

JUDGES SESSION #13

In the last session, we began looking at Abimelech, a man who doesn't really belong in "Judges" because he was not actually a judge himself. You may have noticed that his story, which is really just an epilogue to Gideon's record, is completely different than those of the previous judges – in his case, there is **no deliverance** at all. Quite the opposite, in fact! Jackman and Ogilvie put it well:

*"Here we see in the **microcosm** of one man's life and one specific geographical area the devastating effects of sin which are spreading on the **macro-scale** throughout the nation."*

- remember that the period of the judges was Israel's "Dark Ages"
 - so at this mid-point in the book, the writer shows us how **bad** things have become in the nation of Israel by shining the spotlight on Abimelech, that dangerous bramble bush
- As we continue the story in Judges chapter 9, the Bible makes it clear that...

C. The Wrong Choice Leads to Disaster

- Abimelech "reigned over Israel" three years as Judges 9:22 tells us
 - in one sense we can say that he was really Israel's "first king" (at least, over a small part of Israel)
- but the town of Shechem became **disillusioned** with Abimelech
 - ...note that it took 3 yrs for this to happen - sometimes, even under an evil man, people can be content for a while
- then another man, a sort of ancient Robin Hood named **Gaal**, shows up and foments rebellion against Abimelech

Judg 9:28

Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who *is* Abimelech, and who *is* Shechem, that we should serve him? *Is he* not the son of Jerubbaal, and *is not* Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve *him*?"

- the men of Shechem were very fickle, ready to change loyalty quickly
- Gaal gained their confidence with slick talk, just like Abimelech had done
 - he emphasized Abimelech's family background, but he highlighted his *father* – Jerub-baal, the 'Baal fighter' – and questioned: Why should Shechem, a city of **Baal worshippers**, be ruled by the son of the famous '**Baal fighter**'?!
- now clearly, the Shechemites should have turned to God and submitted to Him as King
 - but instead, they dealt with Abimelech on their own
 - and the tragic result was **self-destruction**

Judg 9:46-49

[the men of Shechem] entered the stronghold of the temple of the god Berith. ⁴⁷ And it was told Abimelech that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸ Then Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who *were* with him. And Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it and laid *it* on his shoulder; then he said to the people who were with him, "What you have seen me do, make haste *and* do as I *have done*." ⁴⁹ So each of the people likewise cut down his own bough and followed Abimelech,

put *them* against the stronghold, and set the stronghold on fire above them, so that all the people of the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women.

...Abimelech defeated them and burned up 1000 survivors of the initial battle as they took refuge in the temple of their god

...Jotham's parable literally came true: fire came out from the thornbush & devoured them!

- the *LifeGuide Bible Studies* on this passage includes this quote from a motto on the wall of a German school:

*When wealth is lost, **nothing** is lost;*

*When health is lost, **something** is lost;*

*When **character** is lost, **all** is lost!*

- the LifeGuide goes on to say: "The people of Shechem serve as an illustration of this motto.

By failing to stand up for what was right, they soon found their lives ruled by evil. Once character was gone, they lost freedom. All of the choices presented to them were merely different paths through a vile maze which led inexorably to a final death trap."

- as **Christians** the same principle is true for us: who rules our spiritual lives makes all the difference – is it God's Holy Spirit, or is it the Abimelech of our old sinful nature?

- Gal. 6:7-8 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

The one who sows to **please his sinful nature**, from that nature will reap **destruction**; the one who sows to **please the Spirit**, from the Spirit will reap **eternal life**."

- as the story continues, we find that Abimelech tried to do the same thing to a tower full of people in **Thebez**, but once again – as in Deborah's story – a *woman* is the hero as she drops a millstone down on Abimelech's head

Judg 9:50-57

Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and took it.

⁵¹ But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women – all the people of the city – fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower. ⁵² So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³ But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ Then he called quickly to the young man, his armorbearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" So his young man thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed, every man to his place.

⁵⁶ Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

- and once again we see **God at work** – this time avenging the blood of Gideon's sons as every single person involved in that crime was killed; and God emerges victorious over Baal again

All of which brings us to the...

D. Key Issue: Obedience

- this grim story is right in the center of the whole book of Judges, and God gives it a rather long & detailed treatment – why?

- on one hand, it highlights the terrible **effects of sin** on any peoples; that whenever people turn away from the Living God they move toward consequences that are ultimately disastrous
- on the other hand we see **God** at work – even evil in its worst forms cannot get out of control; our God still reigns! ...He limited the extent to which Abimelech’s evil influence reached, and He cut down Abimelech’s life early; the “thornbush’s fire” accomplished the purposes of God’s perfect justice by bringing punishment on those who deserved it ...God is truly the King, in control, on the throne!
- not only do we see God’s majestic *power* here, but we also see **God’s love** in action because he cares enough to intervene in their lives
- this story shows us how much God cares for his people – he disciplines Israel through the events of the life of Abimelech because he wants them to realize the tragic results of pushing God out of their lives – in that discipline God’s fatherly heart longs for his children to return to him so that he can care for them as he intended
- as Jackman & Ogilvie put it: *“We can be sure that even when the rod is in His hand there are tears in His eyes.”*
- so we find in the story of Abimelech an important picture reminding us about the significance of the **choice** we must make every day:
 - * either to follow the desires of our **sin nature**, that dangerous ‘bramble bush’ that brings destruction;
 - * or to follow God’s **Holy Spirit** who leads us to do what is right, gives us the power to do so and then produces blessing
- the **key** issue is **OBEDIENCE**
 - John Akers said: “We have deep desires to live a holy life, but we have given up on the possibility. We have struggled long and diligently with particular sins and moral weaknesses... We know we sin, and we come to the edge of despair: Where is the victory in Jesus others talk so glowingly about?”
 - ...have you ever felt this way, as I have? we struggle with temptation & sin, and too often fail. Then we get discouraged because victorious living escapes us.
- But, as Akers goes on to say, “[The problem is] We have concentrated on victory to the detriment of **obedience**. Careful self-examination shows we are *not obedient*. The truth is, we can’t merely give our sins to Jesus; we must give ourselves to him. When we give ourselves to Jesus, he gives his Holy Spirit to us. The Spirit **empowers us** for obedient living, which is the dynamic of a holy life.”
- think of it this way: if you were to stand beside a **747** jet on the tarmac, its massive weight and size would make you think this beast could never break the holds of gravity. But when the power of its engines combines with the laws of aerodynamics, the plane is able to lift itself to 35,000 feet and travel at 600 miles per hour. Gravity is still pulling on the plane, but as long as it **obeys** the laws of aerodynamics, it can break **free** from the gravitational pull of the earth.
- the downward ‘gravity’ pull of our sinful nature is still strong, but obedience to God enables His Holy Spirit to free us from that pull
- let’s remember what Paul wrote at the end of Romans 7 & the beginning of chapter 8:

“Oh, what a terrible predicament I’m in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature? Thank God! It has been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. **He has set me free**. So there is now **no condemnation** awaiting those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the **power** of the life-giving **Spirit**-- and this power is mine through Christ Jesus-- has **freed me**

from the vicious circle of sin and death. ... So now we can obey God's laws **if we follow after the Holy Spirit** and no longer obey the old evil nature within us. Those who *let themselves* be controlled by their lower natures live only to please themselves, but those who *follow after the Holy Spirit* find themselves doing those things that please God. Following after the Holy Spirit leads to **life and peace**, but following after the old nature *leads to death* because the old sinful nature within us is against God. It never did obey God's laws and it never will.

Paul goes on to say: “That's why those who are still under the control of their old sinful selves, bent on following their old evil desires, can never please God. *But you are not like that.* You are controlled by your new nature if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that if anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ living in him, he is not a Christian at all.)”

- “following after the Holy Spirit” is the same as “walking in the Spirit” (the phrase Paul uses in Gal. 5:16)
- the secret to **victorious, successful** Christian living is **walking in the Spirit.**”

So...How do you do that?

Let's take a look at some...

E. Practical Steps for Success

- “walking in the Spirit” requires two things:

- (a) studying the **Word** of God so that you can know the **mind** of the Spirit, and
- (b) **communing** with God so you can know the **will** of the Spirit.

[1st] *Colossians 3:16* helps us with the **first step**:

—“Let the **Word of Christ** dwell in you richly.”

Being filled with the Spirit is the same as letting the Word dwell in you richly because as the Word dominates your thinking, it dominates your actions. As the Word moves through your heart and mind, the Spirit of God directs your life.

- 1 John 2:14b makes the connection clear – “I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the **word of God** lives in you, and you have **overcome** the evil one.” (NIV)

[2nd] And *Ephesians 5:18-20* helps us with the **second step**:—“Be filled with the Spirit ... singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.”

...in other words, communing with God, praying to Him, praising Him & thanking Him

- these are 2 specific commands: “*let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly*” and “*Be filled with the Spirit*” – obeying them will increasingly enable us to walk in the Spirit, to produce good fruit, & to be truly successful

Conclusion

Let's wrap up this session with an illustration from the cuckoo bird – they may be cute in clocks, but in real life...not so much!...

Did you know that the famous **cuckoo** bird never builds its own nest? It flies around until it sees another nest with eggs in it and no mother bird around. The cuckoo quickly lands, lays its eggs there, and flies away. The thrush, for example, whose nest has been invaded, comes back. Not being the brightest bird in the forest, she gets to work hatching the eggs without noticing the extra egg.

What happens? Four little thrushes hatch, but one large cuckoo hatches. The cuckoo is two or three times the size of the thrushes. When Mrs. Thrush brings to the nest one large, juicy worm, she finds *four tiny* thrush mouths, one *cavernous* cuckoo mouth. Guess who gets the worm? ...Ah yes, it's not rocket science. In short order, a *full-sized* thrush ends up feeding a **baby** cuckoo that is three times as big as it is.

Over time, the bigger cuckoo gets bigger and bigger, and the smaller thrushes get smaller and smaller. Apparently you can sometimes find a baby cuckoo's nest by just walking along a hedge until you find dead little thrushes, which the cuckoo throws out one at a time.

Paul teaches in Romans 8:5-8 that spiritually speaking, we have **two natures in one nest**. The nature that we go on **feeding** will **grow**, and the nature that we go on **starving** will **diminish**.

- so which will it be?

- our **sinful** nature with its **fleshly** destructive desires?

- or our **new** nature with its **godly** productive desires?

...successful victorious Christian living comes down to daily **obedience**: which nature are we feeding?

- some of us know we've been making the **wrong daily choices** in this area – the results may not yet have been as dramatic as Abimelech's story, but deep down we know we're heading into difficulty and maybe even disaster

- if that is you, today can be a new beginning for you...maybe it's time to make a commitment to obedience – to getting back into God's Word and into communion with Him

- God's Holy Spirit wants to fill you with His power to live a life truly victorious and successful ...let Him!