

The Anti-Judge: Destroyer, Not Saviour

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Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0:00] We're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning.! Judges chapter 9.

And we're beginning at verse 1. It's a long chapter, so settle in. It's a good story, but here we go. Chapter 9, verse 1. Now Abimelech, the son of Jeroboam, went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, Which is better for you, that all 70 of the sons of Jeroboam rule over you, or that one rule over you.

Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother.

And they gave him 70 pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-Bereth, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Ophirah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jeroboam, 70 men on one stone.

But Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, was left, for he hid himself. And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-Melo. And they went and made Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

[1:59] When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood 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.

The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, Rain over us. But the olive tree said to them, Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?

And the trees said to the fig tree, You come and rain 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 rain 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?

And then all the trees said to the bramble, You come and rain 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.

[3:05] But if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon. Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerobel and his house, and have done to him as he deserved, for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and delivered you from the hand of Midian.

And if you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed the sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he's your relative, if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerobel, and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.

But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the leaders of Shechem, and Beth Milo.

And let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem, and from Beth Milo, and devour Abimelech.

And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beer, and lived there, because of Abimelech, his brother. 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 men 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. And Gal, the son of Ebed, moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem, put confidence in him.

[4:55] And they went out into the field, and gathered the grapes from the 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 Gal, 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 Hamur, the father of Shechem, but why should we serve him? Would that his people were under my hand. Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, Increase your army, and come out.

When Zebel, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gal, the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. And he sent messengers to Abimelech, secretly, saying, Behold, Gal, 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.

[5:59] 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. So, Abimelech, and all the men who are with him, rose up by night, and set an ambush against Shechem, in four companies.

And Gal, the son of Ebed, went out, and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city. And Abimelech, and the people who were with him, rose from the ambush. And when Gal 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 mountains of a man. Gal spoke again, and said, Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the diviner'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 Gal 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.

[7:08] And Abimelech lived at Aramah, and Zebel drove out Gal and his relatives, so they could not dwell at Shechem. 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 razed the city, and sowed it with salt.

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 to the Mount Zalman, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an axe in his hand, and cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up, and laid it on his shoulder.

[8:19] 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 one thousand men and women. Then Abimelech went to Therbez, and encamped against Therbez, and captured it.

But there was a strong tower within that city, and all the men and women, and all the leaders of the city, fled 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 me. And his young man, thrust him through, and he

died.

[9 : 29] 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 seventy 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.

Amen. Amen. May God bless to us, this morning, his words. Good morning.

Do turn in your Bibles, to Judges, chapter 9, once again. Who or what rules us, determines the direction of our lives.

However much our society may insist otherwise, human beings are not autonomous. Something will drive our lives, and set their course.

[10 : 32] It may be our own desires, which much of our society tells us, ought to rule us. Nobody else can tell you, who you really are, so discover your desires, and embrace them.

We hear that sort of thing. But we are more than our desires, and our desires are not fit to rule us. What rules us, will either lead us towards flourishing, or carry us towards disaster.

Judges, chapter 9, is one of the grimmest chapters in the Bible. In it, we meet the anti-judge, Abimelech, to whom the writer gives 57 verses, of sordid scheming, and brutal violence.

He isn't a God-appointed deliverer, but a self-appointed destroyer. Rather than delivering God's people from oppression, Abimelech becomes their oppressor.

And so it's a solemn warning to Israel, and therefore to the church, that our oppressors need not come from outside of us. We're perfectly capable of raising up our own.

[11 : 46] When our hearts, chapter 8, verse 33, turn from God to idols, and chapter 8, verse 34, we forget the Lord.

That is, ignore what He's done and said. And submitting ourselves to terrible rulers won't be far off.

And this chapter does something important within the book of Judges as a whole.

We know the book ends with those chilling words, in those days, there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. That's the disastrous conclusion towards which the downward spiral of Judges is heading.

Judges chapter 9 shows us the calamity of choosing, accepting, and enabling the wrong ruler.

A king in and of himself is not the answer. Any old king will not do. A king who is himself ruled by selfishness and sin can only lead his followers towards disaster, disorder, and destruction.

[12 : 59] We knew that from last week, the possibility of royalty was raised at the conclusion of Gideon's ministry, when Israel asked him to rule and establish a dynasty.

But before Israel can understand what kind of king it needs, it must learn the utter calamity of being ruled or being misruled by an unfaithful king.

And through Abimelech's disastrous reign, God teaches His people to watch what you make king, verses 1 to 6. Watch what you make king.

Be very careful what you allow to rule you, because whatever holds sway over you both reveals what you value and shapes what you become. This episode, Abimelech making his moves to become king, springs directly from the conclusion of Gideon's ministry and his feelings.

What was present in seed form at the end of chapter 8 now comes to full bloom. Remember from last week, Gideon was conflicted about kingship.

[14 : 06] He declared that the Lord should rule Israel, yet increasingly he lived like a king. He amassed wives, collected a king-like tribute, and he named his son Abimelech, which means, my father is king.

But with Abimelech, there is no such conflict. He is calculating about becoming king. Gideon's ambiguous kingship blossoms into Abimelech's naked ambition.

Israel's failure to show love to Gideon's family blossoms into their murder. Israel's return to Baal blossoms into Baal-sponsored politics. And Gideon's sprawling household is almost entirely eliminated by his illegitimate son.

These verses describe a sleazy plot to grasp par. And notice the character of Abimelech's campaign to be king.

It's self-appointed. Unlike the judges whom God raised up, Abimelech raises himself. Verse 1, he goes to his mother's family and begins to make his moves.

[15:17] It's also sectarian. He exploits clan loyalty, getting his relatives to whisper that one of their own is better than Gideon's 70 sons.

Come on, you Shechemites. Remember also that I am bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. Their hearts inclined towards him because, verse 3, he's our brother.

He's one of us. And it's idolatrous, verse 4. We're told that 70 pieces of silver come from the house of Baal-Bareth, the false god Israel had turned to to worship.

That means god of the covenant, Baal-Bareth. There you go. A false god, even taking the Lord's name and funding this treachery.

70 pieces of silver, Baal-funded politicking. And it's treacherous and violent. The money hires worthless and reckless fellows who follow him to Uphrah and slaughter Gideon's 70 sons.

[16:18] Abimelech establishes his throne by shedding Israelite blood. But there's more going on here than just the twisted plot of a power-hungry man. Verse 5 creates suspense.

Do you see Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, escapes. Also, the names that are used in these verses are significant. Abimelech means my father is king.

Jotham means Yahweh is blameless. Reminding us where the blame for this bloodshed does and does not belong. And then notice, throughout chapter 9, Gideon is called Jeroboam.

He's referred to throughout this chapter as Jeroboam. The name given after he tore down Baal's altar. A name which means let Baal contend with him.

Well, now Baal appears to be contending with Gideon and his legacy as his worshippers use his temple money to support Abimelech in destroying Jeroboam's family.

[17:24] Brothers and sisters, all of that points to the fact that the struggle to rule our lives, to rule the church, is always a spiritual one. Anything allowed to hold sway over God's people is not neutral.

And notice where Abimelech is crowned. The plot begins in Shechem, verse 1. And then in verse 6, Abimelech is made king beside the oak of Shechem.

Shechem was a place rich in significance for God's people. Abraham entered the land God promised him and built an altar there. And at the close of Joshua's ministry, he gathered all Israel together in the land at Shechem and called them to covenant faithfulness.

Well, now at Shechem, they crown a king whose rise represents covenant betrayal. Notice also back at Uphrah, verse 5, the slaughter upon the stone grotesquely reverses Gideon's offering back in chapter 6.

Gideon once placed an offering upon a rock before the Lord, but now Abimelech sheds his brother's blood upon a stone so that he can grasp at a throne. And it's not called a sacrifice here, but it resembles a perverse offering paid in blood.

[18:46] We here see not only that we get the leaders we deserve, but what is far more chastening is that we get the leaders we choose. Shechem receives the leader it chooses.

After Gideon died, they whored at Rebaal again, chapter 8 told us. They did not remember the Lord, and the fruit is that they listen to Abimelech, they finance him, they strengthen his hands, and they make him king.

And their choice reveals what they value, and it will shape what they become. And we need to be conscious that this same battle rages today, the battle for what will rule us.

And it's a spiritual matter. It might not be a person we make king. It may be something else we allow to rule us. We can let our career consume us, master us, so that we mouth commitment to the Lord and his church, but when it really comes to the crunch, we do that which will see us reach the top of our profession, whatever the cost to family and church family.

Or money can cease to be a useful servant and begin dictating every decision. The same goes for comfort, alcohol, sexual desire, and all kinds of things like that.

[20:07] Good things can move from being something we enjoy as a gift they are from God to become something we obey. Things that dictate to us, control what we do, so that the gifts usurp the giver.

Same question reaches our homes and our public lives. Will Christ rule our families through his word? Will his design and purpose for marriage and family be trusted and embodied and embraced?

Or who will rule over us as a nation? We live in a democracy and so we need to be aware that who we vote for matters and that is ultimately a spiritual question.

we do not park our Christianity at the door of the polling station. Will we choose leaders who seek to restrain evil in our society or those who push and propagate and legislate that which the Lord hates and appores?

But the main place where this lands is the church. Who will rule over us? Will it be the spirit of the age? Will we be so shaped by the assumptions of the unbelieving world that we cannot bear to be out of step with it?

[21 : 25] When Christ's word confronts our culture on the sanctity of human life, on sexuality, on justice, on what humanity's deepest problem is, who will have the final word?

Will it be the sole king and head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ, who governs his people through his word? Lord. Brothers and sisters, who rules over us is a question of the utmost importance.

It is disastrous to allow anything other than the Lord to master us. Disastrous that we allow Abimelech-shaped things to have mastery over us, things that crave power, things that will stop at nothing to get it, things that are spurred on and propped up by spiritual evil.

Not by Baal, but by the one behind Baal, the evil one himself. Well, Abimelech kills his brother to gain a throne. But the rightful king of our lives and our church, the Lord Jesus, he gave himself to death to make enemies brothers and to share his rule, his kingdom with them.

Abimelech kills his brother to gain a throne. The Lord Jesus gave himself to death to make his enemies brothers and to share his throne with them. Abimelech sees his rule despite having saved nobody, whereas Jesus receives universal rule because he's the savior.

[23 : 01] Watch who you make king. Well, having shown us whom Shechem makes king, the writer now brings back the surviving brother to expose what kind of refuge their chosen king can actually provide.

And so he says to us in verses 7 to 21, do not seek refuge in what will burn you. Do not seek refuge in what will burn you. Be very wary of seeking refuge and security apart from the Lord, lest the very things you trust to shelter you become your ruin.

The suspense created by the escaped brother in verse 5 is realized here in Jotham's Feeble. When Jotham hears of Abimelech's coronation, he climbs up Mount Gerizim and cries out to the leaders of Shechem.

Now, Mount Gerizim is the mountain associated with God's covenant blessing. But here, Jotham stands upon the mountain of blessing and pronounces a curse.

There's no blessing to be found when the Lord's people willfully and persistently scorn him, place another in his rightful place and compound that idolatry with treachery and bloodshed.

[24 : 17] And so Jotham tells them a story. The trees go out to anoint a king over them and the first three trees they approach, the olive tree, the fig tree, the vine. They all refuse.

Each is useful and fruitful. Would be good choices perhaps. They produce oil, figs, grapes, and wine. Good gifts associated throughout Scripture with fruitfulness and abundance and joy.

Each tree prefers its work to holding sway over the others. And we don't need to interpret or allegorize each tree or become bogged down on whether they represent a general reluctance towards monarchy because the thrust of this feeble is plain.

In verse 14, all the trees finally settle upon the bramble to rule over them. They find a candidate who will not refuse and their unanimous choice is the most worthless candidate of all.

And the folly is exposed in verse 15, the bramble produces no nourishing fruit and cannot offer the great trees meaningful shelter. Its chief use is as fuel for fire.

[25 : 33] And yet here is the little bramble saying, verse 15, offering shade, come and take refuge in my shade. A little bramble, come and shade underneath me.

Let me shelter you under my great wings. Let me protect you. But it cannot. The promise of refuge is absurd.

And then comes the menace. If the offer is not made in good faith to make the bramble king, fire will come from the bramble and devour even the settlers of Lebanon.

That's what a bramble can provide. Kindling for fire. The bramble, this invitation is both absurd and threatening. Seek shelter beneath my non-existent shades or be consumed by my fire.

Abimelech presents himself as Shechem's security but possesses only the capacity to destroy.

Jotham's message is simple. You have chosen foolishly and disastrously with your choice of king.

[26:41] You've made king a man entirely unfit to rule you. You've made a bramble king. Do you see the repeated if in verses 16 to 19?

If you acted in good faith and integrity by making Abimelech king, if you dealt well with Gideon and his family, the man who risked his life and rescued you from Midian, then rejoice in one another. But there is no real if about this, is there? Because verse 18 has already exposed them. They ruse against Gideon's house, murdered his sons and made Abimelech king simply because he was their relative.

And so verse 20 must follow. Let fire come from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and let fire come from Shechem and devour Abimelech.

Let your sordid alliance become one of mutual destruction. You've acted corruptly and placed over yourselves a ruler who cannot shelter you.

[27:46] Now together reap the destruction you've chosen. Brothers and sisters, when we seek refuge in the wrong place, the people and the things in which we trust will not merely fail to shelter us, they may become the means of our destruction.

Think of the false refuges we've already mentioned. Take our careers. A career can promise significance, security, satisfaction, but if reaching the top begins to master us, how quickly its promised refuge can become fire.

It may eat away at our family, at those closest to us become second, repeatedly, begin to resent the time given to work, or our ambition may lead us to bend the rules or step over other people, which eventually comes back to bite us, or perhaps everything we've worked for will fall apart, leaving us in utter despair because that's what we've built our life upon.

Or perhaps the destruction is the slow and quiet erosion of our commitment to Christ and his church, like the seed that falls amongst the thorns in the parable of the sower, the seed that's choked by the cares and riches and concerns of this world.

Church slips further down our list of priorities, our service and fruitfulness wither, and eventually our faith is hollowed out. What promised to give us life begins consuming everything we love.

[29:24] That same thing can happen with all that we've spoken of, money, alcohol, sexual desire, and every good gift that we turn into a king. Good gifts make lousy kings, and false refuges make cruel masters.

They cannot provide shelter, they cannot keep us and hold us, but more than that, they will ultimately ruin us. This warning also comes to the church with how we think about and raise up leaders.

The Bramble approach to those who lead in church would be to ignore all that the Lord says about character in his leaders and in his servants. Both 1 Timothy and Titus speak of the kinds of things that an elder, that is a minister, ought to reflect.

They aren't exhaustive lists, but they center on character. They ought to be above reproach, super-minded, self-controlled, respectable, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, and so on.

Those qualifications concern ministers particularly, but the principles of godly character apply to every form of responsibility among the Lord's people. No amount of competence or charisma or apparent usefulness can compensate for ungodly character.

[30:51] If we seek shelter beneath such leadership, great damage may be done to Christ's church. That's an important reminder to a church like ours who are always seeking to train more gospel workers.

But the most chastening feature of Jotham's warning is that Shechem tastes the bitterness of its own choice. They're not simply given the leader they deserve, they're given the leader they choose. And is that not the pattern that Paul describes in Romans 1? Humanity knows God but refuses to honor or thank Him and three times that dreadful refrain comes.

God gave them up. He gives them over to the desires, the passions, and the debased thinking that they preferred to Him.

one means of God's judgment is to allow our chosen master to exercise its mastery which is always ruinous.

[32:00] For God's wandering people tasting that bitterness may be a chastening mercy which calls us to repentance but it's also true that those who won't repent even then that what they choose instead of God will become the instrument of ruin.

But friends where Abimelech offers imaginary shade and produces consuming fire we know don't we that Christ bears the fire of God's judgment.

He's a king we can submit to and serve and love because he bears the fire of God's judgment and he becomes our genuine refuge. In the midst of a forest fire there's only one place that's truly safe. The place that's already been burnt. At the cross the fire of judgment fell upon the Lord Jesus. He bore He bore what our sin deserved so that everyone who takes refuge in him is safe.

He's the place that's already been burnt. God. And so the message to us here is do not seek refuge in things that will wreak havoc upon you. Seek refuge in Jesus Christ.

[33:16] He is not a bramble king who promises shelter and brings destruction. He's the king who bears destruction in the place of his people so that beneath his rule they receive safety, life, and peace.

Well Jotham has announced the fire but now the writer shows how God makes the evil of Abimelech and Shechem fall upon their own heads. We see in verses 22 to 57 that we should know that God repays evil and fool.

Know that God repays evil and fool. However long evil appears to prosper and however hidden God may seem we must know that God will repay every evil and fool.

There's no uncertainty left after Jotham's feeble. The if of verses 16 to 19 is patently not in play and so verse 20 it is fire.

Fire will come from Abimelech and consume Shechem and vice versa. The suspense here is not whether Jotham's word will be fulfilled but how.

[34:26] But notice first in verse 22 that three years pass with Abimelech ruling.

Justice is not always instant. And we knew that don't we? Justice will ultimately be done even if we have to wait until the last day to see it.

It will be done. For three years it would have looked as though Jotham's prophecy had fallen to the ground but then verse 23 tells us what is really happening. God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem and they begin to deal treacherously with him.

Verse 24 tells us why. So that the violence done to Gideon's seventy sons might be avenged upon Abimelech and upon the leaders of Shechem who strengthened his hand.

Before the alliance begins to unravel the narrator tells us that God is acting to repay evil. And so verse 25 the leaders of Shechem begin setting ambushes and robbing travelers.

[35:36] This would be a very public way of undermining Abimelech's control. And then in verse 26 we have Gal who arrives in Shechem and we see that the city's leaders put their confidence in him.

And then comes along the great harvest and they celebrate, they eat, they drink and they begin cursing, reviling Abimelech. Perhaps the wine from the great harvest is a source of Dutch courage to Gal certainly loosens his tongue because he suddenly becomes a very big man.

He begins fomenting rebellion. Who is Abimelech that we should serve him? If only these people were under my command I would remove Abimelech.

Abimelech increase your army and come out. It's quite literally fighting talk. Interestingly Gal uses the same sort of argument that Abimelech used to obtain power.

Abimelech appealed to family identity, I am your bone and flesh, and Gal now appeals to an older Shechemite identity. Verse 28, we are the sons of Hamor.

[36:51] Why should we serve Abimelech? The argument which propped Abimelech up is now being used to pull him down. But Abimelech has an officer in the city, Zebul, who sends word to Abimelech about what is happening.

And his suggested answer, verse 32, is like for like, ambush for ambush. And so Abimelech's men will conceal themselves outside the city, and as they approach, we have this sort of comic scene in verse 35 of Gal standing at the city gates early in the morning.

Perhaps he's consuming his hangover cure, and looking into the distance, he says, verse 36, look, there are men approaching from the mountaintops. Zebul craftily says, no, no, Gal, you've had a heavy night, don't be silly, you're just seeing shadows, your head's a bit hazy.

And then after a pause, and as the men now are closer and off the mountain and the center of the land, Gal says, no, no, no, no, people are coming. And then verse 38 comes Zebul's delicious retort.

Where's your mouth now, Gal? Where's your mouth now? Where's all your big talk about Abimelech now? They're the men that you despised, go out and fight them.

[38:14] Well, Abimelech puts Gal to flight, it's not a very successful fight for him, and Zebul drives him in his routers out of Shechem.

But we read on and find out that dealing with Gal is not enough to satisfy Abimelech. When the people of Shechem return to the field the following day, perhaps unsuspecting, another ambush lies in wait, and Abimelech kills them.

The ringleader of the rabble riser is gone, but now the whole city is in his sights. And he captures Shechem, he kills its inhabitants, he raises it to the ground and soothes it with salt.

A symbolic declaration of cursed barrenness, complete devastation, nothing else will grow here again. The remaining leaders retreat to the stronghold of the Tower of Shechem, but true to Jotham's warning, here is the bramble producing fire.

Abimelech gets his axe, he cuts some brushwood, I wonder if he might perhaps be cutting bramble, and he commands his men to do likewise, and he sets the stronghold ablaze, about a thousand men and women die, literally burned by Abimelech's fire.

[39:31] Well, next in his sight is Phoebe, likely they'd rebelled against him too, or perhaps we're getting a picture of the paranoia that comes with violent plots to take par, and it's the same plan again, fire at the tower.

If it worked last time, why not again? There is a certain unoriginality to sin and destruction, isn't there? But this time, as Abimelech approaches the tower door to burn it, as one commentator notes, well, a certain lady developed a crush on him.

Abimelech is humiliated. In one last vain attempt to control his reputation, he orders his armor bearer to kill him. Don't let it be said that I was killed by a woman.

But that's precisely what has been said and recorded forevermore. A woman dealt the crushing blow. And so there we have it. Abimelech's fire literally destroys Shechem, and the fire from Shechem, their rebellion, and the ensuing conflict ends with Abimelech being destroyed, just as Jotham said.

This is a grim episode in which we see evil turning in upon itself. And that's true, isn't it? Evil doesn't care about one's safety.

[40:56] Indeed, it doesn't care about people at all. Evil has no loyalty. Listen to Ralph Davis. There is no fellowship in evil, evil has no lasting cohesion.

It does not care for its own. It only uses its own. You can see this in living color in Revelation 17, which depicts how the Antichrist and his cronies will hate and consume the very anti-God culture they had nourished.

In God's judgment, evil is often made to destroy evil. Friends, when we willingly give ourselves to what is twisted and corrupting, we will eventually discover that evil does not care about our safety. It has no loyalty to us. Whatever we enable to rule us apart from the Lord will not ultimately look after us. But we miss the central point of these verses if we only see evil collapsing under its own weight.

This is divine judgment. The writer won't allow us to miss that. He places the explanation either side of the story. Do you see at the beginning verse 23 and 24?

[42:08] God sends hostility between Abimelech and Shechem so that the blood of Gideon's sons will be avenged. And then verses 56 and 57, God returned the evil of Abimelech and Shechem upon their own heads.

And then in between are events which could easily be read as ordinary human happenings as if God were not involved. Robbery, Dutch courage gone wrong, an informant, military reprisals.

And then notice even the understated climax of the story, verse 53. A certain woman, no name, no fanfare, a certain woman just happened to throw a millstone and crushed his skull.

One could miss what is going on here. God's judgment does not always arrive in blazing fire from heaven or in catastrophic floods. Sometimes it comes through seemingly ordinary events and as evil people turn upon one another.

Even when God is not visibly present, he is at work to bring justice. Justice will never finally be escaped. There is a solemn word of warning here, but there is also comfort to the Lord's people.

[43:29] Abimelech is the anti-judge, saviour of nobody, destroyer of Israel. He is the fruit of a people who have whored themselves after false gods, the fruit of a people who have forgotten the family of their rescuer, the fruit of a nation riddled with corruption of the heart.

He is the oppressor raised up from within who wreaks havoc. But God will not permit evil to stand forever. Everything which corrupts and oppresses and wounds the Lord's people will be dealt with. Rolf Davis again, the rulers of this world, all that would rule over the Lord's people for ill, have never learned that whoever touches the flock of Yahweh touches the apple of his eye and therefore places himself under God's sword or millstone.

And so even amidst the self-inflicted horror of this chapter, we see that God won't let evil run rampant endlessly. Judges 9 is a grim chapter, but it tells us to take care who rules over us lest they lead us to disaster, and it tells any who long to rule over the Lord's people for ill.

It tells any who love to dominate and destroy the Lord's people that God will not be mocked. No evil, no corruption will escape his judgment. But as we end, turn over to chapter 10.

[45:03] Chapter 10, verse 1. Despite the horrors of this chapter, look at the Lord's wonderful patience and grace.

After Abimelech, there are ruse to see of Israel Tola, the son of Pua. No cry for mercy this time, just God's outrageous patience with his people and his outrageous grace and kindness.

Judges chapter 9 tells us to watch what you make king so that you do not seek refuge in what will burn you, knowing that God repays evil and fool. And so it is saying to us, seek refuge in the one who can shelter you, in the one who can shelter you under the everlasting arms, where there is space aplenty and grace aplenty for those who would have Jesus as their king.

The one who rather than leading us towards judgment truly can shelter us from it. the word translated shade in the Bramble's promise is the same Hebrew word used for the shelter that's found in the Lord.

What Abimelech falsely promises as a terrible, grim, nasty king, the Lord perfectly provides. As we close, listen to the psalmist.

[46:34] He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shade of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

Who will you make king? Let's pray. Oh Lord, help us, we pray.

to rest all of our trust and confidence in the Lord Jesus. Amidst all of the competing calls for our loyalty and service in this world and all the things that could have mastery over us, would you grant us your grace to truly and lastingly rest under the shelter of the Almighty's arms.

So teach us ever more of the refuge that can keep us and draw us there and keep us there.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.