

Gideon III: Progeny

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Preacher: Tim Foster

[0 : 00] Thank you so much to Jamie for leading us there. Thank you to Alistair and David who I set upon only when they came in the building to do the reading for us this evening.

Well, here we are having heard this third and final section of the Gideon narrative read. Perhaps it would be worth recapping where we have been so far.

Judges as a whole began with those two chapters of introductory material showing us that all was not well with God's people in this land that God had gifted to them.

Joshua was dead and soon the people forgot God and started following the gods of the surrounding nations. But God in his grace and in his mercy, he did not abandon them to their idolatry.

He did not let them stray their own way senselessly without a check. Rather, he used the surrounding nations to bring Israel back to their senses.

[1 : 04] And during our studies in Judges, we have found some fairly low points that Israel has had to get to before they would wise up and call out to the God that they should have been serving.

When they realized their folly, they called out to God and it seems to be that he continually is willing to raise up a deliverer to rescue his people.

And we see Gideon, this most recent deliverer that we've had. And we remember that God plucked him from utter obscurity to deliver Israel.

Gideon had a little bit of a tendency to listen to everything but what God had actually said. But God nonetheless used Gideon to save his people amazingly.

But sadly, last week we left Gideon acting like a Canaanite king. We heard some of that with the first bit of our reading this evening. We left Gideon acting like a Canaanite king.

[2 : 12] Like a pagan king. A king who did not know God. And he established false worship in his hometown. But as we come to our passage for this week that we've just heard, the third section of Gideon, it doesn't finish with false worship and illegitimate government.

No, it gets much, much, much worse. Before we dig into our passage, I wonder if I can set you thinking. I wonder if you've ever sat with a friend over a cup of coffee and you've put the world to rights.

You know that phrase, don't you? If only I was running the show, you would say. And then you would propose your solution to all the problems of the world.

Perhaps if I were king for a day, if only they would let me into 10 Downing Street, then I would sort out all these niggling problems. Immigration, unemployment, the NHS education, we can solve it all in the time that it takes to sip at a latte.

Amazing. But thankfully, very few of us are ever in a position to take the reins as our daydream and fantasies would want us to.

[3 : 32] And I know that for myself, and I know the thoughts of a Tim-led country is a terrifying thought to many of you. If I were able to implement even a few of those solutions, the wider cost would be staggering in so many ways.

And I wonder, in your mind, can you imagine the nightmare of a you-led nation? Of a you-ruled world?

Perhaps we can just shelve that idea for a little while and come back to it later this evening. Let's try and work through our passage. But before we dig into the material that we've read, let's pray and ask God to help us this evening.

Father, what we have read this evening is troubling. What we have read this evening is not pleasant reading. It is not a nice story.

And yet it comes as part of your holy and inspired word. And so we long that you would speak to us through it. That you would teach us through it.

[4 : 44] That we would leave this place not just with a little more information in our heads, but with fuel for the faith that we long to live in.

We long that we would know what we are to do and how we are to do it in this world. And so we pray, Father, would you in grace and in mercy speak to each one of us this evening.

And would you get all the glory in Jesus' name. Amen. God gives the people what they deserve. Sadly, I don't have a PowerPoint, but God gives the people what they deserve.

That's what we see in the first section of our passage this evening. After the rather negative bent in Gideon's story, there's something of a positive gloss given to the end of Gideon.

God has delivered Israel from the oppression of the Midianites and there's peace in the land. For 40 years, the land has been at peace. And this has been a common part of the Judges cycle up until this point.

[5 : 50] But notably, if you read further on in Judges, this is the last time the land gets peace. The cycle is breaking down.

And what we read this evening is all a part of a breakdown in the cycle of Judges. The people do exactly what we'd expect them to do by this stage in our study of Judges.

They sin, they go astray after the death of their last deliverer. But there's a massive difference to what happens next. God doesn't do what he normally does.

He doesn't raise up a neighbouring nation to come and to punish Israel or to try and teach them their lesson or to oppress them or to try and bring them back.

There's no fresh Midianite oppression. Something else is happening here. Something different is happening in our cycle. But there's a similar trend.

[6 : 50] They make a beeline for idolatry as soon as Gideon dies. They worship Baal, Baal. But Baal worship wasn't the worship of a single god.

It's not like Judaism or Islam or Christianity or any of the monotheistic religions that we think of today. There seems to have been many strands in Baal religions. And we find a curious detail here.

Their master, the Baal that they were going to give themselves to, if you translate Baal, it turns to something like Lord. The so-called Lord that they prostitute themselves spiritually to is Baalbereth.

Baalberet. The Lord of the covenant is what that word means, is what that name means. And perhaps you kind of skim over that and that doesn't really surprise you.

But remember who this was written to. This was written to Israelites. To the inheritors of a covenant from God. Made through Abraham.

[7 : 54] Confirmed through Isaac and Jacob. Made afresh at Sinai with Moses and that fledgling nation. Their parents have inhabited the land. And these children of Israel, they're enjoying peace.

Because of a deliverer raised up by the God of the covenant. By Yahweh. By the real true God. But they forget Yahweh. The God that made the covenant.

And they create for themselves Baalberet. The Lord of the covenant. Do you see how this is so utterly heinous?

What a slap in the face this is to God. They'd made a counterfeit to serve.

And forgotten the genuine God with whom they had relationship. This is madness. And yet how often can we.

[8 : 56] Yes, even we Christians. How often if we were to honestly examine our hearts. Would we find that a counterfeit has become our God. How easily we slip into the same pattern as these people.

Does our God never challenge us? Does our God never really require too much from us? Does our God seem to have his top priority as our comfort?

Perhaps it could be that we have slipped. That we have forgotten the true God of heaven. And have created for ourselves a God in our own image.

It could be that we come to church. And claim to worship the true God. And to follow his son. And yet that we serve ourselves.

And I'm sure we would find a much nicer way to put this. But could it be. That even tonight we find ourselves in that place. In their self-serving idolatry.

[10 : 11] We find that they're faithless toward Gideon. And to Gideon's family. The deliverer that God used. And we find that.

This deliverer who. God used. He did what. We've already said. He acted like a paganite. A Canaanite king. And he did what we'd expect of any of them.

He married many wives. These would have been political maneuvers. This is way back before the day of alliance treaties. These would have been political maneuvers.

Alliances would have been forged through these marriages. And many of these marriages came. With these many marriages came. Many possible heirs. This wasn't what God had told his king of his people to do.

This was in direct violation. Of the covenant that God had made. But this is what Gideon did. And we're introduced to Abimelech. His name means my father is king.

[11:12] And we find that he isn't the son of a wife. But of a concubine. And she's come from Shechem. Probably a Canaanite.

Probably from a Canaanite woman. And there's so many layers of politics. And problems here. But the simplest way. To cut through it all.

Seems to be that Gideon has slighted Shechem. The alliance that he's made with them. Is made through only a concubine. It's a second class treaty. If you will.

And so Abimelech. This treacherous son. When his father dies. He plays on the political situation. And he puts himself forward. As the candidate for king.

He uses an ethnic argument. I'm one of you. All those other people. They're not here. They're far away. They don't belong to your people.

[12:11] But I do. Make me king. And Shechem supports him. They give him money to start his campaign. Money from the temple of their gods.

Note the amount they gave him. 70 shekels. It seems like an odd figure to me. I wonder why on earth would that possibly be the amount. And why is it recorded? Isn't it convenient that he had 70 competitors to the throne?

This is blood money. And he spends it on a mercenary army. To go and to systematically and brutally kill his half brothers.

What sort of a king will this be? What sort of a leader are they supporting? Seemingly one exactly to their tastes.

They are getting the leader they both desire and deserve. And to make it official. They go to the nearby oak at the pillar of Shechem. This is a monument that was set up by Joshua.

[13:18] And it was done to serve as a witness to the law. To the covenant that was being read to the nation of Israel. And what are they doing here? They're showing their exact waywardness.

They're showing exactly the way that they don't care. And the way that they want to go. To crown Abimelech king. But God warns the people about the dangers.

God warns the people about the dangers. Just as the pomp and the circumstance is at its pinnacle. Just as the coronation procession is in full swing.

Jotham. This odd character. A survivor of the extermination. He appears on the mountain overlooking Shechem. And he makes this rather odd address to the people in the valley.

He tells them this parable about trees. Isn't it curious? He talks of the trees choosing for themselves a king. And they go to three productive and valuable trees.

[14:24] To the olive tree, the fig tree and the vine tree. And all three of these trees. They decline. Because they produce something valuable. It seems that they don't want to give up their value innately to serve as king.

But there's another candidate. The bramble. The thorn. This is a worthless tree. A bramble in these days was a common cause of wildfires.

If you had brambles on your land, you wanted to get rid of them. Because they were dry. They easily caught fire in the summer heats. And they would be cause of wildfires that would then destroy the valuable trees that you had planted on your land.

And the bramble's a small thing. It's about two foot high. A bit of a bush. It has thorns instead of leaves. And so as we read this fable, see the utter absurdity of what's being said.

This idea that all the trees of the field will take shade under this bramble here. It's laughable. There ought to be a wry smile coming across our face at that point.

[15:45] But the thing that drives this parable, that fable, is this idea of good faith. In the fable, the bramble, he thinks, perhaps these trees are having me on.

Perhaps this offer of kingship is just a cruel joke towards me. So I'll put this blessing or curse scenario on the situation.

And when Jotham applies it to Abimelech and to Shechem, it's wrapped up with this idea of good faith. Do they really mean it? Is it done in trustworthiness? Is it done in loyalty?

Jotham doesn't say explicitly whether they are being loyal or disloyal. Whether they are doing it in good faith or not. But it's blatantly clear what he meant. He's showing to them that their treachery against Gideon and to his family is heinous.

And he's cursing them for their unfaithfulness. For their faithlessness. Desiring the mutual destruction of both murderous Abimelech and his sponsors Shechem.

[16:55] But although it comes in this curse form and it's hard for us to recognize. I think Jotham is here warning the people of Shechem.

There is perhaps a chance for them in the middle of this ceremony to turn back. To listen to what Jotham has to say. And to avoid this curse.

And perhaps as that wisdom that Jotham proclaimed back then caught their hearers.

We should hear it ourselves. We must recognize that those who we allow to lead are our responsibility to some level or another.

Whether in the church or in government or wherever we have a say. We cannot wash our hands of the people who we have sponsored and supported.

[17:58] And we ought to be very careful about who we will follow. And who we will give the reins to. We ought to take heed of those who would warn us about leaders who are dangerous.

Men like Jotham. And maybe unlike the people of Shechem we ought to pay attention. And to be willing to break ties with leaders who we have sponsored.

And who we have sadly allowed to become our leaders. Sadly Abimelech becomes king. And for three years it seems that Abimelech's murderous ambition is rewarded.

And I'm sure for Jotham in those three years it felt like what Bruce was talking about this morning. He talked about being in St Andrews and being caught in the har. And you can see nothing for the fog.

I'm sure that Jotham felt like that in those three years. I doubt he saw beyond the circumstances. I doubt he saw beyond Abimelech's actions against him.

[19:21] But let us be patient. Let's remember that God is in control when we see what happens next. God punishes the treachery of Abimelech and the people.

God punishes the treachery of Abimelech and the people. This final or almost final section of our passage. This is kind of the main bulk of the material that we have.

And thankfully the author gives us a little bit of a peek behind the scenes. Just before he lets us into what happens. He lets us see that this is God working to bring justice to bear on Abimelech and on Shechem.

And if we didn't have verses 23 and 24. This whole section would read like a sad bloody coup. That failed and what the aftermath happened.

But the happenings here are divine judgment on these faithless and treacherous people. And it's important that we pick that up early. And that we have that in our minds as we read on to what actually happened.

[20:29] Firstly it seems that Abimelech is living away from Shechem. And ruling it by a governor. And the leaders of Shechem are discontent with this situation. And they begin to sponsor civil unrest.

They fund people to disrupt travellers. To rob passing traitors. This would have been amazingly damaging to Abimelech's reputation as a leader. If he was unable to secure his territory.

To secure safe passage. He would be greatly weakened in his position. And Abimelech hears this and you expect him to come in vengeance right away.

But before he's even able to react. A new character is introduced to the story. Gal. A nobody. It says that he's the son of.

That's the son of a slave. He's a nobody. Who's recently seemingly came back to Shechem. But he seems to have been a native. He seems to have come from Shechem originally.

[21:33] And he's full of bluster and talk. And the leaders of Shechem put their trust into Gal. And it's summer time. And there the Shechem International Festival is in full swing.

I'm sure they had a fringe and a book festival and a film festival and all the others to go along with it. And the party has moved up to the Esplanade at the top there.

Actually it's the Temple of Belberite. But you know you get the idea. And the wine is flowing. And Gal starts to become the centre of attention.

He starts to talk. He's ambitious. And he's charismatic. And he captures the attention of the people. And notice the irony. Notice that Gal makes exactly the same play for power that Abimelech did. He calls in the support of the people based on their ethnicity. And his relationship to them. Shechem existed before the Israelites came back into the land.

[22 : 39] And it was built by Canaanites. And these inhabitants were seemingly descendants of Hamor. Perhaps intermingled with a little Israelite blood here and there. And Gal shoots off his mouth and gives this great show of bravado.

If only he was here I would fight him. I would wait for him to bring out all of his army so that he couldn't claim that I bit him at a disadvantage. He strikes me a little like Conor McGregor. If you've been following that situation. If only Mayweather was here I would take the fight to him right now. If only Mayweather would actually sign the contract so that we could get this over with. Well we all know what happens to McGregor in the end. And this is the fire that's kindled from Shechem against Abimelech. As Jotham put it in his fable.

Treachery against Gideon and his family. Which led to Abimelech's ascension has morphed into treachery against Abimelech. And so the stage is set for the fire to come from Abimelech.

[23 : 48] Abimelech's governor. This man Zebel. He hears this and his blood boils at the treasonous talk. And that very night Abimelech's army comes and moves into position near Shechem.

And the next day you can almost imagine Gal wandering down to the gate of the city. Perhaps after his rough night he has his favourite hangover cure in his hand.

A coffee and a couple of pro plus. And he sits at the gate. And he looks out. And he thinks he sees something. And he turns to Zebel who's there with him.

And he says, Are those people coming down from the mountain? Zebel brushes it off. No. Are you still blurry for last night?

Are you still a little bit hungover? Maybe you need your eyes checked. But Gal sees more from a different place.

[24 : 54] And more from a different place. And I'm sure there was a flash of panic across his face. And can you just imagine the relish that Gal has in saying these words?

Where is your mouth now? Oh you who were so full of talk with a little bit of drink in you last night. Oh you who was so willing to put up a fight last night when he wasn't here.

Well, here's the man in his army. Go and do what you boasted about. It's all gone wrong for Gal. He mounts a hasty defence. But is utterly defeated. He's shown to be a coward. You see him flee. And Zebel has the great pleasure of expelling him from Shechem.

And you think that that would be the end of the tale. But Abimelech isn't satisfied. And this is where we step into the horrifying aspects of our story this evening.

[26 : 03] The people of Shechem think that all is well. Gal has been punished. And now everything can go back to normal. But they don't reckon on Abimelech's rage. He comes again the next day while they're out in the fields.

And he catches the people unaware. And he ruthlessly kills. He captures the gate. He destroys the city. He ensures that no one can escape from the violence.

He even sows the city with salt. This was an incredibly expensive thing to do. And it ensured that the city would be unproductive.

That he couldn't grow crops in the place for generations. We see it getting rebuilt after Solomon's reigns. Perhaps centuries after these events.

His rage and his spite seem to know no limit. And then he comes into the city. And there seems to have been a contingent left behind.

[27 : 06] And they flee into the temple that they were partying in the previous night. And there seems to have been something of a fortification there. And so Abimelech goes and he takes wood from a nearby hill.

And he burns the place to the ground. And this is a truly horrific act for anyone to do. But just let this settle into your mind.

That he was meant to be their king. Their leader. He was meant to be their protector under God. And he massacres them.

But remember only three years before this was the leader that they chose to anoint. Abimelech isn't done.

Abimelech isn't done. He goes to nearby Thebes. Whether they were rebellious or not we don't have any evidence for.

[28 : 14] But he goes full of rage. He's presented with a similar defensive tower. And he thinks I've seen this before. I'll do the same again. And just as Abimelech seems to be ready to place the flaming torch to the woods.

This unnamed woman drops the upper millstone. And it strikes him on the head. And leaves him helpless. The shame for King Abimelech to be killed in battle by a woman is immeasurable. And this story seems to be retold not just in what we hear in the Bible. But in folklore and in military tactics. We hear something about it happening in Samuel when David is attacking a town.

And full of pride and full of anger. He calls this young man to finish him off. So that at least his memory would be preserved. At least his bravado would be intact.

And with Abimelech dead the army disintegrates. And Thebes escapes destruction. They are awful events aren't they?

[29 : 32] It is hard to read these things and to try and make sense of them. There's nothing for us to emulate here. As I've said repeatedly and others too.

Judges is not a handbook for leadership. It's not a book of examples, characters to try and follow. But there is a warning to us.

Evil does not go unpunished. There is no such thing as a sin free sin. And those who abuse. Who wound. Who boast. Who denigrate. Who envy and lie. Who cheat and who steal and who kill. They should see here.

That there is no hiding place from the consequences of flagrant sin. But it doesn't always look like what we would expect. One of my favourite comic book artists.

[30 : 42] A guy called Larson. Has this fantastic one of a computer screen. With a man walking along. And you see a piano dangling above his head. And the keyboard is laid out in front.

And it has a large smite button. With a finger poised over it. Sometimes that's what we think God is like. We think God will smite with a lightning bolt.

That he will sweep in and instantly destroy the evil person. But far more often his justice is carried out through seemingly normal workings.

Of men and women. And this is something of a comfort to some of us who have been wronged. Who have never seen justice done.

That God will punish those who do evil. But it's also a stark reminder that we ourselves have need of salvation from our own sin.

[31 : 45] Because we have all at various times and in various ways tried to make ourselves. The captain of our own lives. Remember the image that we had at the beginning. Of a world ran by you.

A king of your own life. We have all sought to be kings and queens of our own situations. We've all sought to make gods for ourselves of our own comfort.

Or wealth or family or a million other things. And these false gospels lead us straight into sin. But our only hope is to relent from our ceaseless pursuit of these false gods.

And to turn back to the only true God. To submit to the only true king. King Jesus. Whose mercy and grace and love are the very antithesis of what we see here.

The rage and the bloodthirst that we've seen in Abimelech. The very opposite we see in Jesus. Who will we make king of our life?

[32 : 58] Will we make ourselves the king of our lives? Do you trust yourself to lead yourself? You who cannot go through a day without sinning? You who cannot go through a day without messing up?

Or will we make Jesus the king of our life? The one whose love is proven even though he had to die for us? Notice finally that even after all this disaster and rebelliousness.

God still delivers. We didn't read verses 1 to 5 of chapter 10. Although they were part of my passage this evening. But here's the quick version. Tola is raised up in somewhere near the same region as Shechem.

He has very little said about him. All that we know is for 23 years he judged Israel. But notice something very odd. There's no enemy mentioned here.

There was no invading army to deal with again. Tola was raised up in the aftermath of Abimelech to save the Israelites from themselves. And following him Jer is raised up.

[34 : 15] Another man with very little said about him. And he again delivers without an enemy. And you have this time of stability and peace.

And even after all of their rebelliousness and folly. God is still working among his people for their good. And whatever situation we find ourselves in this evening.

There is yet hope that God will work in our lives. Perhaps some of us are living with heavy burdens of shame and of sin.

And despairing of the consequences. We have hope that God will still work. Others of us live wounded by the evil of others.

Hurt by consequences. Pained by bodies and minds that don't work how they should. We too have a refuge to run to.

[35 : 18] To this King Jesus who can heal. Who can bind up our broken hearts. Who will one day fix these broken bodies and make them glorious like his own.

The question I want to leave you with as I sit down is. Who will we install as our King? A mixture of Mother-knau.

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Taking care. Tweet me shirt.