

The Nastiest King in the Bible

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[0 : 00] Well, we come to our Bible reading this evening from Judges, the book of Judges, chapter 9, and you'll find this on page 208 in our big church Bibles.

Judges, chapter 9, and I'll read the whole chapter. This is really an appendage to the story of Gideon, which we've been looking at in recent weeks, in chapters 6, 7, and 8.

You'll see that Gideon dies at the end of chapter 8, chapter 8, verse 33. And this son of his called Abimelech is mentioned in chapter 8, verse 31.

And chapter 9 tells the story of Abimelech, the son of Gideon. Now, Abimelech, the son of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, 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 seventy of the sons of Jeroboam rule over you, or that one rule over you?

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

[1 : 28] And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Ofra and killed his brothers, the sons of Jeroboam, seventy 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-Milo, and they went and made Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

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 honoured, and go and 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?

[2 : 45] 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? 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. 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 Jeroboam and his house, and have done to him as his deeds deserved, for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his sons, 70 men on one stone, and have made Abimelech the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative.

If you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jeroboam 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 Millo, and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth Millo, 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 70 sons of Jeroboam 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.

[4 : 47] 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 Gaal, 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 Gaal, 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 Jeroboam, and is not Zebul 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. But when Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gaal, the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled.

[5 : 54] And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, Behold, Gaal, the son of Ebed, and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they're 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.

So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. And Gaal, 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 Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops. And Zebul said to him, You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men.

Gaal 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 Zebul said to him, Where is your mouth now, you who said, Who is Abimelech that we should serve him?

[7 : 16] Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them. And Gaal 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 Aruma, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives so that 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 Elberith.

[8 : 25] Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. And Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, 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. 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.

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 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.

[9 : 38] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may it be a blessing to our hearts. Good. Well, let's turn to Judges chapter 9 again, page 208, where we have a nasty story about a nasty king.

In fact, if we were to call Abimelech the nastiest king in the Bible, I don't think we'd be far wrong. Now, in a few minutes' time, I want to get to the important question.

[10 : 57] It's always the important question. Why is this chapter here in the Bible? In this case, why is this particularly nasty chapter here in the Bible? And what lessons does the Lord God mean us to learn from it?

So we'll get there in a little while. But I think it would be helpful first if I were to retell the story, or at least parts of the story, so that we can get it really clear in our minds.

Some of you will know this story well, but my guess is that many will not. And I think it's the second half of the story that gets a bit complicated, especially when we get these characters, Gaal, the son of Ebed, and Zebul, and we ask, who are they?

And what exactly happened in these final scenes of Abimelech's life before the millstone descended upon his head? So let's buckle on our seatbelts, and off we go. Gideon has ruled Israel, has judged Israel for the last 40 years, as chapter 8, verse 28 tells us.

And it has been a time of welcome rest from war and misery. And you may remember that the Israelites had asked him back in chapter 8, verse 22, to rule over them, to be, in effect, their king, and to head up a family dynasty.

[12 : 10] We want you to rule over us and your son and grandson after you. But in verse 23, he'd refused. I will not rule over you, he said, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.

Now, Gideon eventually died, and he left 70 legitimate sons, who are mentioned there in chapter 8, verse 30, and one illegitimate son, Abimelech, whose mother, as verse 31 tells us, was a concubine of Gideon's.

And she lived in the historically important city of Shechem, which was about 25 miles north of Jerusalem. Now, when I say historically important city, Shechem perhaps was a little bit like St. Andrew's, just a little bit.

In this sense, that it was smallish, but it had weighty historical associations. I guess they didn't play golf at Shechem, but Shechem featured importantly in Abraham's story.

And it was the place where Joshua, only a few generations before all this happened, had called together the leaders of Israel, indeed all the people of Israel, and had given them his final challenging speeches, begging them and commanding them not to descend into idolatry again.

[13 : 23] And they'd said, of course we won't do that. Now, Abimelech's mother lived in this town of Shechem. Abimelech himself lived in, at least when he'd grown up, he lived in a different place called Aruma, as chapter 9, verse 41 tells us.

But in chapter 9, verse 1, you'll see he goes to Shechem, not just to have a dutiful cup of tea with his elderly mother, but because he's power hungry and he has a plan.

So he gets his family members together, his relatives, to speak to the elders of the city and to say to them, imagine being ruled by 70 of Gideon's sons.

Seventy. Isn't that a recipe for administrative chaos to the power of ten? Wouldn't life be simpler and sweeter if you just had one son of Gideon in charge?

Of course it would. And who would be better suited for this job than yours truly, your humble servant? Remember, my mother is a Shechemite. Blood has always been thicker than water, has it not, brothers?

[14 : 26] So this message gets passed on to the elders of Shechem. And they, with all the farsightedness of moles and bats, say, he is our brother, verse 3.

And they fall in with his wicked plan. They give him 70 pieces of silver, funded by the local Baal temple. One piece of silver, you might say, for each of Abimelech's half-brothers.

And then this kindly, good-natured young man uses the money to hire a group of thugs who journey up to Ofra, Gideon's old home, where his 70 sons still live. That's about 25 miles north of Shechem.

They then round up the 70 sons of Gideon and kill them all, all on one stone. It doesn't say quite how they killed them, but obviously it all happens at one go.

All but the very youngest, Jotham, who manages to escape and hide from them.

Abimelech then goes back to Shechem, where the city elders install him as king, with all pomp and ceremony.

[15 : 25] As verse 6 suggests, because they do it by the oak of the pillar of Shechem, a monument a bit like the stone of Skun. Now, at this point, Jotham, the young brother, the one who's managed to escape the massacre, takes his courage in both hands.

It's a very courageous thing. And he does something very risky. He goes from home, from Ofra, to Mount Gerizim. And Mount Gerizim is a biggish hill that overlooks Shechem.

And somehow he gets onto the top of the hill, and he's able to speak to the elders of Shechem, who are sitting down below him. So you can imagine he's shouting to them, Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you, he says in verse 7.

I guess he either had a loud hailer or else a very good pair of lungs. But he lets them have it with both barrels, in a very sharp-edged parable. And we'll look at that parable a little bit later.

But it's worth noticing, in the final words of chapter 9, in verse 57, the very last verse, that this is a curse that he pronounces.

[16 : 27] It's called the curse of Jotham, in chapter 9, verse 57. Well, back to verse 21. Jotham runs away as fast as he can, far away to a place called Beer, because he knows that Abimelech will kill him if he can possibly catch him.

Now, verse 22, three years of what must have been uneasy rule for Abimelech. And then you'll see, from verse 23, that relationships between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, the people who put him up to be king, they break down.

And the next period of time, the next few weeks or months, brings chaos. Look at what the leaders of Shechem do in verse 25. These are the people who've put Abimelech up to be king.

They set up gangs of thugs in the hilly areas roundabout, and the job of these thugs is to rob travelers. Aren't you glad that you can travel safely, more or less, in Glasgow?

Aren't you glad that you can travel to Bear's Den or Cambus Lang without being, well, without there being any great risk of being robbed? But this is what was happening around Shechem. Law and order is really breaking down in Israel.

[17 : 38] And the Shechem leaders are doing this to spite Abimelech and to undermine his authority. Because people will start saying, what kind of a fool king is this, who can't even secure safety on the roads?

So Abimelech's position as king is suddenly very insecure. And it's at this point that another opportunist appears, Gaal, the son of Ebed.

We don't know where he comes from. But he's obviously a man of powerful personality. Because he moves into Shechem with his relatives. Do you see that in verse 26?

He brings his mother and his mother-in-law, his cousins and his aunts and so on, his whole clan. And the leaders of Shechem, who now hate Abimelech, put their confidence in this incomer, this Gaal.

And the next scene in verses 27 to 29 is a kind of drunken party. We're told in verse 27 that it's grape harvest time. So they've been gathering the grapes and then they have a harvest festival banquet in the very temple of Baal.

[18 : 40] And they revile Abimelech. That's part of the agenda. And I'm sure we're meant to understand that Gaal's speech in verses 28 and 29 is the speech of a man who has taken a lot of drink.

So he says, look at verse 28 and 29. Who is Abimelech? And who are we of Shechem? Who we should serve him? I won't read the whole speech.

But notice Zabel, who's mentioned in verse 28 as Abimelech's officer. So Abimelech was elsewhere. He'd been essentially kicked out. But Zabel was still there.

He was his henchman in Shechem. So Gaal was Zabel's enemy. Just as Gaal was Abimelech's enemy. And see how the speech ends in verse 29.

Gaal says, would that these people were under my hand. And I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, increase your army and come out.

[19 : 38] Come out. That's what he's saying. Come out and fight with us like this. You see, we'll cut you into a thousand pieces. Now verse 30. Here's Zabel, the ruler of the city.

Abimelech's friend. Abimelech's strong man in Shechem. He hears what Gaal has been saying. And of course, he's very angry. And he's determined to squash this odious Gaal.

So he quickly forms a plan. He sends word to Abimelech, who's clearly not very far away, somewhere up in the hills. And he suggests that Abimelech should come straight back to Shechem with an armed force.

Get close to the city by night. And then first thing in the morning, I guess before people are really up and doing. First thing in the morning, to rush upon the unprepared city. And cut down the Shechemites as they come out of it to defend themselves.

So Abimelech follows Zabel's suggestion exactly. He brings his army by night. And then we have a delicious scene at, I guess, about six o'clock in the morning.

[20 : 37] Gaal obviously knows nothing about this ambush. And he knows nothing about what Zabel has been doing behind his back. So he's standing there in the city gate in verse 35.

His morning coffee obviously hasn't quite kicked in yet. He's only half awake. And in the half light of dawn, he peers out into the hills. And he says to Zabel, who happens to be standing just by him, he says, people.

I can see people coming down from the mountains. Zabel says to him, you're seeing things. It's only shadows. And there's a little pause. And Gaal is still peering out into the distance.

He says, I'm sure it's people. Look, there's one company coming straight from the diviner's oak. And then Zabel says, where's your big mouth now?

You remember what you said when you were drunk. Who is Abimelech that we should serve him? And didn't you pour scorn on his soldiers and call them sissies? Well, go out now and fight with them. Prove yourself to be a man.

[21 : 39] So Gaal and the other leaders of Shechem, they go out and fight. They get beaten. And Zabel is able to reestablish control at Shechem. And he drives Gaal out of the city with his relatives.

But that is by no means the end of the trauma of Shechem. Because Abimelech is determined to avenge himself on these people who made him king, but have then rejected him.

So he comes back with his fighting men the very next day. And he systematically slaughters the Shechemites as they come out of the city against him. And by the end of the day, verse 45, he's captured the city.

He's killed its people. He smashed it to the ground, raised it to the ground, and he's put salt. He's sown it with salt, which I think means he's put salt all over the agricultural areas, the fields round about to make the soil unfarmable.

The leaders of Shechem then take refuge in a high tower, a fortified tower. I think many of these ancient cities had a kind of castle keep. So they go up into this fortified tower, and Abimelech goes up into a nearby hill.

[22 : 45] He cuts brushwood, and he gets his men to follow suit and do the same. They bring their brushwood. They pile it up against the tower and set fire to it and burn the tower down, killing a thousand men and women.

But that's not the end. When a fox starts killing chickens, it never knows when to stop. And Abimelech is like a fox on a spree. He then goes to Thebes, which is just five miles or so from Shechem.

And presumably the people of Thebes had also turned against him. And it's the same story again. The city is captured. The leaders shut themselves up in their strong tower.

And so Abimelech thinks he'll simply repeat this tower-burning procedure. And he's just coming close to the base of the tower with his faggots of wood and his flaming torch when a certain woman picks up a millstone.

Perhaps she even carried it up the tower for that purpose. And she tosses it over the edge. And it lands on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull, but not quite killing him. And he's clearly still conscious.

[23 : 48] So he says to his young armor-bearer, Run me through with your sword, lest they say of me, the ultimate shame. Lest they say of me, a woman killed him. So the young man kills him.

So Abimelech dies and his men go home in verse 55. Now that's the gruesome story. It's a little bit like Shakespeare's version of Macbeth, isn't it?

Where you have a power-hungry man who usurps the throne, covers his hands with blood, and then meets a bad end. Now I want to ask, why is this story here in Scripture?

And what is the author of the book of Judges? And when I say the author, I mean both the divine author, the Lord himself, and also the human author. What does the author intend us to learn from this story?

Well, let's look at three main points. And here's the first. Let's notice the endemic underlying corruption, without which the story of Judges chapter 9 would never have happened.

[24 : 49] And that corruption shows up in the final few verses of chapter 8. I don't think we'll understand chapter 9 properly, unless we see how it grows out of the soil of chapter 8, verses 33 to 35.

So let me read those verses again. 8, 33. As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again, in other words, turned their minds and their habits, and whored after the Baals and made Baal-Bareth their God.

And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

Verse 33 there is making the point that while Gideon lived for that long period, idolatry was largely kept under control.

Now Gideon, we saw last week, had not been a perfect ruler. We saw from verse 27 in chapter 8 how he had made a serious misjudgment. He made an effort which became an object of idolatrous worship.

[25 : 57] But the point of verse 33 is that while Gideon was still alive, his influence largely kept the people looking to the Lord. But as soon as he died, the old underlying corruption of the Israelite heart, I guess we need to say of the human heart, began to burst forth.

The restraining influence of godly leadership was now gone, and the people prostituted themselves to the Canaanite Baals. And you'll see verses 34 and 35 detail two distinct aspects of this corruption.

In verse 34, the people forget the Lord. And in verse 35, they forget Gideon and his family. We'll look at both of those things now briefly.

First of all, they forgot the Lord. Now I don't think that means that they forgot him to the point of knowing nothing about him at all. These were Israelites. They'd read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Many of them could have quoted verses from Deuteronomy, such as, Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, the Lord is one. They would even, I guess, have professed to be monotheists.

[27 : 10] Their grandmothers would have remembered what their grandmothers told them about Joshua and his wonderful influence. And if you'd interviewed some of these people going into the temple of Baal-bereth and asked them who they worshipped, many of them would have said, Well, we're Israelites, of course.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is our ancestral God. This Baalism, it's a bit of fun on the side, but we're Israelites. But the author of Judges knew that their hearts had deserted the true God.

Verse 34 says, They did not remember him, the God who had rescued them from all their enemies. These Israelites, they might well have claimed to belong to the God of Israel, but to all intents and purposes, he had become utterly tasteless to them.

And then secondly, in verse 35, they forgot to show ongoing love and gratitude to Gideon's family in return for all the excellent leadership that he'd given to Israel.

I think verse 35 would give us great encouragement to be thankful to those who have looked after us, led us to Christ, and taught us the gospel. Let me just put it like this.

[28 : 22] Might there be an elderly Sunday school teacher or elderly minister living in a retirement home in Pollock Shores who taught you the gospel many years ago? Why not go and visit that elderly person and hug them and thank them so much for their faithfulness in telling you about the Lord Jesus 30, 40, 50 years ago?

So we have this bundle of corruption in verses 33 to 35. On the one hand, the people forgot the Lord and the ones who had helped them to follow him, and on the other hand, they prostituted themselves to the Baals.

Now there's surely a powerful lesson for us here. These Israelites are displaying the endemic corruption of every human heart. Every person here tonight, including me and all those, all those who've shown every sign of being keen Christians for many years, all of us here have that old corruption in seed form or root form, if you like, within us, and it seeks to break out.

Am I right? Are you a potential idolater? If you have no potential to break into idolatry, kindly report to our minister after the service, tell him of your perfections, and he will give you three gold stars.

Look again at verse 33. Let's notice that very nasty verb, whored. The Israelites became whores.

[29 : 52] That's what the author is saying. They became prostitutes. And that means that they willingly gave themselves to the Baals. The word Baal means master or lord. They gave themselves like prostitutes to other masters who had no right to them, no right to possess their hearts.

Idolatry is to give your heart, which belongs to your true master, the Lord Jesus, to another master who has no right to it. Perhaps a good test of where our hearts really belong is to ask this question.

What are the things that we talk about with each other with real animation? What are the things that make us come alive as we discuss them with our friends? I remember, for example, meeting a young man a year or two ago who was outwardly living the Christian life and was involved with his church.

And as we got talking, he told me rather unenthusiastically, about the church he belonged to and the work of that church. But then his face lit up like a Belisha beacon as he began to talk about fast cars.

He was just so excited about fast cars, about owning them, driving them, the thrill, the gleam, the smell, the roar of the engine as you put your foot down. Formerly, formerly a Christian, but his heart was all wrapped around speed.

[31 : 18] I met another man, an Englishman down in England just a few months ago. I guess a man of 45-ish, something like that, who again talked unenthusiastically about his church, and just briefly.

But then he said, with shining eyes, you live in Scotland. Oh, I love Scotland. I love it. You know, I've climbed all 286 Munroes in Scotland, and I'm hoping to do them all a second time round before I get too old.

That was the thing he really lived for. Let me give you one or two more. Oh, yes, I'm a Christian. Yes, yes, yes, yes. I just adore food and fine wine.

I'm a Christian. Yes, yes, I turn out to church out of a sense of duty. But my garden, my garden, oh, ever since I've been retired, growing things, you know, rhubarb and custard, roses and manure, dirt under my fingernails, you just can't beat it.

It's lovely to have a garden. You see, as I'm a Christian, what I really love, however, is partying. As I'm a Christian, I have been ever since Billy Graham made his visits over to this country in the 1950s.

[32 : 26] But you know, it's the artistic life of our city, our wonderful concerts and our theatres and our art galleries. I mean, quite frankly, I think that a week is wasted if I don't go to something which feeds my interest in beauty and my hunger for it.

The question is, where are our hearts? These things I've just mentioned are all good gifts from God.

It's good to climb a Monroe. It's good to enjoy gardens and parties and concerts and food. Of course it is. But the good gifts from heaven can so easily turn into bales.

They become our master, our Lord, the thing that we really live for. And then our delight and our joy in the true Lord becomes hollow and empty.

And as in verses 34 and 35, we forget the Lord and we distance ourselves from the people who helped us to know him. And in the terms of our story in the book of Judges, it was the corrupt state of Israel described in the final verses of chapter 8 that opened the door to a wretch like Abimelech being able to seize power and cause mayhem.

[33 : 39] So there's the first thing, the underlying corruption that made this possible. Now secondly, let's notice the unwise choice of a leader. how on earth did this ghastly, horrible man work his way from chapter 9, verse 1, when he first visits Shechem, to chapter 9, verse 6, where he's made king with all pomp and ceremony?

Well, it's the city fathers of Shechem who have to answer a few questions. Did they not know what their 70 pieces of silver were going to be used for?

Of course they knew. They were in it up to the hilt with Abimelech in his plan to murder his 70 brothers. They'd forgotten the Lord and they'd forgotten the family of their great benefactor, Gideon, and that family had become worthless in their eyes.

They elevated Abimelech not because his father was Gideon, but because his mother was a Shechemite. He was one of them. Now Jotham's parable, which begins in verse 8 here, opens up the whole issue of leadership.

It's a very interesting parable. He paints this vivid picture of the trees meeting together to anoint a king, king tree. And he starts off with three trees which were basic to the agricultural prosperity of Israel, the olive, the fig, and the vine.

[35 : 05] And each one is asked by the other trees, be our king, and each one refuses. The olive says, shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, to go and rule over the trees?

Not likely. The fig tree says, shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit? Uh-uh. The vine says, shall I leave my wine, that cheers God and men?

Not likely. So each of these noble, fruit-producing trees is showing a servant heart. They don't want to leave their proper role of serving God and men by providing nourishment for the human race just in order to become the tree at the top or to be the king.

They're happy to go on serving. But when the fierce desert bramble or thorn bush is asked to be king, he accepts rather too readily. And he threatens the other trees that if they don't dance to his tune, he'll pour out fire which will devour the very cedars of Lebanon, the biggest and noblest of all the trees.

And then, beginning at verse 16, Jotham interprets the parable. If, leaders of Shechem, if you have acted well and with integrity in making Abimelech your king, which you clearly haven't, if you've dealt kindly with my father Gideon and his family, my father who risked his life for you and saved you from the Midianites, if you've acted well in killing my 70 brothers and elevating Abimelech simply because he's related to you, if you've acted in good faith in all this, which you clearly haven't, then rejoice in your excellent Abimelech and let him rejoice in you.

[36 : 46] But if not, and here's the curse of Jotham, if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour all you leaders and let fire come out of you to devour Abimelech.

Now that's exactly the course that history took three years later. The leaders of Shechem quarreled with Abimelech and that led to the horrible destruction of both them and him.

Now the pressing question is, why did they choose him? Were they complete nincompoops? Couldn't they see what kind of a man he was? It's a strange human phenomenon how a body of people, it could be a church, it could be a whole nation, how a body of people can make a disastrous appointment which allows a completely unsuitable person, even a wicked person, to assume authority.

society. Our American friend Ralph Davis in his commentary on Judges quotes a 20th century historian of Nazi Germany named William Shirer who had carefully studied Adolf Hitler and his method of leadership.

Let me read you William Shirer's words as he comments on one of Hitler's mass rallies that he held in Nuremberg in 1934. The words Hitler uttered, the thoughts he expressed, often seemed to me ridiculous.

[38 : 10] But that week in Nuremberg, I began to comprehend that it did not matter what he said but how he said it. Hitler's communication with his audiences was uncanny.

He established a rapport almost immediately and deepened it as he went on speaking, holding them completely in his spell. In such a state, it seemed to me, they easily believed anything he said, even the most foolish nonsense.

Over the years, as I listened to scores of Hitler's major speeches, I would pause in my own mind and exclaim, what utter rubbish, what brazen lies. And then I would look around at the audience.

His listeners were lapping up every word as the utter truth. Isn't that interesting? How did a man like Adolf Hitler manage to dominate the fine people of Germany for 12 years?

Answer, by opportunism and violence. Abimelech, too, was a violent opportunist. Doesn't Jotham also have something to say to us about church leadership?

[39 : 20] Surely his message is, don't appoint men to lead congregations who are like brambles and thorn bushes, ready to spit fire and act destructively. There are church leaders like that, aren't there?

And their influence can be very damaging. The Apostle Paul teaches all the right qualities of church leaders in his letter to Titus and his first letter to Timothy. Some of you here tonight, especially the younger ones here who may be in different places in many years to come, you are very likely to be involved in appointing church leaders in the future.

If somebody like Abimelech presents himself at the church door as a candidate, say to him, no thank you. It's better not to appoint a minister or elder at all than to appoint one who is a spit fire.

So we've seen the underlying corruption, then the unwise choice of a leader, and now lastly, let's notice the decisive purpose of God or the continuing decisive purpose of God which is revealed in all this.

A chapter like this one at one level fills the reader's heart with gloom and almost with despair. Anarchy, wickedness, violence, cauterized consciences, you name it, it's here in Judges chapter 9.

[40 : 39] It's a horrible story, isn't it? But the writer is very careful to show us that God is not absent. Even through these hideous scenes of slaughter, it is absolutely clear that God is working out his purposes for Israel.

Look with me first at verses 23 and 24. And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech.

So the breakdown of relationship was sent by God, that the violence, verse 24, done to the 70 sons of Jeroboam 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.

In other words, God is avenging the murder of Gideon's 70 sons through what happens in the later part of the chapter. It's God who has set Abimelech against the leaders of Shechem and the leaders of Shechem against Abimelech.

Jotham's curse in verse 20, just look back to verse 20, that's really where the curse is expressed. that curse is really, it's almost a prayer for vengeance, for God to bring vengeance.

[41 : 53] Jotham can see only too clearly how wickedly Abimelech has behaved, and in verse 20, he's almost praying that Abimelech should destroy the leaders of Shechem and that they should destroy him.

And then look onto the final two verses of the whole chapter, or three verses, 55, 56, and 57. I'll just read them again. So verse 55, when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.

Now here's the important summary comment. Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his 70 brothers. In other words, turned it back onto his own head, avenged her, avenged that massacre.

And verse 57, 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 Jeroboel.

So the curse of Jotham proves to be the word of God. And if we say, well isn't that strange that a curse should be the word of God?

[43 : 02] We only have to think back to Genesis chapter 3, where the Lord God lays a curse upon his people and upon the whole world, the curse of banishment from Eden. And yet it's God himself who eventually lifts that curse and brings wonderful blessing through the curse-bearing intervention of his own son, Jesus Christ.

It's a good thing that God should curse evil. It's a good thing that God is righteously committed to the avenging of evil and wickedness and murder.

This chapter 9 in Judges is a record of atrocities. We have this vicious murder of 70 men at Ofra and then the massacre at Shechem where Abimelech killed thousands of people.

But God was not absent. Look at the first two words of verse 56, thus God. And then the first two words of verse 57, and God.

That's a comfort to us, isn't it? Our world today is disfigured, marred by one horrible atrocity after another. We have a particular one on our minds, don't we, just this last few days.

[44 : 14] It is a comfort to know that God is committed to the avenging of every drop of blood that is wickedly spilt. And even if there's little justice in this world, there will be justice in the end.

This chapter, was it the end for Israel? We might be forgiven for thinking that anarchy and violence on this scale must spell the end of God's people. Well, look at the first words of chapter 10.

After Abimelech, there was a time after Abimelech, yes. After Abimelech, there arose to save Israel Tola. We'll look at him next week.

Now, just a final word to sum up this message in chapter 9. When the people of God withdraw from loving and serving the true God and give their hearts like prostitutes to other gods who have no right to rule them, chaos follows.

Authority, godliness, good order, and joy drain quickly out of the life of the church when this happens. Leaders are appointed who should never be leaders.

[45 : 25] So, friends, let's guard our hearts very carefully against idolatry. let's give ourselves again and again with fidelity and joy and great enthusiasm to the only one who is rightly our master, and that is the Lord Jesus.

And let's go on preaching the gospel to a dying world which is rightly under the curse of God so that many should come to the Savior and find the blessing, the peace, the forgiveness, and the security which can be found in no one else.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Lord Jesus, you are the only Savior, the only one sent by God who was able to bear the penalty of our sins and to remove the curse and the banishment and the alienation from our lives.

thank you, dear Lord Jesus, that you have been such a wonderful Savior and that you were prepared to be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief for our sake, that you should suffer as you did so that we should be freed and liberated both in this life and even more in the world to come.

So please keep us faithful, loving you, serving you, delighting in you, rejoicing in you, and help us to have the courage to tell many others about you. We ask it for your name's sake.

[46 : 56] Amen.