatever we desire most becomes our God.

And we will do anything to serve this God. And we will sacrifice anything to this God. but we just don't see what we're doing.

So God used Jotham and Abimelech to show his people their own hearts. Each man revealed hearts in a different way. Jotham, well, he exposed hearts with his speech.

Abimelech expressed his heart, demonstrated what was on his heart with his actions. So first Jotham, the hearts exposed by Jotham in verses 7 to 21.

[11:52] When it was told Jotham about the making of Abimelech king, he went and stood up 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.

Before Jotham even speaks though, we have to look at Jotham's name. You see, before he even cries out his message, his name speaks volumes. Jotham, translated from Hebrew, means Yahweh is perfect.

Even Jotham's name was a signpost back to God. Whatever they're choosing to delight in, whatever they are worshipping, Jotham's name says Yahweh is better.

He is perfect. God alone is perfect. So we have Jotham's name, then we have Jotham's aim in what he's doing. Jotham actually had something really important to say and he goes on to tell a parable about a bunch of trees and I think that, Matt, you made really good sense of that.

That was really helpful. An olive tree, a fig tree, a grapevine and a bramble. This parable takes aim at the people and Abimelech as Jotham tells this.

[13:03] You see, the people have chosen a bramble to take shade under. You guys have seen a bramble, haven't you? You know what a bramble's like. It's a low-growing plant. It's the most impractical choice for shade you could possibly imagine.

It's got thorns all over it. It doesn't even fruit. Its only use was for gathering up and burning as kindling and that's what they used it for in those times.

Getting under a bramble for shade means abasing yourself. It means getting onto your stomach and crawling into its shade through thorns. It means taking refuge in a fuel dump.

This is what the people chose over Yahweh, their perfect God. And Abimelech, it tells us about him too because Abimelech is that bramble.

He's the thorny bush no one in their right mind would seek to shade under. He's the one incapable of bearing fruit. He's the fire starter. He is the fuel dump ready to go up in flames.

[14:04] Jotham is saying, why in the world would you choose him over God? Why in the world would you? But we do, don't we?

We do. I was chatting with Matt at the men's camp this weekend and he made this observation about this period in history. He's been reading Chronicles and noticing just how things just keep going in cycles even through the kings.

People turn away from God, set up their idols and then turn back to God. They worshipped everything other than God then they return to God. They build altars, they tore them down again.

And Matt confessed to me, I'm outing him here, he said, he felt like it was a daily pattern in his life that that's what it was like.

I agreed with him. It is a daily pattern like that in his life and my life and your life. If we're honest, it's true, isn't it? Daily pattern for us to actually continue to treasure God as that perfect saviour.

To treasure God for who he is. To recognise him as the only perfect God. We choose good things over our perfect God every day.

[15:28] And what we're seeing here is a call back to choose God. The final thing to say about this, what happens with Jotham's speech is this.

He says all of this in a particularly significant place. When Jotham has climbed up onto Mount Gerizim, it's not actually the top of Mount Gerizim. Apparently the mountain's too big. If he was at the top, no one would see him let alone hear him. He was at a promontory but it was a promontory that was actually used previously. It was used by Israel before. You see, in Deuteronomy 27, Moses instructed the people when they went to the promised lands to gather at Shechem and to basically do this, to have half the tribes gather on Mount Gerizim and half the tribes gather on Mount Ebal. two mountains opposite each other. And what they were to do was one group of tribes on Mount Gerizim were to read out the blessings that God longs to just pour out on his people, Israel. [16:28] And the group on Mount Ebal were then to shout back the curses that would happen if they abandoned God. So they gathered at this place in the past to read out to each other the blessings and the curses, to shout them across this very valley. all the good things that God would pour out on his people if he kept their covenant with him, all the bad things that would happen if they didn't. And Jotham says these words now in verse 16, now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king and if you have dealt with Jerubal and his house and have done him as his deeds deserved, well, there's a possibility of blessing. He's standing on Gerizim, the mountain of blessing. The only other place that this phrase, good faith and integrity appears in the whole Bible is in Joshua 24. This is the famous passage where Joshua nails his colors to the mast and says, as for me, choose this day whom you will serve Israel, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. So only the time this verse is used, this phrase is used, and Joshua said those words at Shechem 2. This place, the geography of this place has so much history for Israel, so much history that points them towards choosing a good and perfect God over feeble substitutes. [18:07] Jotham is trying to call the nation of Israel back from the brink. He's trying to expose the path that they're treading and he does that quite graphically. He said, you've made Abimelech a worthless man king. You've risen up against Gideon, a faithful servant. You've slaughtered his 70 sons. He exposes their path, but he still lays out a choice in how he does it. It's a choice that calls the people back to Yahweh, their perfect God. They ignore Jotham. Next thing we read in verse 22 is that Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years. Abimelech ruled Israel. Remember, Gideon refused to rule because they already had a God. Abimelech wasn't even appointed by God. He wasn't even a judge. He was self-appointed. He wasn't a saviour. He was a bramble. And he didn't have the spirit of God. Although God did send a spirit. [19:12] God sent a spirit which characterised Abimelech's reign. An evil spirit. In verse 23, we read this, and God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. And the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. God sent an evil spirit among them. Note that God didn't set them on their path, though. What God does is he gives them over to this path. They've already chosen the path of evil. God says, okay, here you go. On your way. God punished them by giving them over toward their inclination toward evil. They had betrayed Gideon's family. Now they were going to act treacherously toward each other. What we see in this is that that treachery stimulates and motivates Abimelech to actually seek revenge. Gal conspired with the leaders of Shechem, we read, against Abimelech. They got drunk at a grape harvest, apparently, and started to slander him and plot. Zebel was there. That's how you say his name. [20:19] He conspired with Abimelech. He was a friend of Abimelech. He was there, heard the plot, conspired with Abimelech against Gal. They heard the plans. They set a trap. The short version is everyone dies. He was there tragically, tragically, by fire, as God's punishment for sin. Even Abimelech's revenge serves God's justice. And Abimelech's death, still his death, reflects God's mercy. You see, as much as we see the hearts of the people and perhaps even a glimpse into our own hearts through the choices that were

being made, through the actions that followed, we also see the heart of our God on display here. The heart of God is revealed in the events of Abimelech's life. God's heart is to end suffering, even as God's people rebel against him, even as God hands out justice. And we get a glimpse of this in verses 50 to 55.

You see, Abimelech is rampant in his wrath. He launches wave after wave of attacks. He destroys his enemies. And he doesn't stop. Shechem and Beth Milo are destroyed.

[21 : 35] They were complicit in what went on. But in verse 50 we read this. Then Abimelech went to Thebes and encamped against Thebes and captured it. Why did he do that? There is no evidence in this story that Thebes had anything to do with the trouble against Abimelech.

So it appears that Abimelech is burning like brambles do. Hot and fast. In his anger Abimelech was consuming anything in his path.

Until a certain woman who just happened to be carrying a millstone at the top of a castle tossed it over onto his head.

A random event? Well the conclusion of the right of the judges is anything but that it's random. The conclusion of the right of the judges is that God is in control.

God limited Abimelech's rampage to mete out the justice that God desired, that God demanded. But no more than that.

[22 : 42] God acted surgically to establish justice and to end suffering. suffering. This is how we see some of the nature of God in wanting to end suffering.

But beyond that, you see Abimelech's reign began with the desire to control the outcome of his life. to avoid the suffering in his life, he rejected God's rule for his own.

Then ironically, his reign was characterized by violence and suffering for everyone around him. He was the king in name, but he couldn't lead his people to the safety, stability and success that he desired.

If anything, the book of Judges teaches us that if our blessing is left to our choice, then we are sunk. Time and time again we see those choices fail and the people of God moving away from God himself.

This book doesn't point us to the next big act that we need to do to save ourselves. It points us to the only Savior who could break the judge's cycle.

[23 : 58] Nothing else but a Savior from God could do that. And that Savior didn't do it by seizing control. He did it by completely submitting to the will of Yahweh, our Heavenly Father, in a way that we couldn't.

Our Savior didn't save us from a position of power, exerting his influence and authority over the things that exist. He saved us by emptying himself from absolute power. He had the power. He emptied himself from it.

He gave it up. He embraced our weakness. Jesus' death on the cross satisfies God's justice and mercy. Jesus is the one that judges points to.

Where time and time again human saviors failed. Jesus, God the Son, took on the role for us. His death on the cross satisfies God's justice and provides God's mercy.

And it does it in the opposite way to the one we would choose. Paul describes the message of the gospel as foolishness rather than wisdom, weakness rather than strength, a display of weakness rather than strength, a display of submission rather than exerting influence or authority over.

[25 : 18] And it's a wonderful message for us too, because that's a message that as we experience suffering, we can know that our saviour has entered into suffering and has conquered it on our behalf.

But to finish up, it's important to actually address how this blessing and curse kind of play out for us now. Because what I want to suggest to you here is this, that the saviour who suffered on our behalf calls us to a path of suffering.

For the Israelites, the suffering followed disobedience, followed abandoning God, finding other things to delight in above God. But it's different, it's very different for us.

Jesus, the suffering servant who saved us, entered into suffering in our behalf and then invited us to follow him on his path. life. In Matthew 16, he says, take up your cross and follow me.

Later in Matthew, he showed us exactly what that looks like. Now, don't get me wrong, there's an undeniable goodness in making the good choice to honour God and to live for him.

[26 : 36] There's deep intrinsic blessing in obeying God's commands and in living his way. His way is fullness of life. But that equation to obey God, to delight in him, to worship him alone, and then you'll be blessed with land, offspring, blessing and so on, prosperity and health, that's not quite how God calls us to now.

He calls us to pursue him directly. Our reward, our delight, our joy is living in close relationship with our God. our heavenly Father, without fear and certain of his fatherly affection for us.

I can remember a few years ago, one of our children was going to chapel at their school, and at chapel at school, the repeated message, the repeated refrain was, you can do anything if you try. In God's strength, you can do anything, you just have to apply yourself, you just have to work hard enough. Now both of my boys have had chronic fatigue syndrome for several years.

What kind of thing that does to someone who has chronic fatigue? things like that thing? It says, you're the failure. That son asked me, can I stop going to chapel?

[28 : 08] I said to him, you can go and ask the chaplain if he can give you a good explanation for why you're not able to do what he's asking you to do, and if he can't, then I'll write a letter and say you no longer have to go to chapel.

He stopped going to chapel because we don't have an answer to this issue. Friends, this is a hard word, so if you're not yet a Christian and you're thinking about becoming a Christian, I want to tell you this, the path of the Christian life is a difficult path.

Not always, there's so much joy that fills our lives, but there are difficult choices to make day in and day out, and we don't always succeed at that, as the conversation that Matt and I had related to you.

We don't always succeed at that. But in Christ, we have a God who loves us so much that he's rescued us from our failed attempts.

He's rescued us from our inability to achieve what he rightfully deserves, and he's granted it to us as a gift. So yes, the path of suffering, and yes, the guarantee of our good God is that one day he will call us home.

[29 : 33] Let me pray. Father God, we look at this story and we can see so much of ourselves in so many ways.

perhaps we're thinking in some ways, well, we haven't succumbed to the excesses of Abimelech. But Lord, we know in our hearts that we don't treasure you as we should in every aspect of our lives.

We know that there are aspects of our lives that we allow to get bigger, more important, more valuable, more precious to us than you. So Lord, we thank you for saving us even from that, even from our willfulness, our willingness to turn away from you.

Thank you for bearing the cost of our rebellion so that justice is served and we can just receive your mercy, your love, uninhibitedly from you.

We thank you, Lord, and praise you for that. Amen.