



Central Peninsula Church

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Judges 8:33–9:57
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What Goes Around Comes Around

You've heard the saying, "What goes around comes around." We use that line to encourage good deeds and warn against bad ones. It's the boomerang theory of life. What you throw up in the air will come back to help you or to haunt you. If you take the time to help another person, if you operate with truth and integrity, eventually that will come back to bless you. If you rip someone off, sooner or later that deed will return and hit you in the face. What goes around comes around.

But sometimes I wonder if it's really true. Sometimes I wonder if life really plays that fairly. Sometimes I see the good guys paying a steep price for their integrity, and the bad guys having all the fun. Sometimes I can relate to the ancient poet who wrote in the book of Psalms that when he saw the success of the wicked he was envious. It seemed to him that their life was easy and carefree. At one point he even cried out, **"Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure...all day long I've been plagued; I've been punished every morning"** (Ps. 73:13-14).

This morning we come to Judges chapter 9. It's a story about a man named Abimelech and a group of people from a place called Shechem. It's a story that sort of tests the theory: what goes around comes around.

I. When people forget God, they abandon truth and integrity.

Last week we finished the story of Gideon. We saw how Gideon was used by God to deliver the Israelites from a hoard of Midianites. It was a great victory against great odds. We also saw how Gideon compromised later in life. He rightly refused to be made king, but he acted like a king. He became wealthy. He had many wives and a mistress who gave him 70 sons. Nevertheless, during Gideon's lifetime the memory of his victory stayed alive. People remembered that the Lord was the one who had given them the victory. But after Gideon's death, things changed.

"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" (Judges 8:33-35).

Israel develops spiritual amnesia. They fail to remember the Lord and all that he had done for them. They fall back into idolatry. They become enamored with Baal worship, and particularly Baal-Berith, which means "lord of the covenant." So they break their covenant with the Lord and make a new one with Baal. That's what happens to us. When we fail to remember what the Lord has done for us; how he has rescued us from sin and death, we find other things to take his place; other sources

of security; other sources of meaning and identity. But that wasn't all Israel forgot. They also forgot about Gideon. It says they failed to show kindness to his family. In a secondary sense, he was their deliverer too. So their neglect of God is mirrored in their neglect of his servant. They failed to act with truth and integrity towards both.

Chapter 9 tells us more about Gideon's household. Remember, Abimelech was his son by a mistress he kept in Shechem. No doubt Abimelech grew up feeling like he didn't belong with the rest of Gideon's sons. He wasn't exactly legitimate. So he comes before all of his people in Shechem and offers them a deal.

"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.' They gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him" (vv. 2-4).

Notice he says, "I really have your best interest in mind." But, of course, this is all about personal ambition. The leaders of Shechem think, "This guy is making sense!" so they give him a little start up money from the church bank account to establish his leadership. He takes the money and hires some thugs. Then he makes a little house call.

"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. 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" (vv. 5-6).

Abimelech slaughters 70 of his half-brothers on a single stone. The people make him king "by the oak of the pillar that was in Shechem." That, by the way, was a holy place. That was where Abraham had pitched his first tent in Canaan and where the Lord had appeared to him with the promise that this land would belong to him and his descendants. This was where Joshua brought together a gathering in which all the tribes of Israel heard his challenge not to forsake the Lord and serve other gods, but to serve the Lord with "truth and integrity." Scripture says that 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 oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord"** (Joshua 24:26). So the stone that was a set up to help them remember God's law became the stone upon which his law was

broken; a stone of slaughter.

It shouldn't surprise us. This is a story that's been told repeatedly throughout history. Adolph Hitler resented his father and rose to power by eliminating opponents and making deals with power structures that the German people believed were good for them. Sadaam Hussein did the same thing. As with Abimelech, most often these things are legitimized in holy places and in the name of God. On a smaller scale, men and women rise to power in businesses and even churches in the same way. They gain support by telling people what they want to hear. They eliminate the competition. They set up shop and thank God for all his goodness. They take that which is holy and use it to mutilate justice.

The difficult thing is, at least for people of faith, that God seems to sit by and watch from the grandstands. God allows evil to have its day. God watches as 70 innocent men are slaughtered on one stone. We see all of this and we wonder, is it really true? If what goes around comes around, it sure takes a long time.

II. When people abandon truth and integrity, God warns them.

But there is one small sign of hope—Jothom. Gideon's youngest son managed to escape. When he heard the news about his brothers, he climbed up on one of the slopes of Mt. Gerazim, overlooking Shechem. Jothom stands above them and cries out, **"Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you"** (v. 7). In the late 1700's open air preachers like George Whitefield were able to speak to thousands of people at one time without the use of a microphone. Jothom takes advantage of the natural acoustics in the valley below and cries out, "Listen to me that God may listen to you. When you hear what I'm about to say, you will know that you have some explaining to do."

He then goes on to tell them a parable. Parables are powerful because they draw in the listener; they break through our defenses. They would have tuned him out if he just said, "You shouldn't have killed my brothers!" So he comes at them indirectly, with a seemingly harmless story about trees. It's found in vv. 8-15. He says, "Once upon a time, the trees wanted to anoint a king. They offered the job to the olive tree but he was too busy making olive oil. They went to the fig tree, but he was too busy making figs. They went to the vine but he was too busy making people happy with wine." Finally, they offered the throne to the bramble, and look how he responds in v. 15. **"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.'"** In essence, the bramble says, "If you're really serious about this, then let me provide a little shade for you, but if things go wrong, don't forget that I'm good at catching fire and even the best of you had better watch out." Of course, the parable is all about what they did with Abimelech. And what it reveals is that he was both worthless and dangerous. Bramble provides shade for no one; all it does is present a fire hazard!

Jothom gets right to the point in vv. 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."

These are hard words, but true. Notice how twice he mentions "truth and integrity." With those words he warns them: "My father risked his neck for you. If you've acted in truth and integrity in killing his sons and making the son of his mistress king, then go throw a party, but if not, watch out." Notice what he says will happen: Fire will come forth from him and burn you up, and then fire will come out of you and burn him up. It's called mutual destruction.

Some have called this a curse. The strange thing is he was on top of Mt. Gerazim. Mt. Gerazim was the place where Moses told the people of Israel, "When you come into the Promised Land, go to Shechem, where there are two hills overlooking the city. There I want you to read out loud God's law with all of its blessing and curses; blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Read the curses from Mt. Ebal and read the blessings from Mt. Gerazim." But here he is on top of Mt. Gerazim, and instead of a blessing he seems to pronounce a curse. Or is it? Maybe this is a blessing. Maybe it's a blessing when God raises up someone like Jothom to speak the truth. Maybe that truth is God's way of reaching out to us.

Sometimes it's hard to hear the truth about ourselves. Mrs. Fisher, a fourth grade teacher, was recovering from surgery and got a card from her class. It said, "Dear Mrs. Fisher, Your fourth grade class wishes you a speedy recovery...by a vote of 15-14." Sometimes it's hard, but that's exactly what we need. Do you have someone in your life who you love and trust, and who you know will tell you the truth, even when it hurts? That's not a curse, that's a blessing. That's God's grace. Walk with them. Listen to them. Proverbs says, **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy"** (Prov. 27:6).

Thank God for men and women like Jothom. Maybe you're being called to be a truth teller. That's a hard thing to do. You can get in trouble for that. Shortly after the Communist Revolution, a spokesman for the party visited a peasant village to promote communism. He said, "Thanks to the party, we've increased wheat production by 100 percent." One little man stood up in the back and said, "My name is Menski, and I would like to know where all the wheat is?" The next year the same official came to the same village with the same propaganda. This time he said, "We have increased wheat production by 200 percent." A little man stood up in the back and said, "My name is Menski, and I have one question, Where is all that wheat?" The third year came

and the same guy came to the same people and gave the same talk, only this time he said wheat production is up 300 percent. A little fellow stood up in the back. This time, before he could speak, the official said, "I know, you're Menski, and..." The little fellow replied, "No, my name is Polaski and I have a question. Where is Menski?"

It's hard to tell the truth. It takes courage and faith. Sometimes there is a price to pay. Guys like Menski disappear. I can imagine Jothom's knees were knocking as he stood up there. It says when he was finished he escaped and fled and ran to Beer. He probably felt like he needed a beer! But that's it for Jothom. He disappears from the pages of Scripture and never returns. Abimelech is still the one shining in the sun. Verse 22 says for three years he ruled over Israel. What's gone around still hasn't come around.

III. God upholds truth and integrity by using evil to repay evil.

But evil has a way of self-destructing and evil men will soon enough be at each other's throats. Even God himself had a hand in this.

"Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, 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" (vv. 23-24).

I would imagine that eventually this partnership would have self-destructed anyway, but God speeds things along. We're reminded that all creatures are under his command, not just angels but fallen angels. As a result, seeds of distrust develop between Abimelech and the people of Shechem. Money often plays a part in these things, and they begin to disrupt the trade routes that benefited Abimelech.

Finally, a new leader comes along. Look at v. 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."** They were so confident in this guy that they threw a party in the house of Baal. It was a wild affair. At the end of v. 27 it says **"they ate and drank and cursed Abimelech."** And then Gaal gives a little speech.

"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 Zebul not his lieutenant? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? Would, therefore, that this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech.' And he said to Abimelech, 'Increase your army and come out'" (vv. 28-29).

Events move quickly from there. Zebul, who was Abimelech's city manager, told Abimelech all about Gaal and this rebellion. He advises Abimelech to come and attack the city by night. Abimelech and his soldiers do just that and manage to defeat Gaal and drive him and his people out of Shechem. But Abimelech isn't finished. Look at vv. 42-45.

"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. 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 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."

The next day the people of Shechem figured business as usual. They head out to their fields for another day of work, but Abimelech wipes them all out. The only ones left are the leaders, who take refuge in a tower, which was where they worshipped Baal. Look what happens to them.

"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" (vv. 48-49).

Remember the bramble? Now it's on fire! Just as Jothom said, "let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem." But he also said something about a similar fire consuming Abimelech.

Look what happens in vv. 50-52.

"Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he camped against Thebez and captured it. 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."

Apparently, the people of Thebez had also rebelled against Abimelech. But when Abimelech tried to set them on fire as well, the unexpected happened. Look at v. 53. **"But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull."** I tell you, these women in Judges. They're dangerous! Abimelech is struck by a millstone thrown with amazing accuracy by a woman. The "upper millstone" was a stone you could easily hold, about ten inches long, that rode back and forth over the larger lower millstone as the grain was crushed. Grinding wheat was the work of women, and this unnamed woman doubtless took the stone with her as a potential weapon. Since dying at the hand of a woman was considered a disgrace, Abimelech, commanded his armor-bearer to kill him immediately, which he does.

End of story. But the writer wants to make sure we get the point of the story. So he gives it to us in vv. 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.” The point of the story is very clear: What goes around DOES eventually come around. It's all symbolized by a stone. At the start of the story Abimelech slaughters 70 men on one stone. That's what "goes around." But at the end of the story one woman takes one stone and slaughters Abimelech. That stone "came back around" and killed him. Sooner or later that's what happens. It may take awhile. It may even happen in ways that surprise us. Sometimes it's not the good guys beating the bad guys. It's the bad guys beating the bad guys. It's a bad virus attacking a bad virus. You see, this story reveals God as sovereign. He's in charge. All things are at his disposal, including evil spirits and evil people.

CONCLUSION

We ask the question, so what? What does it really matter? Let me give you four life lessons that we can learn from this.

First of all, when evil is having its way, evaluate your part in it. Remember that Gideon had compromised. Abimelech was the product of his compromise. Furthermore, after his death, Israel had fallen into idolatry and what happened at Shechem was the result. Ask yourself some hard questions: how have I contributed to this? What have I done, either directly or indirectly, to bring us to this place?

Second, when evil is having its way, be willing to stand up for truth and integrity. Maybe the reason God spared Jotham was so he could be a voice for truth and integrity. Ironically, no one really listened, but his words were shown to be true. We need to be truth tellers. Yesterday, I was standing in line for some coffee and I end up talking to a man about spiritual things. He actually told me that he talks to plants and animals! He believes that God is One and we are all part of that Oneness. I asked him about Jesus. Does he ever just pray to Jesus? He said to me, "Funny you mention that. I was talking to Zeus the other day and he told me I should talk to Jesus too." I told him, "You should listen to Jesus' advice. That's the truth."

Third, when evil is having its way, don't panic. You don't have to take matters into your own hands. You don't have to make it all right. You don't have to try to align yourself with some man who you think will take you to the top. You put your trust in God, not man. Sooner or later, evil will self-destruct. If God so chooses, he will even help it along.

Finally, when evil is having its way, continue to invest your life in what is good and right. If it's true that what goes around comes around, then it's as true for kindness and goodness as it is for evil.

A story is told about a man named Fleming, a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby swamp. He dropped his tools and ran to the swamp. There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Fleming saved the boy from what could have been a slow and terrifying

death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman came out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Fleming had saved. "I want to repay you," said the nobleman. "You saved my son's life."

"No, I can't accept payment for what I did," the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer.

At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the home. "Is that your son?" the nobleman asked.

"Yes," the farmer replied proudly.

"I'll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my own son will enjoy. If the boy is anything like his father, he'll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of."

And that he did. Fleming's son attended the very best schools and in time, he graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman's son who was saved from the swamp was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life this time? Penicillin. The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son's name? Sir Winston Churchill.

Whether or not that story is true to fact, it illustrates a point. What goes around comes around. If you invest your life in evil, sooner or later, whether in this life or the one to come, God will see to it that evil will come back and hit you in the face. But if you invest your life in truth and integrity and kindness, sooner or later, if not in this life, in the next your life will be blessed with the same.

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