

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Abimelech and the King Complex – (Judges Chapters 9-10) Last week, we explored the contradictory life of Gideon, the man who could have been king. Even though he refused the kingship, he made an ephod and attempted to discern the will of the divine. One must respect what appears to be the sincerity of his heart: he endeavored to make the Lord his king by erecting the ephod and seeking counsel from God. However, this too became an idol for Israel. How difficult it is for the people of God to disassociate the voice of pure religion from the voice of popular culture. Today, we will explore the life of Gideon's son and witness the continued devastation that accompanies God's rebellious people.

Part One: *The Killer Becomes King* – Abimelech is included in the book of Judges because he is the first king per se in Israel and the son of Gideon not because he is actually one of the judges that the Lord raises up to be a savior to his people. In fact, Abimelech did not fight the enemies of Israel, he fought the people of God. If the short, three-year reign of Abimelech is insightful, it is due to the fact that God continues to demonstrate his covenantal grace to Israel in spite of the fact they rebel against him and are deserving of destruction and wrath.

The story of Abimelech begins in deceit and ends in death; however, the saddest part of the story is not the murder of Gideon's seventy legitimate sons by his one illegitimate son, but the collusion that existed between the religion of God's people and the worship of Canaanite deities. This will be explored in detail below. Abimelech was the son of Gideon with his concubine, a lady from Shechem. You will remember that the city of Shechem is notable for a variety of reasons. In the time of Abraham, it is the location in which God reveals himself to the patriarch after he left the land of Ur and promised to give the land of Canaan to his descendants forever. The city was situated in the valley, sandwiched between two mountains: Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. These mountains were ceremonially important because they marked the site from which the blessings of covenantal obedience (Mt. Gerizim) and the curses for disobedience (Mt. Ebal) were pronounced by Joshua and all Israel when they first entered the land of promise. It is believed by some that the city of Shechem was never captured by Joshua, so the Shechemites during the time of Gideon may have either been inhabitants of Canaan or the children of intermarriage between the Israelites and the Canaanites.

Arthur Cundall states the following: "The capture of Shechem by Joshua is nowhere hinted at nor mentioned in passing and yet at a very early date a covenant-renewal ceremony will be held between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim (Joshua 8:30-35). This would have been impossible unless Shechem had been either captured or else been on friendly terms with the invaders. The evidence points to this latter as being the more probable."¹ The evidence to which Cundall is here referring is not provided in the text, so the veracity of the argument is debatable. It likewise seems unlikely that a Canaanite city would have

¹ Cundall, Arthur. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Judges and Ruth*. Page 123. Baney, Lesson 12 Winter/Spring 2016

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been peaceably overlooked by Joshua and the generation of conquest although such indifference to the land's former inhabitants would become characteristic of the generations that follow. Despite the origins of the city's inhabitants, the truth remains that the men of Shechem were in favor of an evil plan hatched by the mind of Gideon's son that would later be the cause of their destruction. He went to the clan of his mother's relatives and encouraged them to say to the leaders of the city: "*Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?*" (9:2). This comment is deceitful and insightful. Insightful because there is no indication from scripture that the seventy sons of Gideon had any intention of ruling as kings in Israel. In fact, their father had informed Israel that such would not be the case, and became the context for requesting from Israel the golden earrings from which he would make the ephod.

The leaders of Shechem were convinced by the relatives of Abimelech's mother, and they gave him seventy pieces of silver that Abimelech used to hire assassins to kill the seventy sons of Gideon. What is interesting is that they retrieved the money from the house of Baal-berith, which is Hebrew for "lord of the covenant". Remember that when Joshua and Israel assembled for the ceremony in which they pronounced the blessings and the curses in Joshua chapter 8 that they erected an altar of memorial and wrote the covenant of God or words of God's law on the surface of the altar. There are some who believe that the house of the Lord (or tabernacle) was pitched at this site. Michael Wilcock states, "The oak at Shechem in particular had an honored place in the lore of the chosen people. There Father Abraham had pitched his first camp in Canaan, and the Lord had appeared to him with the promise that the land should be his. There his grandson Jacob put away all the foreign gods his household had brought from Mesopotamia, to renew his own dedication to the Lord. And there was a shrine, too, at Shechem, the house of the Lord of Berith, the Covenant. To the true Israelite, there is only one covenant, the agreement that has bond generation after generation of his people to the Lord their God. The shrine, the oak, the town, the name can all be seen as integrated with the grand traditions of the true Israel."²

It is highly unlikely that Israel would have been actively engaged in worship to the one true God, the covenantal Lord if the inhabitants of the city of Shechem were primarily Canaanites as was previously suggested. What is more likely is that the shrine of Baal-Berith is a place where the worship of Baal and the worship of YHVH is synchronized into something other than commanded by God to his people. Nonetheless, for the men of Shechem, the two were one and the same. El or YHVH was one of many of their pantheon of deities. There is the hint of the Israelite religion as the surrounding vicinity lends itself to being interpreted in light of ceremonies and events marking the covenant between God and his people. This further exasperates the situation since the money taken from the shrine was used by the men of Shechem for the unholy duty of slaying the late judge's sons. After murdering the seventy sons of Gideon, the men of Shechem return with Abimelech and made him king at the oak near the pillar of Shechem. This is undoubtedly the same place mentioned in Joshua chapter 24 where the covenant between God and Israel is renewed.

The youngest son of Gideon, Jotham, manages to escape. As he flees, he stops momentarily atop Mt. Gerizim (the mount of blessing), and pronounces a prophecy to the men of Shechem. In his prophecy he declares the following: "*The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'* But the olive tree said to them, '*Shall I leave my abundance by which gods and men*

² Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Judges*. Pg. 92-93
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are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’”

It is apparent from this account, that the relationship between the people of Shechem and their new king was not off to a good start. How could it be when the throne of Abimelech was erected in the blood of his brothers? There is no reason to think that Abimelech reigned over all Israel, indeed there is no indication that his influence ever went beyond the vicinity of Shechem and maybe outlying hamlets and villages. Leadership among the people of God substantial enough to unite all Israel under one monarch was rarely achieved either in the period of the judges or the period of the kings. David and Solomon are the only pre-captivity monarchs who successfully united all Israel under the leadership of one king. It should also be observed that the idea of a monarchy was not perceived as inappropriate. This is different than the prevailing sentiment during the lives of such men as Joshua and Gideon. It can be argued that the editor of Judges included the story of Abimelech’s rebellion to send the message that the monarchy was corrupt and should not be pursued, but such a message will quickly be lost in the baseless and abominable behavior exemplified later in the book.

The message of Jotham was clear: Abimelech is like a bramble. It is ridiculous for the tall and strong cedars of Lebanon to find shade and comfort under the meager twisted knots of the bramble. Furthermore, the bramble (Abimelech) will set on fire all who oppose him, the men of Shechem notwithstanding. This later becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the men of Shechem seek to overthrow the new king, and he destroys them and their city. Abimelech himself will meet his own demise at the hands of a woman throwing a millstone from atop the tower of Shechem. The story of the illegitimate son of an illegitimate king concludes as badly as it begins.

Part Two: Tola, Jair, and the Impatience of God – After the death of Abimelech we have two other saviors who arose to defend the people of God. The first of these was Tola. There is little we know about this man, and even less about what he accomplished. Perhaps under his tenure, the enemies of God’s people were once more brought to a state of submission. All we know is: *“After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years.”* Perhaps all that needs to be known of Tola is the meaning of his name. His name means both scarlet and worm. Scarlet is made from the crushing of a silk worm. Perhaps the reason that Tola saved Israel and the reason for their twenty-three yearlong rest was the fact that he allowed his life to be crushed in the hands of the true Judge so that God’s people might be spared from becoming objects of his divine wrath.

Jair is the second judge mentioned in chapter 10. He judged (saved) Israel for twenty-two years. We know little more of him save for the fact that he had thirty sons who ride on thirty donkeys (10:4). It is agreed upon by both Wilcock as well as Cundall, that the reference to thirty donkeys was indicative of a period of peace and prosperity. As Wilcock aptly states, “...he who rides on an ass rather than a warhorse is one who comes in peace.” What is more noteworthy is the grace that God shows to his people during the forty-five-year period in which Tola and Jair judged Israel. It is unlikely that Israel witnessed significant repentance and heart change during this period of time. What is more likely is that Baney, Lesson 12 Winter/Spring 2016

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the God of the covenant chose not to give his rebellious people what they justly deserved so that he might bring them back to him in faith and repentance.

Such a gracious reprieve, however, did not last long. After the death of Jair, we have the familiar account, *“The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.”* When God delivered them into the hands of their oppressors, the surrounding nations, they cried out to him in repentance. God’s response to their repentance is notable and alarming: *“You have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore, I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress”* (10:13-14). If this response was unprecedented, so was Israel’s next move. According to our text, *“...they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord...”* What did God do? *“...and he (God) became impatient over the misery of Israel”* (10:16). It is amazing that God is not seen as losing his patience over the sin and rebellion of his people. His chastisement of them is the expected response of a loving father to restore his wayward children. This is not to say that God’s merciful patience does not run out, indeed in the preceding verses he told them that he would deliver them no more. However, the misery of his people, which was rightly deserved on their part, was the variable over which he is described as becoming impatient. We have here a sense of grieving on the part of God over the relentless cycle of sin and judgment, a longing that filters through the pages of scripture for a judge, a savior who can set everything right again.

Conclusion: By way of application, we read the account of Abimelech and can’t help but think of the evil deeds of Gideon’s son mirrored by the deeds of his father before him. The destructiveness of Abimelech against the men of Shechem can be compared to Gideon’s torturing and killing the men of Succoth and Peniel. Such an injustice against the people of God is a misuse of one’s military strength and abilities. However, we are left to wonder, how does this apply to us today? It is obvious that the tendency toward certain prejudices can be easily passed from father to son, from one generation to the next. What else can this story teach us? If nothing else, we should discover in the tale of Abimelech the long-suffering and merciful attributes of a covenant keeping God.

From the two chapters of our text this week we learn more about the heart of the Father towards his children. The impatience of God (certainly an anthropomorphism) is expressed here regarding the misery experienced by his people. Similar language was used in Exodus 2:24-25, *“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew.”* God is aware of our suffering, even when our suffering is the result of our own transgression and rebellion, and God grieves.

A third and final application we can rightly draw from the story of Abimelech is the important role the church can play in speaking prophetically to the culture of the day. Central to the story of Abimelech’s murderous deeds was the fact that he received payment to hire the assassins from the shrine of Baal-Berith (lord of the covenant). The fact that this structure cannot be easily identified as a site of worship to YHWH or a Canaanite site (or both) is indicative of a culture in which the religion of God’s people has become effaced by the spirit of the age. When the church refuses to speak prophetically to the cultural values of each generation, they will fall prey to the philosophy of relativism and use God’s resources for the furtherance of their own kingdom instead of God’s.