

Judges 9

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[0 : 00] Well, did you enjoy that? Thank you. Shall I pray?

Gracious, loving God and Father, as we've heard your word read, and now think a bit more about it, by your Holy Spirit, speak to our hearts, speak to our lives, for we would see Jesus.

We ask it in his name. Amen. What are the following four people got in common? Vladimir Putin, Margaret Thatcher, Donald Trump, President Erdogan.

Do you want to shout out? Risking? It's okay, I won't make you... It seems to me that, well, obviously, in one sense, they're leaders, aren't they?

But they're leaders who have polarized opinion extraordinarily. Some think they are absolutely fantastic, whereas others think they are truly the worst of all kinds.

[1 : 25] Leadership is one of the key issues of our time. You only have to listen to pretty much any politician of one party today talking, and they will talk about strong and stable leadership.

We all kind of can fill it out. That's one of the questions. That's what the election, certainly in England, has been played out on. I guess in Scotland, you just have the council elections as well. The same kind of questions are around leadership.

So where do we look for leadership? Questions, obviously, are big questions. Do you look in Brussels, or in Westminster, or in Holyrood, or somewhere else?

What makes a good leader? If I put it more personally, what do you look for in a leader? Who do you see as your leader?

Where do you look for leadership? Do you aspire for leadership? You see, I was just talking to one of you just before the service, and they were saying how tough it is in the job that they're in because the management has gone soft on a particular situation, and therefore it's very hard to control.

[2 : 42] A number of staff go off sick. The series in Judges I know you've been part of faces this big question around leadership.

They're times of change. They're times of turbulence. You may remember Israel's history. So Moses has died, the great leader who brought, been leader of the people as they come out of Egypt.

Joshua has taken over. But now new generations have grown up after Joshua has died, and they haven't known the Lord. And so at the end of the previous chapter, you may remember what happened with Gideon, or Jeroboam is also known.

People came to him and said, Jeroboam, we'd like you to be king. Do you remember what happened? He said, no.

I won't be king. The Lord will be king over you. Slightly teasingly about it, I don't know if you noticed this, there's something double-edged.

[3 : 48] So lots of the trappings that Gideon takes for himself, they're all marks of a king with crescents and the rest. He has a whole load of wives and concubines, and a whole load of sons, rather like a royal figure.

And perhaps most strikingly of all, he has this concubine or servant girl mistress, and that son is called Abimelech.

Abimelech means, my father is king. No, Gideon says, I won't be king, I'm just going to call my son, my dad's the king. Now it could be, of course, that he's been honoring God, and saying, my God, my father, that is God is king, but there's something there.

Anyway, these things come back to bite. But we're going to see as we go through this, that behind human leadership, is God's hand at work.

There's covenant God, beyond and above every human ruler, is Jesus Christ, the king of all. And what's so wonderful about Bible narratives, Bible stories like this is, they don't always, like a director of a film, don't walk onto the stage and say, and here comes the bad guy, or here comes the good guy.

[5 : 10] You're meant to listen, have your antennae attuned, to pick up and follow the contours, follow the route through. So that's what we're going to do. A few minutes as we're going to head through different parts.

I give you a little outline on this yellowy buff colored sheet, see where we're going to go. And if you want to jot down some thoughts, you're welcome to do that.

So we start then at the beginning, verses one to five, what we might call scheming slaughter. Slaughter. Slaughter. So Abimelech, son of Jeroboam, went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them, and to all his mother's clan, ask all the citizens of Shechem, which is better for you?

To have all 70 of Jeroboam's sons rule over you, or just one man? Just in case you're wondering who this one man is, he is your flesh and blood.

As in me. Abimelech. Shechem has been this place of amazing Bible significance.

[6 : 23] It was a place where the Lord met with Abraham in Genesis 12. It was a place where Joshua and the tribes gathered in Joshua 24 to make a covenant. How had the mighty fallen?

It became a place of scheming and idolatry. What on earth do you want 70 sons of Jeroboam ruling over you?

Wouldn't one man be better? Wouldn't the crown look rather good on my head, says Abimelech? Don't forget I'm your brother. Interestingly, there's no evidence at all that any of these 70 sons of Gideon were trying to be king.

There's no hint that that's the case. But I don't know if you ever noticed, somehow, the one who's plotting evil always thinks that everyone else is plotting evil too. Have you noticed that?

And look what he appeals to. He doesn't say, look, I've got a proven track record. I'm a person of integrity and quality, and I've delivered up to this moment.

[7 : 27] He appeals purely to the populist vote. I'm your brother. It's not about quality. It's about relatedness. Anyway, the campaign strategy is rather effective.

Did you notice? So they fund this plan. Verse 3, when the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, he's related to us.

Oh, we like this populist. Forget the qualities of the leader. We like this kind of argument. So they gave him 70 shekels of silver from the temple of Barbarit, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless scoundrels.

Empty people, vacuous is what it says. So they go and plunder the pagan temple. That's not a promising place in Shechem, is it? They go and plunder the pagan temple.

They get 70 pieces of silver, blood money. One shekel for each son. As 70 brothers are slaughtered on one stone.

[8 : 33] Pretty grim, ruthless, brutal. But did you notice how one got away? Did you see who it was?

We're now in our second little part. A fearless fable. This is Jotham, the youngest son. They make Abimelech king. By the very oak that both Jacob and Joshua had declared their trust in the Lord, they crown this no good king.

Abimelech uses the same place to sanctify his treachery funded by pagan money. But Jotham won't take it lying down. He's faced with murder.

He's faced with intimidation. And he speaks truth to power. That for me is, for some of us here, that is the fundamental thing.

It is the truth that speaks to power. Think in Burma or Myanmar of Aung San Suu Kyi. Speaking truth to power. Dealing with corrupt leadership.

[9 : 44] He stands up. And he tells this story. He legs it up to this high platform in Gerizim, which overlooks Shechem. He's right high up above. And he calls down. He says this parable.

This story. And he starts off, did you notice, with two audiences in mind. If you look at verse 7. When Jotham was told about this, he climbed on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.

What they did with his words was the way they were going to be judged by God. God was looking at how these citizens of Shechem were going to hear that word, how they were going to respond.

And that was the acid test. Did you note, so God may be hidden at this point in time, but he's not absent.

God hears. God knows. And it seems to me, again, as I look around the world, which is so broken in so many ways, isn't it of extraordinary reassurance that God does here in Syria, in North Korea, in Egypt.

[11 : 02] But do you see his fable? Do you see his little story? The trees come along, and they say, will you come and be our king? They talk first, did you notice, to the olive tree.

And the olive tree says, should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?

Then to the vine, should I give up my wine? The fig tree, should I give up my sweetness? To become a leader means to give up certain things, as well as to take on something else.

We had a fascinating book last year. It's called, First Break All the Rules. Anyone seen it? First Break All the Rules.

You might think, what are you as a Christian reading that? Does it justify speeding on the motorway? No. It's basically a book about management, leadership kind of thing.

[12 : 03] And it basically says, that great managers look to develop those working for them. And when developing someone, they help them find the right fit.

Whereas in so much of our culture, it's kind of climbing the ladder. You do the work on the ground, and then you become a manager, then you become a manager's manager, and it's basically a ladder's upper rung like that.

Too often, people want to climb rungs into leadership roles. But you can see here, you have to give up certain things to become a leader. And actually, you may be best in your sweet spot producing wine, or sweetness of figs, and so on.

So again, if you're aspiring to leadership, what are you giving up as well? And then they come, they eventually give up, they're tried with the vine, and the fig, and the olive, and they say, okay, let's scrape the barrel.

They come to the buckthorn, or the thorn bush. I hope you'll forgive this appalling pun, but it's rather barbed humor. Do you know what the, they said, come on, buckthorn, you be our king.

[13 : 12] And look what buckthorn says, it's just hilarious. If you really want to, verse 15, if you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade.

Has anyone ever tried taking refuge in a buckthorn bush? Let me tell you a little bit, a little bit of research on the buckthorn. It's basically, two to three meters wide.

Something like that. Just reasonable size. It's about three meters, two, three meters tall, so reasonable size bush. Its spines, when they're young, are an inch long.

On the new growth, every single little branch has got a spine an inch or two centimeters long. On the older branches, the spines are this long.

They are 15 centimeters, six inches long. Come on, have refuge in my shades, says buckthorn. Doesn't sound like a very comfortable place to find refuge.

[14 : 16] And actually, what the rest of the story tells us is, when you have the wrong kind of leadership in place, it's a pretty uncomfortable place to be. Buckthorn makes good fuel, but poor kings.

It's better at burning than sheltering. So Jotham then confronts the Shechemites. And it's rather ironic, he had the echoes of Buckthorn, who said the same thing.

If you've acted genuinely, find joy in each other. In other words, the Shechemites, who's made Abimelech king, may get on really well together if you've acted honorably.

But it's kind of obvious that they haven't. Did you notice that in verses 17 and 18? Have you been fair to Jeroboam and his family? Have you treated him as he deserves?

Remember, my father fought for you and risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian. But today you've revolted against my father's family. You've murdered his 70 sons on a single stone and have made Abimelech the son of his female slave, king over the citizens of Shechem, because he's related to you.

[15 : 29] So verse 19, So have you acted honorably and in good faith? And if you have, may Abimelech be your joy and may you be his too.

But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Milo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Milo, and consume Abimelech.

It's going to be one big bonfire. And that's actually what we see in what happens next. This is our third one, the longest part, divine or just desserts.

And we're going to see how there's a sense in which, and you might want to notice as we go along, how everything that someone does wrong rebounds on themselves.

And we're going to see that as we go. But it doesn't start well, does it? Verse 22. Jotham flees for his life. No one's listened to him.

[16 : 30] No one's paid any attention. Verse 22. Abimelech had governed Israel for three years. It might seem that God doesn't see.

It might seem that God doesn't care. Has he got away with it? The Shechemites got away with it. He is the anti-judge, the self-appointed, ruthless, brutal.

For those three years, Israel must have been an awful place to live. I think Psalm 94. You could almost imagine the psalmist in this kind of context.

How long, Lord, will the wicked, how long will the wicked be jubilant? They pour out arrogant words. All the evildoers are full of boasting. They crush your people, Lord.

They oppress your inheritance. They slay the wicked and the foreigner. They murder the fatherless. They say, The Lord doesn't see. The God of Jacob takes no notice. But God's got his own timing, his own way.

[17 : 37] His ways are not our ways. The psalm continues. Take notice, you senseless ones among the people. You fools, when will you become wise?

Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? See? Just desserts for their actions are coming.

God's intervening. These careful plans of Abimelech and the Shechemites begin to unravel. And as you said, and Katrina, thank you so much for reading, so well said, this is not a happy story.

This is messy, double-crossing, scheming murder. Those who live by the sword die by it. Or to put it a different way, God never forgets those who forget him.

God never forgets those who forget him. So you first see how fire devours Shechem. So the men of Shechem, in verse 25, they install ambushers to rob the travelers as they pass by.

[18 : 43] So people will think, ah, that Abimelech, he's a pathetic king. He can't look after his little small city. He can't guarantee safety in his hometown. So on the back of that, in comes Gail and his band.

He was a bit of a big mouth, especially when he had the first fruits of the grape harvest in his stomach. Happy hour in the pagan temple gave him an enthusiastic audience. But he wasn't just a big mouth.

He was a canny customer. Do you see what he did? He says, what on earth are you going after Abimelech for? I know he says he's related to you, but I'm much closer related.

So he applies Abimelech's same logic. Forget qualities of leadership. It's just about popular vote and relatedness. And I'm more related, so you should listen to me. So he becomes rather a big mouth.

Abimelech now has turned against him. So Gail has found that this Shechem nouveau goes a long way. So he denounces Abimelech, the king.

[19 : 50] He has a go at Zebul, who's the governor in Shechem. And the Shechemites, who a few moments before were loyal to Abimelech, and now switch their loyalty to someone else.

Once you're fickle once, you can be fickle again. This wasn't part of my original sermon, but it struck me.

I'm a dad of two daughters. They're 21 and 19. I was listening to a very interesting book. I do like driving up and down the motorway. And in the book, there was a guy who'd been consulted for advice on what just their daughter's boyfriend was coming around.

They thought they were coming to propose for the question, asking for a hand in marriage. And the guy consulted the person who'd written the book and said, what should I say to the guy when he comes in?

And he said, what I'd like to see is your tax return and your income statement. And the guy said, what do you mean?

[20 : 57] I can't possibly ask this guy who's going to be my future son-in-law for his tax return income statement. It's rude to ask about people's money and how much they earn.

And the person who'd written the book said, I'm not interested in how much they earn. That's not the point. What I'm interested in is their character, their caliber. If they are unreliable and their credit rating's poor and they can't fill in their tax return, if they can't be faithful with money and faithful with their responsibilities, what chance have they got being faithful with your daughter?

I haven't actually tried that. I don't really advise that for me if a future son-in-law comes around. But there is something about once you're fickle once, you can be fickle again.

Or again, I suppose I think of some people with a lover. And they think, the lover thinks, oh, well, this is, I found the true love of my life and the husband or the wife has gone off with the lover.

And then the lover then is gutted and amazed that this person who's come off with them goes off with another person. You think, once you've done it once, you're going to do it again. And this is like the Shechemites here.

[22 : 10] If you cheated once, cheat again. Well, Zebul didn't take it too kindly to being belittled. He told the Bimelech exactly what to do. Did you notice? He said, set up an ambush. Do you remember that?

That's what the Shechemites did. And now he's telling the Bimelech, set up an ambush. So you can imagine the scene. This is verse, I need to get my glasses actually.

Verse 34, Bimelech and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies. Now Gael's son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance of the city gate just as Bimelech and his troops came out from their place.

Verse 36, When Gael saw them, he said to Zebul, look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains. Zebul replied, you mistake the shadows of the mountains for men.

You should have gone to Speck Savers, Gael. If you'd been to Speck Savers, you would see this as just shadows. But the shadows come closer down the mountain.

[23 : 15] Gael says, no, they really are men. They really are coming. And then Zebul's been practicing this line for quite a long time. Do you see what he says? Where's your big talk now, you who said, who's a Bimelech?

This is a hangover that no Alka-Seltzer will solve. So what happens? Well, the Shechemites get beaten back.

Gael gets driven out of the city. The next day, the people of Shechem gulf into the field almost certainly to gather the rest of the harvest. Many hadn't been perhaps Gael's cronies.

Maybe some had been. They suspected nothing. As soon as they reach the fields, then a Bimelech then swoops down again. There's mass slaughter. The companies are also there. They massacre them in the fields.

The rest of the city leaders, they leg it into the stronghold of the city, the temple of El Barit. A Bimelech makes this bonfire against it. And a thousand people die in this inferno.

[24 : 18] Shechem. Fire has come out from a Bimelech and devours Shechem, the unfaithful city, the one who'd funded that slaughter. Then you find the other side of the coin though because in verse 50, a Bimelech's really chuffed.

This is a great new strategy. Make a torch of a place. So he goes off to Thebes. We're not told why he went there. There's no hint of their involvement in any revolt.

But he's flushed with success. He decides to make a bonfire out of the tower. But you see one of the women there had another ideas. I don't know if this is true in other people's homes.

I do know it's probably true in our home. So I can imagine a conversation going something like this. Come on darling, your suitcase is going to be a bit overweight with that millstone.

I think it might come in handy. It'll be over the weight limit. No, no, I think I might need it. She lugs it up to the roof and a moment later drops it on the skull of a Bimelech and a crash and comes to the ground.

[25 : 26] It lands on a Bimelech's head. He knows the end is near. He urges one of his servants to finish him off. Then all of the Israelites went home. What a mess. You hardly find God as a character in a narrative at all just like with a film.

The director's not on the stage. But we should never, never lose sight of who is the leader, the ruler, and the judge. Sometimes we think God's seen in acting of judgment.

God's power is seen in mercy. For judgment to happen, all he has to do is to say, the car is pointing down the hill, I'm going to take the handbrake off and off you go. God gives people over to the choices that they've made.

So Gael, he speaks up against a Bimelech. A Bimelech routes him. He belittles Zebul. Zebul throws him out. The big mouth silenced. The people of Shechem, they laid ambushes for passers-by.

A Bimelech lays ambushes for them. They trusted Baal-Berit as their delivery. They got money from the temple for Bimelech. This very temple, Baal-Berit, becomes the inferno where they die. Fire came out from Bimelech.

[26 : 39] A Bimelech, the same thing's true. He incites people of Shechem to rebel against the other sons and Gael incites the people of Shechem to rebel against him. He kills 70 brothers on a stone.

A stone is dropped on his own head. In his pride, he claims the crown for himself but in his own pride, he's humbled, felled by a stone dropped by a woman.

In that culture, for a woman to kill you was the kind of lowest form of, for a warrior in that setting. On his deathbed, he doesn't cry to law for forgiveness. All he cares about is his own ego, his own pride.

He doesn't want the reputation a woman killed him. We read on in 2 Samuel 11, who killed the Bimelech, son of Jerob-Besheth? Didn't a woman throw up a millstone on him from the wall so he died in Themis?

So everything that he hoped to avoid came down his way. Evil repaid with evil and it's God who is behind it all.

[27 : 41] Did you see that in verse 56? Thus God repaid the wickedness that Bimelech had done to his father by murdering his 70 brothers. God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness.

The curse of Jotham, son of Jeroboam, came on them. So what do we do with this? Well, you've seen woven through some themes about should we aspire to leadership?

What are we giving up when we do that? What kind of leaders? A self-appointed leader or a populist leader who's got no qualities in their own right but a rabble-rouser?

Are they brutal and ruthless? So there's something about that. There's something also about us like the people of Shechem.

What kind of leaders do we look for? Do we honor? Do we esteem? Do we work for? How faithful are we in response to that? But I don't know if you've ever seen The Apprentice on TV.

[28 : 45] Anyone seen The Apprentice? The search goes on when someone gets fired. The search goes on. And as Martin so helpfully reminds us, this is all part of a narrative, the search for the leader that God wants, that God chooses.

And over and above every human leader is another king, Jesus Christ. And what a contrast with Abimelech. Instead of scheming, he's without deceit.

Instead of grabbing power, he grabs a towel and washes our feet. Instead of murdering his family, he gives his life for his enemies. Instead of a, he wears a crown of thorns rather than a thorn bush.

Instead of being this prickly place of refuge, he says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. This is our God, the servant king.

This is the one we need to come to above and over every human leadership, the king of kings, Jesus Christ. May we pray as we do that. Loving Lord and God, this comes to us at different levels.

[30 : 11] We all know we experience leadership of good and bad kinds every single day. Maybe we exhibit it ourselves. We ask your forgiveness for our many failings.

whether as a leader or as a follower. But we want to first and foremost thank you from the bottom of our hearts for Jesus Christ, the servant king, the one who wears a crown of thorns, the one who gave his life and grabbed that towel and help us to walk in his steps.

For your name's sake. Amen.