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June 27th: Judges 9 & 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

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The reign of Abimelech. Concluding exhortations.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges chapter 9. 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 seventy 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 all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother. And they gave him seventy 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 Ophrah, 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 Bethmilo, 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 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? 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 if you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his son, seventy 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 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 Bethmilo, and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Bethmilo and devour Abimelech.

And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Be'er 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 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. 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 Gael the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from 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 Gael the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech? And who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of 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. When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gael the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled, and he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, Behold Gael the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you.

Now therefore go by night you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do.

So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. And Gael the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, and Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush. And when Gael saw the people, he said to Zebul, Look, people are coming down from the mountain tops.

And Zebul said to him, You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men. Gael spoke again and said, Look, people are coming down from the centre 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? Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them.

And Gael went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him, and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech lived at Aruma, and Zebul drove out Gael 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 Elbereth. 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 one 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. 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 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 Jerobael. In Judges chapter 9 we get to know the character of Abimelech, the son of Gideon, by his Shechemite concubine. Abimelech means father is king.

Gideon rejected the kingship when he was offered it, but this name suggests that he did not entirely reject the pretensions of it. It is a good name for a prince, and it is also the name of a number of Canaanite kings in the book of Genesis. Abimelech is the son of a concubine, possibly a Canaanite concubine.

She is from Ephraimite territory, whereas Gideon was a man of Manasseh. After the death of Gideon, the Israelites had made Baal-bereth, lord of the covenant, their god, and the worship of Baal-bereth seems to have been concentrated in the city of Shechem. Shechem was a Levitical city in Joshua chapter 21 verses 20-21.

As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite clans of the Levites, the cities allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasture lands in the hill country of Ephraim. This might make us wonder what has happened to the Levites.

Their city of refuge has become a site of idolatry, a centre of idolatry. Abimelech presents himself as one who ought to be king over them. He sees himself as their flesh and their blood, and so for this reason he is an apt ruler, and they support him.

They support him with the coffers of their god Baal-bereth, and the money that he gets

from this false god he uses to destroy 70 of his brethren. His claim for kingship arises out of the sacrificial murder of his 70 brothers, all funded out of the coffers of Baal-bereth. He kills his brothers on one stone in Ophrah, his father's house.

Could this be the same stone as the altar? One way or another it is an ugly reversal. Jotham, the youngest son of Jerobail, or Gideon, escaped, and he turns up later on. Abimelech is made king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem, and we've previously encountered this place in the narrative.

In Genesis chapter 12 verse 6, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 4, So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. Joshua chapter 24 verses 25 to 26, So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God.

And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. On each of these previous occasions the terebinth, or the oak at Shechem, plays an important role in covenant establishment or renewal. And now it's being used for this perverse act of creating Abimelech, the slayer of his brothers, as the king over the Shechemites, who have committed themselves to the idolatry of Baal-Bareth.

At this point Jotham, who has escaped, brings a parable to the people. He stands on Mount Gerizim, it's the mountain of blessing. This is a gracious act of God.

If they listen, they will be blessed. In his parable the trees are looking for another tree to rule over them. And they ask each tree in turn, and they reject.

All of the great and good and worthy trees are offered rule, but they all have other productive things that they are invested in, and they do not wish to rule. Perhaps they are a bit apathetic. Perhaps they don't want the commitment.

One way or another, the bramble, the least worthy of all the trees, is the one that actually wants to wield authority. The trees clearly represent men of differing character, with the bramble representing the cursed man, or the man who brings the curse. The bramble doesn't seem to be a fitting tree to provide shade to others, as a kingly tree was supposed to do.

Brambles also burn very easily and spread destructive fire. The bramble's desire for rule is cautionary. Often it's the people who are least suitable for authority who desire it the most.

Jotham's parable speaks of fire coming out from the bramble and devouring the cedars of Lebanon, the proud and the great trees of the land. Jotham here acts as a sort of prophet, declaring a prophetic type of judgment. Jotham's name might mean the Lord is loyal, and loyalty and disloyalty are key themes of his message.

Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and then again, if you 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. Those expressions, good faith and integrity, take up the language of a previous occasion at this same location, the language of Joshua chapter 24, verse 14. Now therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord. They have not, however, dealt faithfully with the house of Jeroboam, with the descendants of the man who delivered them from the Midianites. This is related to their treatment of the Lord in chapter 8, verses 34 to 35.

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. If they have not been faithful, Jotham calls for fire to come out from Abimelech and to devour Shechem and Bethmilo, and for fire to come out from Shechem and Bethmilo and to devour Abimelech.

Jotham then flees and settles in Be'ah. After three years, the Lord sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the Shechemites. God brings discord to the wicked.

Now this may be an actual evil spirit or it might be a spiritual force by which the Lord is creating disunity and opposition between the two groups. The Shechemites prove to be treacherous and troublesome. They act like bandits in the mountains, causing trouble for Abimelech.

Whether they set ambushes in the mountains designed to attack Abimelech himself, or whether they are doing it for the sake of Abimelech, it isn't entirely clear. The result is that the land is brought to a sorry state, similar to that in the time of Deborah, where people can't move around freely. Then Gael comes on the scene and the Shechemite rulers turn to him.

They have a harvest festival and revile Abimelech. Gael argues that they should be serving a Canaanite, a son of Hamor. Remember that Hamor, the father of Shechem, was the leader of the Shechemites back in Genesis chapter 34 when it was a Canaanite city.

Abimelech had already claimed that he was a fitting ruler as one who was kin of the Shechemites by his mother, presumably she was a Canaanite. Now Gael reminds them

that Canaanite mother or no, Abimelech is still a son of Jerobael. Zebel, Abimelech's right hand man and the ruler of the city, hears about this and sends messengers to Abimelech.

Abimelech then sends an ambush against the city. He divides his men into four companies, according to the council of Zebel. Gael sees men coming down from the mountain tops, he goes out to fight the men of Abimelech but he is defeated by Abimelech and by Zebel who supports him.

The next day Abimelech ambushes the men of Shechem as they go out to their fields, trapping them and killing them. He then razes the city and sows it with salt. Fire has come out from the bramble of Abimelech and destroyed the men of Shechem.

The ambushes of Abimelech remind us of the ambushes set by his father Gideon against the Midianites, especially when he divided his men into three companies. James Bujon notes the contrast between Gideon's men with their empty pitchers and Abimelech's band who are described as empty men. The rulers have taken refuge in the tower of Elbereth, the bale that they have served.

Abimelech gets bundles of brushwood with all of his men and burns the tower down with all within it. The manner of his destruction of the Shechemites should remind us of Jotham's parable, irrespective of Abimelech's wickedness, the Lord is also striking a great blow against Baal here and his worship within the land. Abimelech then goes on to attack Thebes, where the men, women and leaders hole up in the tower.

While besieging the tower, a woman drops an upper millstone on Abimelech's head. The one man to rule them all of verse 2 is slain by the one woman of verse 53. He has killed his brothers on one stone, now one stone falls upon him.

He is also a serpent whose head is crushed by a woman. Sisera's head was also crushed by a woman using a tool as a weapon as jail went through his head with a ten peg. Abimelech does not want the shame of being killed by a woman so he asks his armour bearer to run him through with his sword.

However the deed of the woman is recorded for us. Abimelech's death might also bring to mind the death of Saul which is similar in certain ways. The evil of Abimelech for what he did to his brothers returns on his head, quite literally, and the evil of the men of Shechem returns upon their heads too, according to the curse of Jotham.

A question to consider, of which defeated king in the book of Judges might Abimelech remind us and why? Pay attention to the numbers. What might we learn from the comparison between the two? 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 12 to 28. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, he who calls you as

faithful, he will surely do it.

Brothers pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. The conclusion of 1 Thessalonians is mostly a series of final instructions. Paul begins by exhorting the Thessalonians to respect their leaders, not just to submit to them, but to honour them and the labour that they perform, and to hold them in the highest loving regard.

They labour among them, they care for them in the Lord, and they admonish them. Paul's primary reference here is not to ministers so much as ministries. The people in question are probably not all ordained guardians of the church either.

Paul has the women who labour in the life of the church no less in mind than the male pastoral guardians. Romans chapter 16 might give us more of an idea of the sort of group of which he is thinking. The task of the leaders of the church is primarily that of caring for those committed to their oversight.

They must protect them from error, they must build them up in the truth, they must unite them in fellowship, and take concern for their needs both spiritual and material. Earlier in this letter we saw the way that Paul challenges the way that we can set sender, messenger, message, and recipients over against each other as detached and sometimes in opposition. In Christ and the gospel, these things are bound together.

The messenger of the gospel, for instance, gives himself to those to whom he delivers the message, and he becomes a form of the message himself, as do those who receive it. Here Paul also challenges some of the ways that we can instinctively regard the relationship between those in authority and those under authority. Rather than chafing at their authority, we are to be thankful for the care that they show, to recognise authority as a good thing, that, far from weakening us, can make us stronger.

Leaders in the church are not a special higher class of persons, they are our brothers, and we need to esteem them highly and love. We do this not so much because of the mere authority vested in their positions, but because we recognise the goodness and the value of the work that they do among us. The emphasis is very much on what they do over the offices that they do or do not hold.

We submit in love, wishing their labours among us to be fruitful, much as we recognise that they desire that we are fruitful. The Thessalonians are charged to be at peace among themselves. God has brought us into peace by the sacrifice of his Son, and we must inhabit this peace together.

Paul gives a series of rapid-fire imperatives to the Thessalonians. The initial imperatives - admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all -

might seem to relate especially to the work of those in leadership. However, they are also the responsibility of everyone else.

The leaders lead the way in the work of the entire body. Paul returns to the concern he raised earlier in chapter 4 verses 11-12 about idle members of the community who were sponging off others. They should be admonished and taught to be self-sufficient.

Those whose hearts were failing them were to be encouraged. How? Probably by focusing on the future coming of Christ. In chapter 4 verse 18 and chapter 5 verse 11, Paul had already charged them to encourage each other in this manner.

The weak must be assisted as they have their need. The vision here is of a congregation in which people and their leaders are very attentive to each other, recognizing and ministering to the various needs of people in different situations. They are instructed to show patience with all.

Patience is one virtue whose absence makes it difficult to practice any of the others. People are difficult. They can be resistant to correction.

They can be unresponsive to encouragement. And our efforts to help them can often seem futile and fruitless. It is only with a loving patience that we will persevere with them.

Without patience, community is almost impossible. The Thessalonians then must minister to and nurture each other in these ways. The Thessalonians are warned against repaying evil for evil.

Christians must reject the way of retribution, perhaps particularly important for a church that is undergoing forms of persecution. They must seek to do good. They don't merely refrain from evil, but positively seek out creative and appropriate ways in which they can do good.

We might be reminded of Jesus' teaching concerning the fulfillment of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is fulfilled in proactive and transformative love, not in mere sin avoidance. Paul's instructions here are similar in form to those that we find in places such as Romans 12 verses 9-18.

Reading Paul's staccato list, we might recall the ways that he has already exemplified these practices in this letter, in his own way of behaviour. For instance, chapter 1 verse 2, and chapter 3 verses 9-10, All of these charges involve a call to consistency, always, without ceasing, in all circumstances. As we are people determined by realities, principles and truths deeper than our situations, we won't waver in the same way as others do.

The final imperatives could arguably be said to focus on the Spirit and on His work. The

Spirit is the animating flame of God's presence within us, and we must fan this flame to greater life and not quench it. The Thessalonians must live holy lives as temples of the Holy Spirit.

They need to value the words of prophets, testing what they say, discerning and holding fast what is good, and discerning and rejecting all forms of evil. And doing this would equip the Thessalonians in their future growth. The chapter and the epistle ends with a benediction, a brief encouragement, some brief exhortations and a concluding benediction.

Paul began the letter with grace and peace, and now he ends it with them. He directs the Thessalonians' attention once more to the much awaited day of the Lord's coming, and now calls for God to establish them in the blamelessness of holiness to which they are called. God's faithfulness is the grounds of our hope in this regard.

He will bring to completion what He has started in us. He began with prayers for the Thessalonians, and now he asks the Thessalonians to pray for him and his missionary companions. They are also instructed to greet each other with a holy kiss, as a sign of close familial affection, and to have the letter read aloud to the entire congregation.

A question to consider, why does Paul so often emphasise constancy in rejoicing?