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Judges 9:1-6,22-24,50-56, ESV

9 Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, ² "Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."

³ 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." ⁴ 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. ⁵ And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. ⁶ And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

²² Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³ And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, ²⁴ that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal 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.

⁵⁰ Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. ⁵¹ 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. ⁵² And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³ And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone

departed to his home. ⁵⁶ Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers.

Killed by a frying pan.

When I was a young boy, my father was earning a living managing a tire shop and garage. He was paid mostly by commissions; he sold mostly truck tires. I had a much older brother who was just getting started in life. My father got the idea that he wanted to leave my brother with a business. So, my father cashed in his retirement money, and so did two of his buddies who worked in other shops in the same chain, General Tire. The three of them bought a tire shop/garage. There was a photograph that my mother showed me, long after this had all gone sour, showing the three of these middle-aged men standing proudly in front of their store, with big grins on their faces. The problem? One of my dad's partners, who was supposed to be his dear friend, embezzled from the store, and ran off. The two partners who remained behind, including my father, were forced sell the store back to the chain at far less than they paid for it. My father and the other remaining partner lost everything. My parents ended up in debt, and many years later, when my father died, he left my mother almost penniless. She died broke.

Now, here is a question that many Christians ask. Why does God let evil people succeed? The man who stole from my father was never caught; he never

paid for what he did. What we would want to see happen is what happened to Abimelech in the Book of the Judges. The title of the Book of the Judges comes from the principal characters in the book, the judges. But the title is misleading. The original Hebrew word is *shofet* – and it really means ruler, or military leader. The judges were tribal leaders or military commanders, and they led Israel in the period before the Kings, like Saul and David and Solomon. Since Israel didn't yet have any kings, these tribal leaders, these commanders, were critical to keeping Israel intact until they could become better organized as a single nation led by a king. The period of the judges spans the period of time from the Exodus to the crowning of King Saul. We have no idea who wrote the Book of Judges. Most likely, it was constructed over a period of several centuries, starting with oral traditions. In many ways, the Book of Judges is a tragic story about how the people of Israel kept taking God for granted century after century. In Judges, the people practiced idolatry. They were disobedient to God, breaking their covenant with God, and this led to many military defeats. But all through this period, God never refused to open his arms to the Israelites whenever they did repent. We won't be focusing on him, but the most well-known judge is probably the 12th judge, Samson, who ruled after the People of God spend 40 years in captivity under the vicious Philistines. It was

Samson who led them to victory over the Philistines, and then 20 years later, he died. Eventually, the Philistines captured him, blinded him, and killed him.

But our passage comes from much earlier in the Book of Judges. Abimelech is the son of the greatest of the judges, Gideon, the man who delivered Israel from after receiving a call from God to take on the Midianites, a huge nomadic tribe. At first, Gideon has a huge army of 32,000 men, much smaller than the Midianite army, but still a big threat. Then 22,000 of them cut and run, leaving Gideon with 10,000. But through a test from God, most of them are sent home – and only 300 remain. However, God has a great plan. They don't invade or attack the Midianites in any way. God has the tiny army create a huge amount of noise with trumpets and by smashing jars. In confusion, the Midianites end up killing each other. So, here is Abimelech – the son of this very famous judge. As it turns out, Gideon has fathered 70 sons by his many wives, and one son by a concubine. This last and least important son is Abimelech who grows up very ambitious and determined. Using family connections, he gets a band of men to kill 69 of these half-brothers. One survives. Abimelech gains control and rules for three years. Interestingly, although we think of Saul as the first King of Israel, Abimelech was actually called a king, but did not rule over all of Israel. This area included Shechem, a magnificent city whose ruins were uncovered around 1960. But God does not let Abimelech's evil acts

stand. Here is what happens to him:⁵⁰ *Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. ⁵¹ 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. ⁵² And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³ And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. ⁵⁶ Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers.

There is a subtly here. When Abimelech is about to burn the enemy's tower, a woman tosses a millstone used to grind wheat on his head, crushing his skull. Back then, to be killed by a woman was extremely humiliating. Realizing he is dying he begs someone to quickly kill him with a sword. The society that Abimelech lived in was very traditional, very male centered, and men put a high value on being seen as tough, in charge. So, the subtly here is that grain was traditionally ground by women, and so a millstone is a woman's tool. Thus, his skull is crushed by the ancient equivalent of a woman wielding a frying pan or rolling pin.

So, why didn't God take care of my father's embezzling buddy the way he took care of Abimelech? Why do all of us see people who are clearly evil succeed, sometimes becoming wealthy, powerful, and worshipped? Why do we have people treat us in evil ways and get away with it? The answer is that God does not always punish people in the way that we would punish them. We are earthly minded. When we think of ways to crush someone who has done wrong, we think of putting them in prison, getting the fired from their job, humiliating them publicly, or maybe killing them with a frying pan. What does God do?

To answer this, we need to think about an incredible gift that God gave us: free will. You could imagine us all being born incapable of doing wrong. We could all proceed through life doing just what God wants, living the way Jesus lived, and no one ever needing to be punished. But if God blocked all evil behavior, we would certainly not have free will. We want to have it. Don't we? Hell, maybe we would be better off if we didn't have it. But God decided to give each of us the personal choice of deciding how we would live.

However, there is something else to consider. In the Bible, God often catches up with evil people and crushes them, typically using enemy armies to do the job. The lesson is meant to be metaphoric: evil does not win in the end, but the resolution might not be physical. Consider the man who stole from my father. My

father never recovered that stolen money. He died worth nothing. But he had a close connection to God. That's what we have when we do live the way God wants us to live. We are rewarded with a special kind of abundance – a closeness to God. We have a choice, each of us. We can live like Abimelech and have abundance on Earth, and very possibly never meet a terrible fate, at least not on Earth. But if we live according to the teachings of Jesus, if we live with kindness, honesty, generosity, empathy, forgiveness, if we work honestly for our money and don't take advantage of other humans, we are very dearly rewarded. We walk in the Kingdom of God right now, joyously – and we walk in the Kingdom of God forever.

Consider Abimelech's dad, Gideon, again. After he freed the people of Israel from their Midianite oppressors, they wanted to make him King. But he said: *"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you."* This seemed like the right result, with a man who could have let others worship him insisting that they should worship God instead. He did not want to be corrupted. However, this is what then happened: *"Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil."* (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) ²⁵ And they answered, *"We will willingly give them."* And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. ²⁶ And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides

the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels.

²⁷ *And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel worshipped it, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.* It turns out that the Midianites were traders of gold, spices, and luxury items, and they wore gold earrings themselves, and so the Israelites were able to recover lots of gold as the prize of war. Gideon gave in to greed and asked that much of the gold be given to him. He then took that gold and made a “*ephod*” of it. An ephod is a ceremonial costume, a very lavish one, worn by high priests. The people ended up worshiping it. And so, Gideon’s pride led to evil; he caused them to abandon their God for idolatry.

This is how Gideon’s story ends: ³³ *As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping the images of Baal, making Baal-berith their god.* ³⁴ *They forgot the LORD their God, who had rescued them from all their enemies surrounding them.* Thus, Gideon, who seemed to be a truly godly man and to have led his people back to freedom and to the freedom to worship God – and even told his people not to worship him – inadvertently ended his life on a very negative note. Despite all the good he had done, he ruined it all by refusing to stick to what his heart told him: to be humble and to put God first. Gideon died a famous man,

worshipped by his people. He was buried with great ceremony. But he didn't die close to God. His punishment did not come in this physical world. He wasn't murdered or slaughtered by an enemy army. He died having had 71 sons. And it seems that his legacy was a legacy of pride and the loss of God's grace – most of his children were murdered and his one son seems to have inherited his father's ill will with God. That's another thing to remember. We might not see evil punished in this life, and from this we might get the idea that there is no reason to live by God's laws. But we will lose our closeness to God – and we will not pass on to our children the blessings of living in the Kingdom of God. It is true that we can easily pass on the earthly punishment that we deserve. Please pray with me.

God, let us live according to your ways, not the ways of humanity. Let us be humble, modest, generous, and kind. Let us value our relationship with you far more than our position among the ranks of humans. Let us pass on the values that your son taught us to our children. May we be a link in an eternal chain of faith. Let us never be the ones to break that chain by becoming a selfish, destructive, weak link in the great chain of faith. Let us look upon those who do evil and seem to get away with it as nothing more than sad people who, by breaking the chain, have forever separated themselves from you. And they have quite likely cheated their descendants, as well. Amen.