

## You Really Need a King:

*Gideon & Abimelech: Counterfeit Kings* (Judges 8:1-9:57)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 9, 2016

### Introduction

- ❖ Some of the greatest stories of all time contain the same plot device. In some shape or form, there's a kingdom. There's a throne. And there's someone sitting on it that shouldn't be there – a usurper. And that creates the very tension that drives along the plot.
  - ▶ So you've got the story of **Robin Hood** where Prince John has usurped the throne of his brother Richard the Lionheart. Then there's Denethor in the **Lord of the Rings**, the steward ruling Gondor because the rightful king has yet to return. And of course there's Scar in **The Lion King**. He killed the king, his brother, and drove away the heir. **The plots of these famous stories are driven by the same conflict: The wrong person is in charge. A counterfeit king is on the throne.**
  
- ❖ The plot line of Judges is no different. After Joshua dies, the people of God go through a carousel of leaders. None of them last. None of them are ideal. They all fall short in one way or another. Now up until chapter 8, none of these leaders masqueraded as a kingly figure. Most were military figures who helped throw off foreign oppressors. But here in chapter 8, we have the first mention of having a king over Israel.
  - ▶ **The people ask Gideon to be their king.** To rule over them. They offer a dynastic rule, where kingship will pass down to his sons and grandsons. It's true he declines the offer to be their king, yet he goes on to act like one anyways. And his story, which looked to be going up, suddenly takes a nosedive into scenes of brutality and idolatry.
  
- ❖ And then in chapter 9, we see an illegitimate son of Gideon rise up and grasp for kingship. Now if you know your Israelite history, you know that King Saul is officially the first king of Israel. **But Abimelech is technically the first to be called a "king of Israel"**. But the whole point is that he's a counterfeit king. He's an imposter, a fraud, a usurper. A true king is the king that God chooses. That God raises up. That God sends.
  - ▶ And by the end of the book, in the very last verse, we read these words, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" (21:25) **In other words, everyone acted like they were their own king. Everyone was a usurper. Everyone was an imposter on the throne.** There was no true king in Israel.
  
- ❖ Like I said, that's the plot device driving the story in Judges, and if you keep reading in your Bible, it takes you directly into the book of Ruth (about the great-great grandmother of King David), and then it takes you into the books of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings (about the rise of David and his descendants who ruled a divided kingdom).
  - ▶ **But then how does 2 Kings end?** Ever think about that? It ends with the northern kingdom completely wiped out. The southern kingdom defeated with most of its inhabitants exiled into captivity. But it says in the last chapter, "*And over the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, he appointed Gedaliah ... governor.*" (25:21) **In other words, the book ends with still another imposter in charge. We still have a counterfeit king.**

- ❖ And then the OT ends with these question still unanswered. The tension is still there. Who's in charge here? Whose rule is it? Who's the real king? Who's supposed to be on the throne? These questions are still being posed today to each and every one of us.
  - ▶ Who's in charge in your life? Who rules? Who's the king? Who's on the throne when it comes to your life, your family, your church? **In these two chapters of Judges, we're given an illustration of the consequences we can expect when we seek to be king ourselves – instead of submitting to the King of God's own choosing.**

### **Under the Rule of Gideon**

- ❖ We've got a pretty long passage today, so I'll let you know ahead of time that we're not going to be able to cover every verse and every detail. We'll have to consider it from a big picture perspective, so I've split this message into two parts divided by the main characters. So we'll start with Gideon.
- ❖ **We left off last week with Gideon and his 300 chasing a vastly diminished Midianite army in complete disarray.** The Midianites are fleeing east going across the Jordan. As he's chasing them, Gideon calls on other tribes of Israel to join in pursuit. And one of those tribes is Ephraim.
  - ▶ **At this point, Ephraim is one of the stronger, more prominent of the twelve tribes.** They could boast in the fact that Joshua himself was an Ephraimite. And two of the most important sanctuaries were in Bethel and Shiloh, both located within their borders. And we learn in chapter 18 that the ark of the covenant was being housed in Shiloh in those days (18:31).
    - So all these factors got into their head, and the Ephraimites were high on themselves. Which is why they were offended that Gideon didn't invite them to be part of the initial attack and only asked them to help with mop up duty.
- ❖ **So in the beginning of chapter 8, Gideon finds himself not only contending with Midian but contending with Israel, with his own people.** But he exercises great restraint and diplomacy, and the heated situation cools off.
  - ▶ But in v4, as Gideon continues his chase across the other side of the Jordan, he and his men are exhausted. So when they arrive at a town called Succoth, they ask for some food and rest, but they're rudely rejected by their own kinsmen. Surely the leaders of Succoth were grateful to hear that the Midianite army was in retreat, but they may have worried that the Midianites were going to regroup and counterattack, and Succoth would've been caught up in the middle. So they said they'll help once the battle is over and it's certain you're the victor.
    - Gideon appeals to another town Penuel but receives the same treatment and same answer. Come back when you've defeated the kings of Midian and then we'll help you.

- ❖ **What's notable here is how Gideon reacts to the men of Succoth and Penuel.** Unlike how he handled the Ephramites, Gideon exercises no restraint. He doesn't hold back. He issues a threat saying, "I'll be back, and I'll pay you back for disrespecting me." And he does just that. After defeating the kings of Midian, he returns to Succoth and teaches their leaders a lesson by flailing them with thorns and briars (8:16), and even worse, at Penuel, he knocked down their tower killing all their men (8:17).
  - ▶ **It seems so unlike Gideon. So uncharacteristic of him. Or is it?** Could it be that he was much harsher with Succoth and Penuel – not because he respected Ephraim so much more – but because he feared mighty Ephraim that much more? Had he not been intimidated by Ephraim, Gideon probably would've issued the same threats.
    - **This suggests to me that Gideon is still thinking about himself and his glory.** After all the LORD had done for Gideon, it's still about him and his honor and not about rescuing God's people and restoring God's honor.
- ❖ This becomes apparent when he confronts the kings of Midian for killing his brothers at Tabor (8:18-19). **Now his true motive for chasing down, to the final man, an already diminished and defeated army is revealed. It wasn't for the LORD. It was for a personal vendetta.** He made it personal. This was vengeance.
  - ▶ That's why he asks his young son to slay the two kings. He wasn't after justice. He wasn't trying to defend God's honor. He was trying to humiliate his foes by having them be killed by a mere boy. But it was too much for his son, so he ends up doing the dirty deed himself.
- ❖ **What's happening is we have a very complex picture of Gideon.** In some ways, he seems mature and commendable. But in other ways, he comes across as petty and condemnable.
  - ▶ This tension continues in v22 when the men of Israel approach Gideon and offer him kingship. Look at v22, "*Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian."*"
- ❖ **Now was it wrong for them to ask for a king?** It's not an easy answer. On one hand, it seems like wanting a king is a bad thing. But we know it's God's will for there eventually to be a King Saul and then a King David. So eventually having a king in Israel is part of God's will. That's not the problem. **The problem is their motivation for wanting a king.**
  - ▶ God is already their king. But God is invisible. **It's hard to serve a king you can't see – a king whose Word you simply have to listen to and obey.** That requires a lot of trust. It calls for faith. But with a human king, you can see him with your own two eyes. And it's so much easier to decide if you want to trust and obey what he says.
    - **My point is that asking for a king, in their case, was not a mere practical request.** It's essentially a rejection of God, a refusal to trust and obey.

- ❖ Now Gideon's reply to their request seems quite noble. Look at v23, "*Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.'*" So he refuses their offer and reminds them that the LORD is our king. **Now that would be a very commendable response – if not for the fact that, after outwardly refusing to be their king, he goes on to act like one anyways.**
  - ▶ How so? We're told he had a harem of wives in v30, who produced for him seventy sons. That's very king-like behavior. And in v31 we're told he had an illegitimate son whom he named Abimelech, which means "My father is king". Not too subtle. And later in chapter 9:2, everyone else simply assumes that one of Gideon's sons would rule in his place after his death. **So even though he seemed to have rejected a dynastic kingship – he gave the right answer – yet he established himself as a de facto king with a de facto dynasty in place.**
  
- ❖ The blatant contradiction between what Gideon says and how he lives is so apparent that it's appalling. But then again who are we to judge when we do the same? **We readily affirm that God is our king.** We give the right answer. We have the right doctrine. **But then we go on acting like we're the kings and queens of our own lives.**
  - ▶ We can easily tip our hat to God but end up becoming our own lawgivers, our own standards of morality. We end up doing whatever is right in our own eyes. **Unless we're willing to submit to God as king and his Word as law, our professions of faith are meaningless.** That truth is never more glaring than in Gideon's behavior.
  
- ❖ And his decision to make an ephod is the final straw. **It's clear at that point that Gideon can say all the right things about the LORD being king, but he's more than comfortable with the idea of dethroning God and acting like the king.**
  - ▶ In v23, he makes a request for everyone to donate the gold earrings they got as spoils of war, and he made an ephod out of it. In case you're not familiar, an ephod was a sleeveless breastplate worn by Israel's high priest (cf. Ex. 28:1-35). It contained two stones known as the Urim and Thummin. We know from other texts that these stones were used for divining God's will (cf. Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6). That was the purpose of the ephod. To get guidance and direction from God.
  
- ❖ So do you see what Gideon is trying to do? **By making his own ephod, he's setting himself up as an alternative source of guidance and direction.** He says he doesn't want to be king, but then he grabs for an authority and status that God never granted. And now it says in v27 that all Israel whored after this ephod – hoping it would give them all the answers to all their questions. The text says it became a snare to Gideon and his family.
  - ▶ He says he doesn't want to be their king. He says we need to look to God for answers. But in the end, Gideon entices all of Israel to look to him. **He's still a usurper no matter what he said when they offered him the throne.**

- ❖ **Church, if the same kind of hypocrisy is in us, then let the Word of God expose it, and let the Spirit of God root it out.** We say we want him to rule. But do we live that way? We say God is our king, but have we surrendered our claims to self-rule? Have we cast down our crowns? **Or are we still the king on the throne and is God more like the court magician or wiseman that we consult from time to time?** In the aftermath of Gideon's sad ending, these are the questions left for us to ponder.
- ❖ What's real depressing is that v28 is the last mention of there being rest in the land for the rest of the book. And we're told that, "*as soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god.*" (8:33) This is not merely a book full of cycles. It's really a book about one sad downward spiral into greater depravity.

### **Under the Rule of Abimelech**

- ❖ And the depravity is never more apparent than in our next chapter with the rise and fall of Abimelech. Let's shift gears and focus our attention on the counterfeit rule of this usurper, which forced Israel through three agonizing years of chaos.
- ❖ Remember, Abimelech is the illegitimate son of Gideon by a concubine from Shechem. He spoke to the leaders of Shechem and asked them to consider which they prefer: To be led by seventy sons of Gideon or just one son who also happens to be your bone and flesh?
  - ▶ The leaders of Shechem get his drift, and they give Abimelech funds to hire mercenaries to help him slaughter the seventy sons of Gideon. But we're told in v5 that Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, escapes and survives.
- ❖ So during the coronation ceremony, Jotham interrupts to tell a fable. It's about trees seeking to anoint a king over them. They approach the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine. But they all decline, and so the trees approach the bramble to be their king and he's willing. **But the sad irony is that the bramble is a prickly shrub about a foot high, and the trees are hoping to take refuge in its shade.** And brambles were known to be the source of brushfires, a source of destruction. That's who they're asking to be king
  - ▶ The point of the fable is to highlight the foolishness of the trees. They're hoping to find refuge in a king who will more than likely be the very cause of their downfall, the very source of their destruction. **Brambles make for good fuel but bad kings.** You don't want a bramble like Abimelech to rule over you.
- ❖ Listen to Jotham words in chapter 9:19, "*<sup>19</sup>if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. <sup>20</sup>But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.*"

- ❖ And the rest of the chapter describes how Jotham's words ring true. Abimelech rules as a counterfeit king for three years before bad blood develops between him and the leaders of Shechem. **Three years ago he instigated a rebellion, turning the leaders against his own half brothers. He sowed the wind and now he's going to reap the whirlwind.** The tables have turned. A man named Gaal the son of Ebed turns everyone against Abimelech.
  - ▶ Abimelech still has the advantage militarily, so he attacks Shechem, defeats Gaal and squashes the rebellion. But he's not done. **Like father like son, Abimelech is out to avenge his own honor.** So when he discovers that all the leaders of Shechem have gathered together in a stronghold, thinking they're safe, Abimelech tells his men to follow his lead. They all cut down brushwood, set the stronghold ablaze, and kill about 1,000 men and women.
  
- ❖ Next he attacks a town called Thebez and captures it. All the inhabitants of Thebez including their leaders hole up in a tall fortress tower, and Abimelech decides to apply the same technique. He tries to burn them alive. But as he drew near to the door of the tower, we're told in v53 that "*a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull.* <sup>54</sup>*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.*"
  - ▶ Then in v56, we're given a theological explanation for why events transpired as so. *"<sup>56</sup>Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. <sup>57</sup>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 Jerubbaal."*
  
- ❖ What do we learn from all this? **First, as we've seen already in previous chapters, it's clearly not beneath God to work *with* and work *in* the messiness of our lives, the chaos in our lives, and the sinfulness that marks our lives.** The events in chapter 9 seem to go from bad to worse, and it looks as God to has abandoned his people. But that couldn't be further from the truth. If we read on into chapter 10:1-5, we read, "*After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola*", and later God raised up another judge named Jair. So even in the midst of all our unfaithfulness, God is still faithful to save.
  
- ❖ I wouldn't be surprised if some of you would identify yourself with Abimelech. **You've been living your life essentially as your own king or queen.** You make no pretenses to claim God as your king. You're your own master, your own ruler. You don't have any qualms admitting that. In fact you wouldn't want it any other way.
  - ▶ Others of you are more like Gideon. You've grown up with the right doctrine and all the right answers. If anyone asked, you'd say God is your king. **You would never claim kingship for yourself. But your actions, your decisions, your priorities betray you.** You're still living like a king or queen anyways.

- ❖ I hope this morning's passage has been a wake up call for you. The Bible doesn't pull punches. It calls *you* the usurper. That throne you're sitting on – the one that rules over your life – is not yours. **In the story of your life, you're Scar. You're Prince John. You're Denethor. You're Abimelech. And if you cling tightly to the throne – if you won't let go and abdicate it for God – then I'm afraid he'll have to remove you himself.** And as we've seen in our passage, that's not something to take lightly.
- ❖ But let me leave you with a word of hope. **The main message being driven home by the book of Judges, especially these two chapters, is that these men are not the king you really need.** None of these judges are.
  - ▶ Now most of you already know that. You already know that no political leader, no business leader, no church leader, and no parent can function as that king. I think that's why most of you have already resigned yourself to being your own king.
    - **I believe the only way you're going to abdicate is if you're convinced that the King of God's own choosing is far better at the job than anyone you know, including yourself.**
- ❖ **That's why I love how this story points us forward to a True and Better Gideon.** To God's chosen Messiah, his Christ. Who also faced crowds demanding for him to be the king they wanted (cf. Jn. 6:15). But he sought instead to be the King that God wanted.
  - ▶ Like Gideon, Jesus refused their offer. **But unlike Gideon, he didn't go on to act in self-interest, seeking still to be treated and served like other kings, like the rulers of the Gentiles.** No, he came as a King this world had never seen before. He came as a King who seeks to serve and not to be served. He came to die and give his life as a ransom for many, to liberate us from bondage to sin and death (Mk. 10:45) That's the king of God's own choosing. That's the king we really need.
- ❖ And you can even argue that Jesus is a Better Abimelech. **Abimelech argued back in chapter 9:2 that it's better to be ruled by one man, especially one who is your bone and flesh.** Who identifies with you. Who understands your needs, your wants, your struggles. I don't think he realized how much gospel truth he was speaking.
  - ▶ We really do need one King. **One Man who shares in our bone and flesh, who shares in our humanity, who shares in our struggles, who in every way has been tempted as we are yet without sin** (Heb. 4:15).
- ❖ **It's far easier to abdicate the throne, if you know you're handing it over to a sinless Savior, to Christ Jesus the King.** He's the King you really need, the King you've always wanted. He rules with sympathy and selflessness. He rules in love and righteousness.
  - ▶ Your life, your future, your eternity is in much better hands if Jesus is on the throne. Won't you step down and hand him your crown?