

God's Justice

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[0 : 0 0] be seated. Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. It's my joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we've become convinced that there's no one so good they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word. We're continuing our series in the book of Judges, and you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about our need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. It's about our need for a faithful and true king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. It's about the power of spirit-filled leadership, and it's about God's grace for hard-hearted people, people like you and me.

This week, we're continuing the same story we began last week, the story of Abimelech, and you'll remember that we talked about the fact that we often get the leaders we deserve. The people of Shechem chose Abimelech, and Jotham calls them out saying, hey, look, you chose the bramble instead of the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine. Our question this week, our focus is, what is our hope when we find ourselves under wicked rulers? Abimelech, he's now in charge. He's made the king.

Where do we look when we find ourselves with Abimelech-type leaders, leaders who care about themselves rather than their people? I'm going to do the same thing I did last week. I'm going to tell you the story, and then we're going to draw out a few principles. With that, I invite you to turn with me now to God's Word. We're in Judges 9, starting in verse 22. You can turn with me in your worship guide.

You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your Bible. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word, and God tells us that his Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and it's sweeter even than honey, honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. So that's why we read now Judges 9, starting at verse 22.

Abimelech ruled over Israel three years, and God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerobel might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother who killed them, and on the men of Shechem who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to Abimelech.

[3 : 07] Verse 26. And Gael the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards and trod them and held a festival. And they went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. And Gael the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerobel, and is not Zebel his officer? Serve the men of Hamor, the father of Shechem. But why should we serve him? Would that this people were under my hand. Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, increase your army and come out.

Verse 30. When Zebel the ruler of the city heard the words of Gael the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, Behold, Gael the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do. Verse 34. So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies.

And Gael the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city. And Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush. And when Gael saw the people, he said to Zebel, look, people are coming down from the mountaintops. And Zebel said to him, you mistake the shadow of the mountaintops for men. Gael spoke again and said, look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming down from the direction of the Divener's Oak. Then Zebel said to him, where is your mouth now, you who said, who is Abimelech that we should serve him? Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them. And Gael went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him.

And many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech lived at Eremah, and Zebel drove out Gael and his relatives so that they could not dwell at Shechem. Verse 42. On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. He took his people and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them. Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the field and killed them. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and killed the people who were in it. And he raised the city and sowed it with salt.

Verse 46. When all the leaders of the tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of Elbereth. Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. And Abimelech went up to Mount Zalman, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bundle of brushwood and took it up and laid it on his shoulder.

[6 : 42] And he said to the men who were with him, what you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done. So every one of the people cut down his bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold.

And they set the stronghold on fire over them so that all the people of the tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women. Verse 50. Then Abimelech went to Thebes and encamped against Thebes and captured it. But there was a strong tower within the city and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city flew to it and shut themselves in. And they went up to the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, a woman killed him. And his young man thrust him through and he died. And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. Thus, God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his 70 brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads.

And upon them came the curse of Jotham, the son of Jeroboam. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our father in heaven, we thank you this morning that even when the world seems chaotic, you are still in control. And when things seem disorganized, you still have a plan. We ask that you would remind us of that by your word, that you would greatly encourage us and challenge us. Most of all, we would see more than we have before your power, your authority, your love, your mercy. And so we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit, that you'd open our eyes, soften our hearts, that we'd be able to see and believe and understand what you have for us in your word. And we ask all these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. There's been a lot of focus in recent years on what might be called sustainable meat consumption. And one piece of that movement is what is called nose-to-tail dining.

And the idea of nose-to-tail dining is pretty simple. It's that you use as many cuts from an animal as possible. And so it includes unpopular pieces. It includes, hey, let's not just eat the steaks from this animal. We also want to eat its brain. We don't just want to eat the brain. We also want to eat the liver. We're going to eat things like pig's ears. And the goal here is that nothing goes to waste.

Now, whatever you think about that, there is something praiseworthy about 100% efficiency or as close as you can get to 100%. Some people call this zero waste. The goal is to use absolutely everything, to leave as little waste as possible. I bring all of that up because as we enter into more and more of the downward spiral in the book of Judges, we are reminded of this. When it comes to the events of this world, God is a nose-to-tail cook. In other words, when it comes to the events of this world, God will use everything. There is nothing that happens. There's no event that you read about in the news or you watch yourself that God is not using for his purposes. Nothing that happens in this world goes to waste.

[10:41] And even when it seems like things are spiraling in various directions, God is still working. So much so that God even works evil for his own purposes. Even events that are unpopular. Even events that are wicked. Of course, we don't have to go far in this passage to see plenty of evil. You'll remember last week, Abimelech allied himself with the men of Shechem. He had that whisper campaign among his mom's relatives. He said, look, go and speak to the other leaders and tell them, hey, you know, you don't want to be ruled by 70 men. You want to be ruled by one. And don't you want to be ruled by someone who's your relative? Listening to this, then they go and you'll remember they kill 69 of his 70 brothers.

So there's this massacre. Abimelech's involved in murdering his own family. There's the one brother, Jotham, who survives. And you'll remember the passage last week ends with this curse from Jotham.

After he tells this parable, he says, look, if this has not been in good faith, and we know it hasn't been done in good faith, may you destroy each other. May Abimelech destroy the men of Shechem.

May the men of Shechem destroy Abimelech. It's those events, it's that curse, which we now begin to see unfold in this passage. Very quickly in verse 23, we see God sends an evil spirit. And so these two groups that were in an alliance are suddenly turned against each other. No longer is Abimelech working hand in glove with the men of Shechem, the leaders of Shechem. Now they're working at cross purposes. And we're told that God does this, verse 24, so that there would be justice. This justice happens quickly in verses 26 through 29. Gael, the son of Ebed, shows up on the scene and he says, look, what are you doing serving Abimelech? Yeah, he's got some relatives here in town, but guess who my relatives are? My relatives are the founders of Shechem. So my relations trump his relations.

But it turns out that Abimelech has an inside man. Abimelech's inside man, Zebel, hears these words from Gael, and he gives the heads up to Abimelech. Not only does he give Abimelech the heads up, he says, look, you need to set an ambush and take care of this guy before he takes care of you. Abimelech does that very thing. He sets up an ambush. He catches Gael, son of Ebed, off guard, and Gael ends up being cast out. He ends up being driven away. That's not enough for Abimelech, though, and so he comes back for a second round. He wants a second ambush. He lays ambush on the city again and takes care of the people who are there. Even that is not enough for Abimelech, and so he goes after this other city that we haven't heard of before that is close to Shechem, and he decides he's going to run the same play he ran in Shechem. Shechem, he sets fire to this temple, this pagan temple, and just burns all the leaders. He's on a rampage, so he decides it's time to run the same play in the next city.

[13 : 49] He also sets fire to their tower, except this time there is a strategically positioned woman with a millstone. She drops it on Abimelech, and so that he doesn't bear the shame of being killed by a woman, he asks someone to drive him through with a sword. Okay, this is a long reading and a long chapter. If you didn't track with all of that, the point is this. Abimelech and the men of Shechem, who were in an alliance to destroy all other sons of Gideon, both meet justice. Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem are killed. We end on those two notes. Verse 56, judgment on Abimelech.

Verse 57, judgment on the leaders of Shechem. And so in all the events that we're reading about in this chapter, there's two key points, two key focus verses. You have verses 56 and 57, which says God brought justice. You have verses 23 and 24 that God sets up. It says he sent an evil spirit so that he could bring justice.

It all goes back to the curse of Jotham from last week in verse 20. Remember he said, may you destroy each other. Remember our question, what's our hope when we're under wicked leaders?

What's the hope of the people of Israel as they're reminded of this story of Abimelech? Where should they set their eyes when they find themselves in the future under Abimelech type kings?

And the first is this, God is at work whether we see him or not. God is at work whether we see him or not. For the last couple chapters, the story of Judges has been completely haphazard. It seems like violent and wicked men are getting their way.

[16 : 02] God is at work. And we're told at the very end here, verse 56, thus God, verse 57, and God.

God's hands have been in control this entire time. God has never given up Israel.

God has always been at work and in control from the very beginning. It's not just verses 56 and 57.

As I mentioned just a minute ago, it's verses 23 and 24. Verse 23, God sent an evil spirit. Verse 24, that justice might be done.

No matter how wicked things get, no matter how chaotic they seem, in the rulers of this world, God is working his purposes.

- [17 : 14] God is a nose-to-tail cook. You guys will see this on page 8 of your worship guide. However God is related to evil, he is never tainted by it, is always sovereign over it, and causes it to serve, in the end, his own just purposes.
- There is great comfort for us all in that. And of course, as we live, not in the time of judges, but in 2024, we are not unfamiliar with violence and chaos and wicked leaders.
- We could look to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. We are warming up for another contentious election season.
- We now have a standoff between some of our states and our federal government on our southern border. There is a massacre that happened against Christians in Nigeria on Christmas Day.
- God is in control. God is working his purposes. He's not far off. He's not distant. He's not forgotten.
- [18 : 40] He's not absent. Behind the scenes, God is still at work. This passage does not merely or simply tell us that God is still in control of this world.
- He's still working his will. It actually tells us what his purposes are. His purpose here is to bring justice. Why did the evil spirit come?
- Verse 23. We're told in the very next verse. Verse 24. So that the blood might come upon their heads. And then we're told the same thing at the very end. This long story of conflict comes at the very beginning and the end with a reminder of God's work.
- And so when we ask ourselves, how can God allow this or that to continue in our country? How can God allow this action or that action to continue around the world?
- One of the answers that comes from this passage is this. He will not allow it forever. Wickedness may flourish for a time.
- [19 : 52] It will not flourish in the end. Murderers and violent men succeed for a time. they will not succeed forever.
- God may seem far off. He is not. God may appear blind, but he sees.
- God is bringing justice to this world. God brought a justice to Abimelech. God brings justice to the leaders of Shechem.
- God will bring justice fully and finally one day. And so in this passage we get a small picture of that.
- There are many places in Scripture where we see just a little glimpse of the future brought into the present. this is one of those small glimpses.
- [20 : 59] We see God's future judgment acted out in a small way on these evil actors in this story. And it reminds us of God's coming judgment one day.
- And so what is our hope when we find ourselves with wicked rulers? What is our hope when we find a world filled with chaos and evil? Yes, first, it is that God is at work whether we see him or not.
- And it is second that God is bringing justice. God will judge in part now and fully one day.
- And so we see that God is at work. He's using wicked rulers for a time to accomplish his purposes and but their judgment is coming.
- Abimelech survives only for a time. You can think of whatever wicked ruler you might want to right now. They will flourish for a time.
- [22 : 13] They will not flourish forever. We could even think of what's happening right now at the exposure of Jeffrey Epstein ultimately right? All secrets revealed all hearts exposed.
- Wickedness and evil will not survive forever. Now sometimes people will tell you things like this. They'll say look God is sovereign. He's in control.

And so therefore shame on you Christian for having any interest in politics. Shame on you Christian for worrying about the state of this world.

Of course anyone who tells you that is often disingenuous because when something that they care about happens they're suddenly ringing the bell that everyone needs to join them in their cause. When we talk about God's sovereignty, his control in this world, it does not mean that suddenly we stop caring about what's happening around us.

It does not mean that somehow we become uninvolved in working for a better world. But it does change our framework. It does change our hope and our focus.

[23 : 21] Remember our question is what is our hope when we have wicked leaders? One pastor gives these wonderful categories that I love. He says basically the difference between those who hope in God and those who don't hope in God is this.

It is the difference between sorrow and despair. When we as Christians see wickedness flourishing in this world, it is good and right to be filled with sorrow.

But we never despair. Because we know God's working everything for his purposes, right? When we look and see the world around us, it does not mean that we can't act, that we can't take the responsibilities and privileges that have been given to us to move forward.

It does mean no matter what happens, we don't give up. no matter what happens, we are not filled with despair. The Bible thankfully speaks to both sides of this.

We're told in Psalm 119 about appropriate sorrow. The psalmist says this, my eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law. In other words, the psalmist is filled with grief.

[24 : 36] He looks around at the world, he sees people rebelling against God and it fills him with tears. He doesn't say, God's sovereign, he's in control, silly me for caring about any of these things.

No, he cares deeply about them and he's not crushed because he knows the other side. There's another promise in the psalm. Psalm 46 reminds us God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea. And so Christian faith is both of those things.

It is a realistic, clear-eyed view and sorrow over the state of the world. It is an appropriate anger against violations of God's law and it is coming nowhere close to despair because we know that God holds the world in his hands.

So what is our hope? Our hope is real and so I'm not saying don't care, I'm saying don't give up. I'm not saying close your eyes, I'm saying don't be crushed.

[26 : 02] God is working out his will and his purposes no matter what. God is at work in every politician and political process.

God is not ignorant of the violence around our world. He is acting and he will act.

I mentioned before that this passage points us forward to God's ultimate judgment at the end of time. And the uncomfortable truth that Christianity teaches is it is not just wicked people out there somewhere.

No, the Bible tells us that wickedness is in our own hearts as well. And so as we hope, as we see God working out his purposes, there's a part of us that should cause us to praise him and there's a part of that that rightly causes us to tremble.

If God is going to deal with evil, what does that mean for me? And that reminds us again of one of the major themes of Judges, which is God's mercy to hard-hearted people.

[27 : 17] God's mercy to people like you and me. Yes, we see God's judgment here. Yes, last week we saw people often get the leaders they deserve, and we can say at least once we got a leader we did not deserve.

How is it that God shows mercy to the people of Israel over and over? How is it, as we'll see next week, that he sends good judges to bad people? His mercy finds its foundation, its focal point in our Lord Jesus Christ.

That what is true for us, what we look back towards, the people in Judges look forward to, which is that Jesus came in real time and real space as a real man.

He walked and lived on this earth the perfect life that we should have lived. He credited that to us, to those who have faith in him, and then he took the punishment that we deserve.

And so why is it that we can have hope as God's judgment comes? Because God holds not just this world, he holds the lives of those who trust in him.

[28 : 38] In Christmas of 1939, King George VI gave a radio broadcast on Christmas Day. Now, if you're a student of history, you know, on September 3rd of 1939, Britain had declared war on Germany.

So they're almost three months into World War II. The realities of war are coming home to them, and there is great trepidation and anxiety among the people of Britain about what is going to happen next.

Giving this radio address, King George VI reads a poem, and it was a poem that his daughter, Elizabeth, had told him about. Elizabeth was 13 years old at the time.

She's who we now know, now call Queen Elizabeth II. We lost her just very recently. And so she tells, this 13-year-old girl tells her father about this poem, and so he reads it to the entire nation of Britain on Christmas Day.

It's on the back of your worship guide. It's called The Gate of the Year. And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.

[29 : 48] And he replied, go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.

God is at work. He's using history to accomplish his purposes, and he is bringing full and final justice. Because of that, for those who have trust and faith in Christ, walking with him is better than a light, and it is safer than a known way.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and we thank you that you haven't taken your hands off of the wheel of this world, that even when we don't see you, you're still at work.

when we cry out to you, you hear us, and you are working to make all things right. We ask that you would remind us of that this morning, that you would grow our belief and our faith and our hope and our trust, that more and more we would be people who, when we experience sorrow, never come near to despair, because we know that you are writing your story in this world.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.