

Creekside Community Church
Strange Tales, "The Man Who Wanted to be King" (Judges 8:30-9:57)
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We're making our way through the Old Testament book of Judges in a series I call "Strange Tales," because Judges contains some of the strangest and most violent stories in the Bible. The book opens with "After the death of Joshua..." and closes with, "In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes," and covers the 400 years between Joshua and King David. These are Israel's dark ages because they keep abandoning God to worship idols which always results in their bondage to the pagan nations surrounding them until they cry out to God for help and He raises up a judge, a military hero who delivers them. Once they're delivered, they go right back to their idols and the cycle begins again. For 400 years, Israel sinks lower and lower spiritually, socially, economically and morally – which we see in chapter 9. Because in chapter 9, Israel never repents and the leader who appears isn't sent by God but appoints himself, setting up a tragedy Shakespeare could have written. This morning we'll look at the strange tale of the man who wanted to be king – because this story tells us a lot about ourselves.

Vs. 30 *"Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives."* If you've been with us, you'll remember that we spent the last three weeks looking at the judge named Gideon and how God used him to free Israel from the Midianites. As a result, the people asked Gideon to be their king, attributing to him what God had actually done. To his credit, Gideon refused, saying that God was their king. However, even though Gideon did not want the responsibility of being king but he certainly wanted the privileges. He wouldn't accept the office but he certainly began to behave like he was king. Kings had multiple wives and Gideon had so many that he fathered 70 sons and who knows how many daughters. Vs 31 *"His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech."* Gideon not only has a bunch of wives but he also has a concubine in the town of Shechem in Northern Israel in the area which was called Samaria in the days of Jesus. In our culture, we would call a concubine a mistress and since Shechem was largely a Canaanite city, Gideon's concubine was probably a Canaanite woman. She and Gideon have a son which Gideon names Abimelech which means "the son of the king" which shows us what Gideon thought of himself. Vs.32-35 *"And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is,) Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel. As always in the book of Judges, once the judge who delivered Israel from their bondage dies, Israel goes right back to their idols and this time, completely forgetting the Lord, Gideon's family and the good Gideon did for them. Chapter 9:1-3 *"And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives, and spoke to them and to the whole clan of the household of his mother's father, saying, "Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh." And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our relative."* When your dad names you "son of the king" your career path is pretty well marked out. And when you're the outsider, a halfbreed and the son of Gideon's concubine, ostracized and looked down on by the rest of the family, your motivation to succeed is amplified by your desire to get revenge. So as soon as Gideon dies, Abimelech returns to his hometown and begins to foment a rebellion against Gideon's family who are ruling the region. First, he wins over his own relatives and then they win over the leadership of Shechem. "Why should Gideon's good-for-nothing brats be our rulers? We've got our own son of Gideon and he's one of us." Vs 4 *"They gave him seventy {pieces} of silver from the house of Baal-berith (the local temple of Baal) with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him."* The town council gives Abimelech the cash he needs to hire a gang of cutthroats and mercenaries. Vs. 5 *"Then 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."* Not only do the people who were helped by Gideon forget him, they finance the murder of his children. Now that the local rulers are dead, the residents of Shechem can have the leader they want and Abimelech becomes the first king of Israel –*

kind of. Vs. 6-15 *"All the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem. Now when they told Jotham, (Gideon's youngest boy who escaped the massacre at Ophrah) he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and called out. Thus he said to them, "Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you. Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!' But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored, and go to wave over the trees?' Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come, reign over us!' But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?' Then the trees said to the vine, 'You come, reign over us!' But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my new wine, which cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?' Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' The bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'* Jotham has a strong voice and he shouts down to Shechem from Mount Gerizim and tells this little fable about the trees, the point of which is be careful what you ask for. Gideon refused when the people wanted to make him king, saying the Lord is king over you, and apparently other worthy men also refused to be king, just as in the fable, the fruitful trees refuse to leave what God has given them to do to rule over the other trees. So the trees ask a weed to be their king and Jotham is obviously referring to his half-brother, Abimelech. Vs. 16- 21 *"Now therefore, if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved-- for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; but you have risen against my father's house today and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your relative-- if then you have dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech."* Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer and remained there because of Abimelech his brother." One theme that runs throughout the Old Testament is that God's people get the king they deserve. When the people repent and turn to God, God raises up a righteous king and the nation is blessed. When the people worship idols and appoint their own king, they are never happy with the result. The book of Judges describes the 400 year downward spiral of Israel with each generation further from God than the previous one. Up to this point in Judges, when Israel's idolatry plunges them into bondage, they eventually turn back to God and he sends a judge to deliver them. This time, there is no calling on God and the leader who shows up is self-appointed. Israel is trying to solve her problems on her own and she is not going to be happy with the result.

Vs. 22-24 *"Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, Judg 9:24 so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood might be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers."* When you lay a rotten foundation, don't be surprised when your house collapses. Abimelech schemed with the residents of Shechem to assassinate Gideon's family so that he would be the undisputed king of the region and for three years it looked like he got away with it. But God is not mocked and now He begins to bring the deeds of Abimelech and his co-conspirators back on their own heads. The evil spirit sent by God to cause a rift between Abimelech and the residents of Shechem was probably a demon; something we see God doing numerous times in the Old Testament. Proverbs 16:4 says that "God has made everything for His purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil." God is sovereign and is able to use even evil things to accomplish His good purpose. The great illustration of that of course is the cross. God uses the wicked and unjust execution of His own son at the hands of evil men as the means of our salvation. In this case, God uses a demon to do what demons do; create division and distrust and hatred between people and to cause a rift between Abimelech and the people he relies upon to maintain his rule. Vs. 25 *"The men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who might pass by them along the road; and it was told to Abimelech. The "men of Shechem" probably refers to the gang of cutthroats Abimelech hired to murder Gideon's boys. They've grown tired of him lording himself over them as king and so they set up their own little crime empire up in the hills. Shechem is a commercial center and dependent on the caravans which come through town and with Abimelech unable to guard the trade routes, his kingdom is beginning to unravel; and the reader knows why. God is unraveling it. Vs. 26 "Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his relatives, and crossed over into Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their trust in him. The*

fickle citizens of Shechem find a new leader they like better than Abimelech. Vs. 27-28 *"They went out into the field and gathered {the grapes of} their vineyards and trod {them,} and held a festival; and they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank and cursed Abimelech.* At this point, Abimelech's approval ratings in Shechem are around 0%. At the New Years parties which were celebrated at the harvest, people are cursing Abimelech. Vs. 28 *"Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? Gaal says, "When you think about it, what connection does Abimelech really have with this community? "Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and {is} Zebul {not} his lieutenant? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him?"* Gaal uses the same argument Abimelech used when he came to Shechem. Abimelech argued that he was a hometown boy and that's why the people of his hometown should support his bid to be king. Now that Abimelech's approval ratings are in the basement, Gaal comes along with the same argument. "Remember, Abimelech isn't one of us – he's a son of Gideon, a foreigner. Don't you think we should serve the descendants of Hamor who founded this city?" Hamor was a Caananite back in the days of Jacob and Gaal claims to be from his family. "I'm a descendant of the original Shechemites – which is about as valid as Abimelech's argument. "Make me king because I'm one of you." Vs. 29 *"Would, therefore, that this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech."* Gaal does the same thing to Abimelech that Abimelech did to the sons of Gideon; persuading the citizens of Shechem to rebel and make him king. *"And he said to Abimelech, "Increase your army and come out."* The people of Shechem agree with Gaal and he challenges Abimelech to a battle. Vs. 30-33 *"When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger burned. He sent messengers to Abimelech deceitfully (or secretly), saying, "Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem; and behold, they are stirring up the city against you. Now therefore, arise by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field. In the morning, as soon as the sun is up, you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and behold, when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you shall do to them whatever you can."* Zebul is the mayor of Shechem and the loyal lieutenant of Abimelech and he secretly sends word to his boss that Gaal and his relatives are stirring up a rebellion in Shechem and that Abimelech needs to bring his army, surround the city by night and attack at dawn. Vs. 34-36 *"So Abimelech and all the people who {were} with him arose by night and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies. Now Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the city gate; and Abimelech and the people who {were} with him arose from the ambush. When Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, (who apparently was an early riser as well) "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains."* Gaal thinks he sees troop movements in the hills above the town in the early morning light. *"But Zebul said to him, "You are seeing the shadow of the mountains as {if they were} men."* Zebul doesn't want to give away Abimelech's surprise attack so he tells Gaal that he's seeing things. "That's just the shadow of the mountains moving as the sun comes up." Gaal isn't convinced and continues to peer into the distance. Vs. 37 *"Gaal spoke again and said, "Behold, people are coming down from the highest part of the land, and one company comes by the way of the diviners' oak."* By this time, Gaal can clearly see Abimelech's army running toward them and Zebul doesn't have to pretend any longer. Vs. 38-40 *"Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your boasting now with which you said, 'Who is Abimelech that we should serve him?' Is this not the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them!" So Gaal went out before the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. (The men of Shechem follow Gaal into battle.) Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him; and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate."* Gaal and the men of Shechem are soundly defeated. The bodies of the wounded lie all the way to the gates of the city. Vs. 41 *Then Abimelech remained at Arumah, (After he wins the battle, instead of attacking Shechem into which the survivors of the battle have retreated, Abimelech and his army withdraw to the town of Arumah) but Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives so that they could not remain in Shechem."* Gaal tries to hide behind the walls of Shechem from Abimelech but Gaal won't let him and he drives Gaal and his relatives out of the city. Vs. 42-43 *"Now it came about the next day, that the people went out to the field, and it was told to Abimelech. So he took his people and divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the field; when he looked and saw the people coming out from the city, he arose against them and slew them."* The following day, the people of Shechem think it's safe to leave the town and they go outside, probably to collect their dead and wounded, only to be attacked again by Abimelech. Vs. 44, *"Then Abimelech and the company who was with him dashed forward and stood in the entrance of the city gate; the other two companies then dashed against all who {were} in the field and slew them."* Abimelech divides his army into thirds. The third he's leading position themselves between the city and the men of Shechem who have come out so they can't repeat what they did the day before and retreat back behind the walls of the city. The rest of his army then kills all that remains of the army of Shechem – the people who made Abimelech king. Vs. 45 *"Abimelech fought against the city all that*

day, and he captured the city and killed the people who {were} in it; then he razed the city and sowed it with salt. Once Abimelech has killed all the citizens of Shechem he found outside the city walls, he turns his attention to Shechem itself, captures the city, kills all its citizens and then sows salt in the ground surrounding it so that no crops can grow there. Abimelech knows how to hold a grudge. Vs.46 *"When all the leaders of the tower of Shechem heard of {it,} they entered the inner chamber of the temple of El-berith. As soon as the leaders of Shechem know that the city has fallen, they all flee to a tower in the center of the city which functioned both as a temple and as a citadel for situations like this. The leaders and their families lock themselves into this impregnable tower. Vs.47-49 "It was told Abimelech that all the leaders of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. So 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 branch from the trees, and lifted it and laid {it} on his shoulder. Then he said to the people who {were} with him, "What you have seen me do, hurry {and} do likewise." All the people also cut down each one his branch and followed Abimelech, and put {them} on the inner chamber and set the inner chamber on fire over those {inside,} so that all the men of the tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women."* Abimelech and his men burn down the fortress, killing the thousand or so people hiding inside. Vs. 50 *"Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he camped against Thebez and captured it."* Thebez is about 10 miles northeast of Shechem and one of four towns under Abimelech's reign. Apparently they also had joined in the rebellion against Abimelech and so after defeating his enemies at Shechem, Abimelech proceeds to Thebez which he quickly conquers. 51-53 *"But there was a strong tower in the center of the city, and all the men and women with all the leaders of the city fled there and shut themselves in; and they went up on the roof of the tower. So Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it, and approached the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. (just like he had done at Shechem) But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull."* Millstones were handy tools for grinding grain into flour and this woman must have carried her millstone into the tower because she was afraid it would be stolen by the invading army. Once on top of tower, she finds a better use for her millstone and drops it on Abimelech's head. Vs. 54 *"Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that it will not be said of me, 'A woman slew him.'" So the young man pierced him through, and he died."* In that culture, being killed by a woman was a great dishonor for a warrior. So even though he's mortally wounded, Abimelech orders his armor bearer to put him to death. Vs.55 *"When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, each departed to his home."*

The story of the man who wanted to be king is a long, strange story which sounds more like something from *The Godfather* saga than what we'd expect from the Bible. So what does the author of this history want his readers to learn from the tale of Abimelech? The point of this story is found in the final two verses, verses 56-57 *"Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father in killing his seventy brothers. Also God returned all the wickedness of the men of Shechem on their heads, and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came upon them."* In a story in which God seems completely absent, He appears at the end, repaying Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem for the murder of Gideon's sons. The author of Judges wants his readers to see that even when God seems absent, we live in a moral universe where every act is either rewarded or judged. Abimelech wanted to be king and was willing to do whatever it took to become king and the citizens of Shechem helped him do it. But the fact that we might achieve what we want by evil means doesn't ensure that we can hold on to it, and God brought the deeds of Abimelech and the Shechemites back on their own heads. Paul writes in Galatians 6:7 *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."* Don't be deceived about what? Forgetting God, taking Him lightly or forgetting about Him all together; not taking God into consideration when we make our plans. Ecclesiastics 12:14 tells us, *"For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."* And because God sees and God repays, what is happening in my life today is largely the result of choices I made in the past. Paul says, *"...for WHATEVER a man sows, this he will also reap."* Sowing and reaping (or planting and harvesting) are agricultural terms. I can only reap what I've sown. I can't plant orange seeds and get an apple tree. If I plant impatiens, I'm not going to get roses. I can only harvest what I plant and the law of sowing and reaping is not only true in agriculture; it's true of everything we do. Paul writes, *"Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."* What am I harvesting today? Only what I planted in the past. That's why Proverbs 12:14 says *"The deeds of a man's hand will return to him."* Jesus said that if I'm merciful, I'll be shown mercy; if I condemn, I'll be condemned; if I give, I'll be given to; if I withhold, it will be withheld from me. The deeds that I sow, will come back to me. What did Abimelech sow? Rebellion, division and murder. What did he reap? Rebellion, division and murder. Abimelech led the people of Shechem to rebel and to

assassinate the sons of Gideon and to make him king, and God created a rebellion against Abimelech by the very people who put him in power. What did the citizens of Shechem sow? Disloyalty and murder. They turned their backs on Gideon and his family after he risked his life to free them from the Midianites and financed the murder of Gideon's sons. What did they reap? Disloyalty and murder. After being disloyal to Gideon's family, they were disloyal to Abimelech and followed Gaal and ended up being murdered themselves. And all this began years before with Gideon wanting to benefit personally from the way God had used him to deliver Israel. He refused when the people ask him to be their king, but begin acting like a king anyway by demanding tribute, making an idol which brought Gideon even more wealth as all Israel came to worship it instead of the Lord who delivered them from the Midianites; and by taking multiple wives, having 70 sons, and acting like his family were the hereditary rulers of the land. And to top it all off, Gideon has a mistress and a son whom he never accepts into his family. Everything that happens in chapter 9 ultimately began with Gideon. Three years pass before Gideon's youngest son, Jotham's warning of judgment and the actual judgment happens; three years of Abimelech's untroubled rule. It looks to everyone like his sins paid off, that he got what he wanted. Because we always reap after we sow – sometimes long after – but whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. God will bring every act to judgment, rewarding every good act and punishing every evil act.

Now if whatever we sow, we also reap is true, then there is much less luck or chance in our lives than we often assume. Most of what happens to us is the result of our past choices. That's why Proverbs 19:3 says, *"The foolishness of man ruins his way, and his heart rages against the LORD."* Our life is ruined by our own bad choices but we blame God. "Why are you doing this to me, God? Why am I so unlucky?" I find that there are very few negative things that happen to me for which I am not at least partially responsible. I coached swimming at San Leandro High and each year we held a fun, preseason relay meet at our pool for all the other teams in our league where every event was a relay. I was a new coach and I really wanted the kids to think I was cool and so I was kind of the good time coach that first year, letting the students goof off and not pushing them too much. I was used to dealing with master level swimmers – adults who wanted to work hard. The relay meet was a disaster. Some of our swimmers acted like idiots, treating every race like a joke; doing flips off the starting blocks, crazy strokes, looking less like a team than a group of out of control barbarians in Speedos. The other coaches and teams were furious and I was so embarrassed. Why is this happening to me? Because I allowed it to happen. I allowed an undisciplined, good time atmosphere and never established myself as the authority; and harvested exactly what I planted. Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. And if I don't like the harvest, the first question I need to ask myself, "What did I sow?" God is not absent. He is involved in every detail of our life and He repays the deeds of our hands. If this is true, then we cannot succeed or be happy or productive in this life as long as we ignore God because He will bring the deeds of our hands back to us.

And this isn't good news. If the quality of my life depends upon the choices I make, then unless I'm consistently making good choices, my life will be awful. Is there any escape from this cycle of sowing and reaping; planting and harvesting, cause and effect? The answer is yes. If Abimelech or the people of Shechem would have repented for the evil they had done, if they would have come to God and confessed their sins and asked Him for His forgiveness, He would have redeemed them and the situation. Look at Psalm 103:10-14 *"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are {but} dust."* God is a forgiving God to those who take Him seriously; who fear Him and turn to Him and ask Him for forgiveness and help. That's what salvation is – being released from both the penalty and power of sin. I used to work with a guy and every lunch was the same. He'd take out his brown bag, open it and say, "Oh no – peanut butter sandwiches again!" This went on day after day. So finally I asked him, "If you don't like peanut butter sandwiches, why don't you ask your wife to make something else?" He replied, "Oh, my wife doesn't make these – I do." I came to Christ when I realized that I was making my own peanut butter sandwiches. I was creating all of my problems and I couldn't stop myself. That's when I realized I needed a Savior- someone to save me from myself and my stupid self-destructive choices. I had met some Christians who were different from any Christian I ever met. They told me that Christianity is not being good; that we're all great sinners but Christ is a great Savior. And if I asked Him to be my Savior, He would come into my life, forgive my sins and make me a new person. I did and He did. And as He gave

me the desire and the power to make better choices, my life began to improve and I began to experience joy and peace of mind I had never experienced before. We reap what we sow. You can continue to make bad choices and pray for crop failure – or we can turn to the One who not only forgives our sins but who frees us from those sins. But nothing in life changes until we change; because the choices we make determine the life that we have. And only Christ has the power to change us.

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