

A King too Soon?

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[0 : 00] Father God, we pray today that you'd teach us through your word, that you'd be at work by your spirit to convict us of sin, righteousness, judgment, and of our need for Christ.

And Father, we pray that you would be at work also to drive us, or to give us wills that will be set to obey your word. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, friends, I want to tell you that I have been distinctly disillusioned this week. You see, I love that story about frogs in water.

You know the one that I mean, the one about putting frogs in cold water, then turning the heat on, and reputedly the frogs can then be boiled alive without jumping out if you approach things this way. Well, apparently it's bunkum. Not true, apparently, which is a real pity, because it really spoils a good illustration and a good sermon illustration at that.

[1 : 05] You see, it would have really fitted well with the Bible talk for this morning. So what I want you to do this morning instead, knowing that the illustration is bunkum, is to try and work out from this passage today where I might have used it.

Okay? Where might I have used it? See if you can place a point at where I might have used that illustration of boiling frogs, as it were. Now, with that background, let's turn to Gideon today.

So keep your eyes open. And we want to talk about, we've been talking about the character of Gideon. And this talk is also the last talk on judges for this year and the last talk on Gideon.

Next week, we're going to begin a short series on a critical Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the atonement. And then in December, we're going to turn to Luke 1 and 2 to have a Christmas series on Luke's gospel.

And next year, we'll come back to judges and we'll try and do the next slice of judges. However, before we look at our passage today, let me summarise the story of Gideon so far.

[2 : 09] We began inauspiciously, you might remember, in chapter 6. The eastern nations were camping out on God's land. You might remember the Midianites, the Amalekites. And the Israelites were intermittently ducking in and out to do their bits of farming and then ducking back into their caves and so on.

And we found a timid Gideon hiding in a winepress, threshing the family wheat and trying to keep it secret from those marauding eastern nations. However, the angel of the Lord gave us hope because you might remember the very first words of the angel of the Lord to Gideon.

The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. The story that follows in chapter 6 shows not only a timid Gideon, but a doubt in Gideon as well.

Things improve a little bit in chapter 7. God diminishes the army of Israel and a spectacular victory is had. And Gideon is a hero. And he does indeed prove himself to be a mighty warrior.

However, he's not a complete champion, is he? You might remember his battle cry betrayed him. Do you remember it? For the Lord and for Gideon.

[3 : 17] His battle cry clearly indicates that he wants to share the glory and claim at least half of it before it even occurs. And then he reiterates the cry in battle. Now, the first part of chapter 8, he does show some great diplomacy and some good leadership.

But then we found out last week, in the remainder of chapter 8, his heart is really exposed. Because he's shown up to be a man who's bent on a vengeful vendetta over the death of his brothers.

And he pursues people and brutalises Israelites as he does it. And then his ambiguous character emerges again when he does the noble thing and refuses to accept rule that the Israelites give him.

But then he flips back and he takes on religious functions. And he does an errand by forming gold trinkets into something that his family and the people of Israel then turn into an idol.

So that's where we got to last week. From timid farmer, perhaps with royal roots, to a vengeful brother and a brutalizer of the people of God. Anyway, he does bring peace and rest to Israel, as chapter 8, verse 28 indicates.

[4 : 22] Today, we're going to move into the rest of the story. And although he only appears in the first few verses, it is a story still about him and his family. It's therefore a story about the legacy that he leaves to Israel.

So let's see what happens. Please open your Bible. There's a fair bit to go today. It's a long and complicated story. So you probably need to have your Bible open and stick with me. And let's hear it out. And then I'm going to reflect on it.

And then I'm going to draw together some implications and application for us. So here's the story. The end of chapter 8 summarizes the end of Gideon's life.

In verse 29, we're told that Gideon, also known as Jerubal, the son of Joash, goes back home to live. And he looks like, it looks really, I think, like a retirement from active service.

But look at verse 30. He's no longer a simple farmer. You see, he has all the marks of being a king with many wives and 70 sons. And according to the rule of kings outlined in Deuteronomy chapter 17, many wives goes with a heart turned away from God.

[5 : 28] And not even wives, though, are enough for Jerubal. For verse 31 tells us he has a concubine as well in nearby Shechem, a place that will dominate this whole story.

In Genesis, Shechem was known as a place of illicit sexual entanglements. And so it is here. With these illicit sexual entanglements comes the issue of a son with an ominous name.

He is called Abimelech. Now, we don't know for sure, but we can only assume, can't we, that the name is given to him by his dad. Do you know what the name means in Hebrew?

It means, my father is king. An ominous name to give your son, isn't it, when you've handed away rule, a chapter, a few verses earlier on. So Jerubal may piously turn down kingship and assert that God is king in verse 23, but perhaps the naming of his son betrays where his heart lies.

Perhaps his son hears his inner heart. We don't have time to ponder, you see, because we move on. Verse 32, we're told that Gideon dies. Verse 33, we're told that no sooner does he die than Israel continues the downward spiral into a life of sin.

[6 : 44] They prostitute themselves to the Baals. They do not remember the Lord their God who had rescued them from the hands of their enemies on every side. And they break faith with the family of Jerubal.

Despite his flawed nature, you see, Gideon had brought so much good to Israel, but to no avail. Not only were they fickle to their God, they're fickle with him as well. And such fickleness is the context of chapter 9.

So let's move to chapter 9. Verse 1 makes it crystal clear that the events that follow are not to be separated from that context we've just read about. They're not to be separated from Israel's sinful disposition.

They're not to be separated from Gideon and Jerubal. Abimelech, my father is king, is the son of Jerubal. Let's see what happens.

First, the son of the concubine asserts himself. In verse 2, he argues that his single leadership would be preferable to the combined leadership of his 70 brothers.

[7 : 45] He also appeals to his kinship with the citizens of Shechem. In verse 3, the Shechemites are inclined to agree with him. And so they finance his rule with idolatrous money from the temple of Baal Berith.

Reckless scoundrels or thugs is what I think is meant, are hired and a murder is enacted. Seventy sons of Jerubal are killed on one stone.

And the Shechemites gather to crown Abimelech king over them. But verse 5 has told us that one son of Jerubal has survived. His name is Jotham.

And in verse 7, Jotham climbs up to the top of Mount Gerizim. Now, Mount Gerizim is a place associated with calling Israel to covenant obedience. And atop such an auspicious location, Jonathan shouts out a parable.

It is a beautiful and articulate story. One scholar has called it the strongest anti-monarchic poem in world literature. That's an incredible claim, isn't it?

[8 : 52] It is full of ridicule of kingship. And it mocks Abimelech and what he is doing. Jotham imagines that the people of Shechem are trees looking around for someone to rule over them.

And there are various fruit trees and vines who all decline the role because they've got better things to be doing. Finally, they ask a worthless thorn bush who invites them to come and take refuge in his shade.

Now, let me tell you, thorn bushes don't have much shade. Of course, the irony is really strong, isn't it? Thorn bushes are not much good for shade. And then in verse 16, we reach the nub of the parable because the question is whether the people of Shechem have acted honorably and in good faith or not.

Have they dealt well with Jerubbaal and his family? Have they treated him as he deserves by anointing his son king? And the answer is a clear no. But the Shechemites have clearly acted dishonorably.

They've not been fair to Jerubbaal. And so thorn bushes are good for nothing much more than what? Fire. Kindling.

[10:00] Getting a fire started. And so just as thorn bushes are nothing much more than kindling, so fire will consume the lot of them. So here's the parable.

And now Jotham runs off. We never hear of him again. Now, verses 25 to 57 tell us what Abimelech's rule is going to look like. In verse 22, we're told that in a book where judges rule for long periods, how long does Abimelech rule?

Three short years. And this is because God is at work. Look at verse 23. Can you see what the NIV says in 23? It says that God stirred up animosity between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelech.

Now, let me tell you what the original language says. It can be translated in a number of different ways. The ESV captures it this way. Have a look at the NIV and see the difference. It says that God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem.

The Net Bible captures it differently. It says that God sent a spirit to stir up hostility or to stir up evil between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem.

[11:11] Now, the word for spirit here is the very same word that's used throughout the rest of the book of Judges. In Judges 3.10, the spirit of the Lord empowers Othniel, the judge, to do battle and to rescue Israel.

In Judges 6.34, the spirit of the Lord takes control of Gideon himself to rally the troops of Israel. One can't help thinking that perhaps it is the same spirit that's at work here.

This time, God's spirit does what? Acts to judge and he causes division and conflict between two ungodly partners. And verse 25 tells us how this works out.

The Shechemites begin to ambush and rob travelers out of opposition to Abimelech. And conflict ensues in verse 26 when a Canaanite man moves into Shechem.

This man's name is Gal. And he uses the same strategy that Abimelech himself had used. Look at him. Verse 28. He says to them, and who is Abimelech?

[12:13] And why should we Shechemites be subject to him? Can you notice what he's doing? He's saying, well, I'm one of you. Isn't he Jerubal's son? And isn't Zebul his deputy?

Serve the family of Hamor, Shechem's father? Why should we serve Abimelech? If only these people were under my command. Then I'd get rid of him.

Anyway, the end result is that Zebul, Abimelech's deputy, gets wind of the rebellion, warns Abimelech, tricks Gal victorious in verse 40. Gal and his clan are driven out of Shechem.

But that's not enough for Abimelech. He's got punishment on his mind, like his dad. And in verse 42, it's reported to him that the Shechemites are out in the field. So he ambushes them.

More Shechemites come out of the city. Abimelech takes them on as well. He captures the city in verse 45, and he kills its people, destroys their city, and scatters salt over their land so that nothing will grow there again.

[13:14] The next phase occurs in verse 46 and following. The inner circle of Shechemite leadership retreat into the stronghold of the temple of Canaanite Baal, god Elberi.

And Jotham's prediction comes true. The thorn bush, Abimelech, gathers some brush. Do you notice the irony? He gathers some brush and sets fire to the stronghold.

And all the Shechemites in the tower of Shechem are consumed by fire. Now, the actions of Abimelech here have strong echoes of the actions of his dad, don't they?

Do you remember? They're full of the same vengeful spirit that we saw in Gideon and his attacks on the citizens of Succoth and Peniel last week. But now, this son looks out of control.

In verse 50, apparently at random attacks a place called Thebes. There's a siege. There's a capture. Inside, there's another tower into which people have retreated. And Abimelech attacks this tower.

[14:13] It's something about towers, isn't there? So I presume everyone, when all your walls have gone of your city, you sort of go to the one place that's left, the tower. Anyway, he attacks the tower, but this time things go awry.

A certain woman drops a millstone on his head, cracks his skull open. It's an ignominious death, isn't it, for a man whose father is king.

He's lived a life independent, of independence from God, independent before humans. And now he faces the prospect that a human and a woman is going to take his life.

A great shame in that culture. Of course, the irony is that even here he fails to recognise that it's, of course, the Lord who oversees his life and who orchestrates his end. He fails to see that it's the Lord who, through his spirit, stirred up this antagonism and who orchestrated his end.

He thinks it's a woman. So humanly, to avoid the shame, he asks his servant to deal the final blow. And in verses 56 and 57, the story of Gideon and his family comes to end.

[15:23] By the way, I ought to tell you something about this. Do you know, whenever Abimelech is remembered from here on in scripture, do you know what he's remembered for? That a woman killed him.

The very thing he didn't want happening, he's remembered for. Anyway, look at the last few verses. Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his 70 brothers.

And God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. And the curse of Jotham, the son of Jerubal, came on him. So friends, there's the story. I really have skimmed through it. I've painted Abimelech clearly as the bad guy. Let's make sure, though, we're right. Let's ask ourselves who the good guys are. That is, who are the ones with the white hats, if you like, in our story?

I think that there are three sets of hints in this chapter that make it very clear. Let me show you. Let me say that in the Bible, whenever an author actually expresses themselves, their view, we need to pay particular attention.

[16:26] And I want you to look at where that happens. Look at verses 22 to 24. Did you notice, as I explained before, that God initiates the action? He causes his spirit to divide Abimelech and the Shechemites.

He causes division and conflict between these two ungodly parties. The second significant intervention is the last verses of the chapter, where God is seen to be a judge who repays Abimelech for his wickedness in murdering his 70 brothers.

But notice something else. Do you notice the final words? The curse of Jotham, son of Jerubal, came on them. So we've ascertained, haven't we, that the black hats are worn by Abimelech and the Shechemites.

But verse 57 indicates that the white hat is worn by Jotham. Jotham has got it right. Abimelech is flawed. He acts dishonorably. He acts in bad faith.

His actions are against God, against good order. They are about getting what works for him and not about honoring either God or his dad. Friends, Jotham is right.

[17:34] Kingship, that is human, is flawed because of its self-interest. Now I want to show you another thing. It's about the names of God and Gideon here.

At the beginning, I indicated to you that this story is part and parcel of the story of Gideon. Now, as you know, Gideon can be known by two names within this story. Do you remember what they are? Israelite name?

Gideon, which means hacker. Very positive name because it means hacking down idols. What's his other name? Jerubal. It includes the name of the Canaanite god, Baal.

It is Jerubal, which means let Baal contend. It too is meant to be a positive name, but it's not entirely positive because it's got a non-Israelite god name in it.

Okay. Okay, that's the first thing to say about name. Second thing to say is this. Most of you know that whenever you see the word Lord in capital letters in our Bibles, we're being told it stands for the special name of God, probably pronounced Yahweh.

[18 : 40] It is the name God gave to Israel by which he was to be known to them. Now, let me tell you something. The word God in our Bibles, whenever you see the word God in our Bibles, is like our English word for God.

It can have a capital or not. It can be used for the real God or for false gods. It's a generic term rather than a specific term, whereas Yahweh is a very specific term.

It's for the God of Israel. That behind us, let me show you two interesting trends in the story of Gideon. Let me give you a summary of the number of times that the name Gideon is used.

So listen carefully. The name Gideon is used 14 times in chapter 6. 17 times in chapter 7. 19 times in chapter 8.

And guess how many times in chapter 9? Zero. Not one. The name Jerubal is used once in chapter 6.

[19 : 46] It is used once in chapter 7. Twice in chapter 8. How many times in chapter 9? Eight. Do you see the trend?

No longer calling him by an Israelite name, but by calling him by a Baal name. Here's something else. Positive names decrease as the story goes on and as the story of Gideon's family goes on. Negative names for Gideon increase as the story goes on. But that's not all. Let me tell you some more. In chapter 6, the name Yahweh occurs 27 times.

In chapter 7, it occurs nine times. In chapter 8, it occurs four times. And in chapter 9, no times. Not one. At the same time, the ordinary term for God occurs eight times in chapter 6, once in chapter 7, three times in chapter 8, and seven times in chapter 9.

[20 : 52] I wonder if you can hear, when you put all of this together, what's going on? As Gideon's story goes on, Israel and Gideon's family are moving away from Yahweh and being linked to Yahweh.

They are becoming more and more indistinguishable from their surroundings. They are increasingly using ambiguous language in reference to God. They're increasingly using names that have negative connotations.

Names like Jerubal and Abimelech. They are becoming more and more like their neighbors, aren't they? More and more like Canaanites. Even the words they need for God could be read as the gods of the Canaanites.

Less and less associated with the true God and his ways. Friends, that gives rise to my first point of application. My guess is that most of you here today watch movies on television you would have never countenanced watching, or on DVDs or whatever, you would never have countenanced watching 20 or 30 years ago.

My guess is that you also read books that would have made you embarrassed or ashamed 20 or 30 years ago. My guess is also that we speak and act in ways that we would have criticized in others 20 or 30 years ago.

[22 : 09] Now some of it might be put down to prudishness or the like, but most of it shows that our values have shifted in the past 20 to 30 years.

And with most of us, that shift has been negative, let me say. With most of us, it has been a shift away from godly values toward ungodly ones.

And those ungodly ones have now become acceptable to us. How many of us read our Bibles as much as we did 20 or 30 years ago? How many of us pray as much as we did 20 or 30 years ago?

How many of us consider God integral to our life in the same way as we did even 10 years ago?

Friends, I want to ask you how distinguishable you are from your neighbor, your friends, your fellow workers.

You see, what has happened with Gideon and his family, I think, is a very real danger in our world as well. Friends, we are God's elect. We are exiles in this world.

[23 : 06] We do not belong to it. We are scattered throughout the world, as Peter says in his epistle, people chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

Friends, we have been redeemed from an empty way of life. We have been called by God to be holy. So be holy. Let us rid ourselves of the characteristics of this world that we have become so accustomed to.

Rid ourselves of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander of every kind. As the Apostle Peter says, we have spent enough time in our life doing what pagans do.

Leave it. Leave it. Become God's people. Abstain from sinful desires that wage war against our souls. Live godly, good and holy lives among the pagans.

All of these are quotations from 1 Peter, which you might want to read. Don't be like Gideon and his family. Don't slip into being indistinguishable from your neighbours.

[24 : 16] Be different. Be godly. Shine like lights in the world. Don't let the light gradually dim into darkness.

Oh, and by the way, this is the place where I could have used the illustration about frogs. You know, us living in the world and not recognising that we're being boiled alive.

Oh, well, never mind. It would have been a good illustration, wouldn't it? Let's move on. My second point of application has to do with the picture of human rule that's presented here. See, chapter 8 raised the issue of rule.

Do you remember? Jerubba was offered it. Gideon was offered the rule by the people of Israel. He nobly refused it. But clearly the slide has begun. This chapter shows us outworking.

You see, if you fail to worship and serve God and live under his rule, then you'll end up living under human rule. And that's what we've seen in this chapter.

[25 : 23] We've seen self-rule and self-assertion go crazy. Friends, let me tell you, self-rule, self-assertion go hand in hand with idolatry. Just as we've seen in these chapters.

As the real God fades into the background, false gods will come to the foreground. As submission to the real God fades into the background, human rule will begin to dominate.

And this passage has told us much about human rule. You see, rule is always a vacuum waiting for someone to step in and fill the void. If God is not allowed to do it, then anti-God forces will.

And that can be on the personal level, in our own individual lives, or it can be on the corporate level, or it can be in the national level. Friends, as I've tried to indicate, the deterioration we've seen in the life of Gideon and his family is a picture of the world when it deserts the real God.

You see, without the real God, we are left with Satan's rule. Or we're left with human rule, which will in the end be satanic. Abimelech is a picture of where our world will end up if that vacuum is filled by humans devoid of God.

[26 : 38] It will end up with despots. And we only have to look around the world to see how many of them crop up at every vacuum that appears. It'll end up in harsh and despicable rule, where life will not be valued, where nations will be set at war just for people having their own interests.

Where children will not be led into righteousness, and where they'll be left to determine their own end. And where justice will be flawed, and where nepotism and corruption will just be acceptable and a way of life.

Friends, a world without God is a world that looks nice from this side. But it is, in reality, a world where humans are unleashed. And in the end, that'll be a place where Satan is unleashed.

And this passage tells us that God cannot accept such rule, and he will oppose it, and he will judge it, just as he did judge Abimelech.

Friends, against such a dark portrait, I want to leave you with a ray of hope. You see, God's goodness doesn't only extend to the judgment of evil. It has a more, it has another more positive direction as well.

[27 : 53] God will, by no means, we are told in the book of Exodus, clear the guilty. However, his purpose is to pursue grace.

We know that because we've seen it in the gospel. In and through Jesus, God gives us what we do not deserve. We are self-rulers.

We do not deserve his rule. But his son suffers the worst human self-assertion against his creator on the cross.

But on the cross, his son rules as only God can. Not with brutality. Not with revenge.

But with grace. And kindness. And surprising mercy. And the promise of forgiveness. Friends, don't embrace thorn bushes.

[28 : 54] You'll be burnt up with them. They'll only consume you. Embrace the only one worthy of worship and rule. And he wears a crown, which intriguingly is made of thorns.

Submit your life to him. And become like him. And allow him to rule your existence. Let's pray.

Father God, we see in the story of Abimelech what we see every time we pick up our newspapers.

Or we listen to the news on the television. Or hear it on the radio. We see in the story of Abimelech a despot. Unleashed from your rule.

Or unleashing themselves from your rule. And we see where it ends. At the same time, Father, we are reminded of your son today. And we see where his rule ends. Not in destruction. But in salvation. So, Father, we return to your son this day. And we ask that you might make us holy.

[30 : 18] Dependent upon his rule and determined to live under it. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.