

“When the Good Goes Bad” (Gideon 3 and Abimelech) // Judges 8:1 – 10:4 // *Broken Saviors* # 6

Preview

I wanted to start this week telling you a little about where we are going to go from here... This is going to be our **last week in Judges** before we take a little break. (I figured you'd had enough **gore and scandal** at church for a while...)

- **Starting next week**, we are going to do a 2-week series around the cross (since that doesn't have any gore or scandal in it) going into the Easter season.
 - By the way, I think **just about any weekend** here is a great one to bring friends to... because we always... **but Easter is an especially good time** and I hope nobody will come alone. **Baptizing** people.
- **Right after Easter**, we are going to get into a series called, *“From the Beginning”* about God's designs for relationships and sex; we'll be looking at **what kinds of sexual relationships give life and what kinds destroy it**. This is a topic people ask me about a lot, so we're going to address it for a few weeks, and we'll talk about **everything from singleness to same-sex attraction to a healthy marriage: they say that if love is a dream, marriage can be like the alarm clock...**
- **But this week...** JUDGES 8. We come to the tragic conclusion of Gideon's story and see where the writer of Judges takes us from there...
- (I have to begin this week by recanting something... I said no team would ever choose the biscuits for their mascot... shirt)

Introduction

I think one of the **worst experiences** in life has to be taking a big swig of milk only to realize that it's gone bad... **It happened to me** not too long ago... I actually felt the lumps of the curdles before I tasted the taste...

- One of the **scariest moments** is when the date on the milk jug is a couple days past, and you don't want to throw it out if it's not bad, because milk is expensive... so you are going to give it the smell test... that moment where you put your nose on it and smell is like that moment you are anticipating a shot...
- Or Parents: find that **sippy cup in the back of the van...** how long has this been here?

Today we're going to look at a good leader who turns sour... he never becomes an evil man, *per se*, he just spoils, and ruins his ministry and his kids in the process. You'll see the effect of Gideon's souring on 3 generations of Judges.

I. Gideon Turns Sour (8:1–21)

We left Gideon last week on a high... he had **just pulled off the most incredible upset in military history...** with only 300 soldiers he had defeated a Massive Midianite army of probably about 100,000 soldiers without so much as a **single casualty** on his side. **You picture** this scene of people opening champagne bottles and carrying him around on their shoulders...

But he goes back and, **as often happens** after a great victory, his people are backbiting and bickering with each other, so the next chapter opens with him **in conflict with 2 clusters of Israelites...**

- **The first is Ephraim**, a large, wealthy tribe in Israel, who seems to have had their pride hurt because they got left out... so they ream Gideon for not calling on them to lead in battle.

- The **second group is a couple of smaller townships** called Succoth and Penuel... they just refuse to help because they don't take Gideon that seriously.

Their **offenses are similar**; what is **striking is how differently Gideon responds** to each. To large, wealthy Ephraim, Gideon responds with flattery; he woos them over; to the smaller towns of Succoth and Penuel, however, he responds with harshness—actually going so far as to torture the leaders of Succoth by wrapping them in briars and beating them, and he levels the town of Penuel and kills its inhabitants.

His response is **inconsistent...** and seems based more on what is best for him than what God wants.

- **Gideon needed the tribe of Ephraim**, you see, and he knew he couldn't beat them anyway, so he flatters them to get them back on his side; **Succoth and Penuel, however, are weaker than him**, and he didn't need them, so he just wipes them out.
- ***Maybe the bigger point is that in neither case did he consult God to ask what he wanted.*** He simply did what he felt like doing, based on what he had the power to do.

What you are seeing is that **something is happening** in Gideon's heart. Fresh off of this incredible victory over the Midianites, he's already forgotten whose battle it is... his heart has turned inward and gone sour.

- He **used to say**, "*Success is joining Jesus wherever he is.*" Now he says, "Success is doing whatever I want."

[22] 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." [23] But Gideon said to them, "I will *not* rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." This was actually a great response on Gideon's part, because God had told Israel they would not need a king because *he* would be their king. **So, so far, so good...** but jump down to vs. [30] Now Gideon had

seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. He has a harem and 70 sons, which is pretty king-like. Only kings in those days had a wife-pool like that. [31] And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. (Now, *Abimelech*, in Hebrew, means literally "*My dad is the king.*" What? Kind of sounds like Gideon sees himself as king...)

Go back to vs [24] And Gideon said to them, "Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." Now he's **collecting taxes**. That's also pretty king-like.

[27] And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city... And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

- An **ephod was the vest** worn by the high priest into the presence of God when he went in to make requests to God on behalf the people.
 - The ephod, per God's instructions, was only to be **worn by the tribe** of Levi and only at the tabernacle.
- **Gideon creates his own version of that...** He may **not be trying to deny God**, but he's put himself **in the place of God** and taken upon himself privileges that belong only to God, and is now **directing people's attention** away from God.

What's happened to Gideon? His victory, evidently, has given him a taste for glory. And that leads him to blasphemy and he becomes a curse to Israel.

- So now, **instead of being the deliverer of** the people, who taught them to have faith in God; he has become a **stumbling block to** the people that *kept them* from faith in God.

I'll be honest. As your leader, Summit Church, this fills me with fear and trembling... Because maybe no leader in the Old Testament provides a better example of faith-filled, courageous leadership... he led God's people to such incredible things. But at the end he sours, and he makes it about himself, and ends up leading Israel astray.

- **You see, with Gideon we see something that we have never seen before in Judges:** the people fall away from God *while* the Judge is reigning, not after. (**In every other case** the people fell away *after* the Judge died. Gideon's generation fell away while Gideon was in power, **because of how** Gideon used his power.)
- I ask: *What if I teach you to believe God for great things, and he does them (plant 1000 churches; change the trajectory of RDU... transform colleges)... and then, after we get there, we make it all about us? What if I become a stumbling block to you?*

You see from Gideon's life some clear indicators that you have made it all about you... **When you see these things in your life**, you can know it's become about you, too:

1. **Infrequent prayer:** When Gideon was desperate for God, he prayed instinctively. Many leaders are type-A enough that they pray as a matter of discipline, and that is good; for someone who is really dependent on God, prayer is involuntary, because **it comes from desperation**.
 - Like breathing. Not a discipline.
 - Many of you pray each day as a discipline... **Prayer as discipline is good; prayer that grows out of a desperate realization of your need for God's help us better.**
 - Infrequent, non-desperate prayer is a sure sign...
2. **Failure to consult others:** Not only does Gideon fail to consult God, he doesn't really consult with anybody. I've seen this so many times... They **become an island**; they see themselves on a **higher plane**; they always **know best**. No longer humble enough to recognize they don't know it all...
 - I've seen this... and it always destroys.
 - "An isolated man seeks his own desire." (Prov 18:1)
3. **Resentment:** When it's about you, you resent those who get in your way; you become harsh and cruel to those who challenge you: you can't forgive anyone who challenges or obstructs you. You come down like a hammer... **Except for the rich**, because you need them.

4. **Materialistic excess:** Gideon takes people money and makes for himself a suit of clothes made of gold. I'm not a poverty guy... God loves to give us nice things. But for leaders who have made it all about them, they start to live on a higher plane... they deserve it... newer; bigger, flashier...
5. **Constant worrying about your name:** When it's about you, you are always guarding your reputation. Building your platform, elevating your name. You **can't handle criticism**. You **crave praise** and need **constant affirmation**.

These are signs it has become about you. Maybe you were a great leader who led people to great things. But at the end... you use that success to substitute yourself for God. **You put on the ephod and share glory with God.**

What a horrible offense... The church is Jesus' bride, not yours. He appoints you, as a leader, only to bring it to him.

- **Illus. Best man flirting** with BRIDE illustration. John 3:30!
- When I make it about me... What an offense to God; and what a disservice to you!

*So I'll say what I said last week: Christians **most often pass the test of adversity**; it is the test of prosperity we fail.* When Gideon was small and weak, he depended on God. It was when he got strong that he forgot God and made it about himself. **Beware your strengths, don't bemoan your weaknesses; beware your prosperity.** Those are the things that woo your heart away from God.

Proverbs 30:5-6 have always been haunting verses to me, **"Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.**
⁹ **Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."**

- **Literally?** Does this mean Christians shouldn't save? No, it means that if you do have excess, you must 1. Plead with God to protect your heart. 2. (Be as surrendered to him when you're wealthy as

you were when you were poor and desperate.) 3. Be extravagantly generous. Nothing cures the love of money like giving it away.

Don't take God's blessing of success in your life and make it all about you. Don't let that good thing God has done in your life spoil!

Gideon accomplished so much in ministry... but what good is that if your heart spoils, you lose your relationship with God, your joy, and then you spoil your family after you? Which is where we turn next.

II: Abimelech the Tumbleweed (9:1–57)

Well, after Gideon's death, **Abimelech** (remember, he was the son Gideon named, "*My dad is the king, y'all*") said, "***I want to be king like my dad*** sort of was without the name except I want to have the name" and he hired a bunch of **worthless vagabonds** to be his posse and they **ambushed and killed** all 69 of Gideon's other sons... **except for one named Jotham** who escaped by hiding in a closet.

Then, Abimelech said, "*Well, I guess I have to be king now since my dad has no other sons left*" and the leaders of Israel, who knew all of this... crowned him king at Shechem.

- This was a terrible SCANDAL. **First** of all, as I told you they were **not supposed to have a king**; God was supposed to be their king.
- Second, they have chosen a **brother-murdering scoundrel** to be their king;
- And to top it all off, this **all goes down at Shechem**, which was a holy place for the Jews: It was the birthplace of their nation, where **God had given Abraham** the promise and **renewed it with Joshua**.¹ One scholar said that *would be like Americans*

¹ Gen 12:6; 33:8; Josh 24:1. It was also at Shechem that Joseph's brothers betrayed him, a premonition of Judges 8 and a prefiguring of Christ.

*reinstating slavery at a meeting in Gettysburg or restoring the Jim Crow laws in Montgomery.*²

Well, Jotham, the one brother who **escaped**, comes out of hiding and **gets in front of Israel's leaders** and tells them a parable about a bunch of trees in a forest who decide they want to choose a king: First they go to the **olive tree** and say, "Will you be our king?" And the olive tree says, "No, I'm getting too rich off my olive production to be bothered with being your king." Likewise the **fig tree... fig newtons**. They approach every kind of tree, eventually even asking the grapevine.... **Nobody wants to be bothered with the burden of being kind**. So eventually they find a **tumbleweed** and say, "Will you be our king?" and the tumbleweed says, "Sure, **but first you have to burn down all the other trees**" and so they do.

And then **Jotham says to the leaders** at Shechem: "**This is what you've done.**"

- Now, **in that parable is an implicit criticism** of Gideon's other sons... evidently there were some good ones who could have led Israel well, but they didn't want to leave their life of ease to serve Israel... WHERE did they get that? **Gideon hadn't modeled for them a life of using your power and riches to serve others...**
- But **Jotham's main critique** is of Israel's leaders for anointing an obviously worthless, self-interested, opportunistic politician to lead them.
- Jotham says, "This is **going to come back** on you!"

Well, sure enough, that happens... **Abimelech, turns out** to be a terrible leader, no surprise there... Judges 9 records a dizzying account of **scandal and sabotage and mass murder** during Abimelech's reign.

Eventually all of those leaders in Shechem that anointed him revolt against him, **so Abimelech and his army attack** them... The people

² Keller, 101.

flee to the **city tower**—which, in those days, was like the city’s final stronghold—and Abimelech takes, ironically enough, **a bunch of tumbleweeds**, and packs them around the base of the tower and then lights it on fire and burns over 1000 people alive inside.

Abimelech then **moves on to the next city**, where he **drives all the people** back into their tower, too, but **as he is about to light it on fire**, a woman on the top floor takes a moderately-sized millstone (which was a kitchen appliance used to grind flour) and leans out the window and drops it on Abimelech’s head... it doesn’t quite kill him, but it smashes him up pretty bad... and as he’s lying there, barely conscious, with his head all mangled, he says to one of his servants, *“Quick, kill me with your sword so that I don’t go down as yet another guy who got killed by a woman with a kitchen utensil,”* and his servant does that and he dies.

Aren’t these stories so pleasant? [56] Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers, upon his head. [57] 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 is this teaching us through this generation?

1. **God’s judgment is slow, and sometimes subtle, but always sure**

- God’s **name is noticeably absent** from chapters 8 and 9. God’s covenant name is not even used between 8:34 and 10:6.
 - But the narrator **shows us in 9:56–57** (which we just read) that God has been at work the whole time, the invisible **hand in history’s glove**, in all things working his plan, using sinful men as his instruments who have no understanding they are being used... AND
- **It may seem, for a while, like evil prevails**, and God is absent, but stories like this show you that in the end God will have the **last word**, perfect **justice will be served** and God’s **purposes** will be fully accomplished.

- I’ve heard it said, *“The **wheels of God’s justice grind slowly, but finely.**”*
- **A few weeks ago** I told you that in this life we may not see every wrong righted... but there are just enough stories like these in the Bible assure us that one day they will be.
- Stories like this warn us that we **must not let the slowness of God’s judgment** lull us into complacency...
 - The **Apostle Peter** says that throughout human history mankind has often mistaken God’s patience and longsuffering in judgment for his absence...
 - **Noah.** Nearly 100 years took place between the time God announced the flood and when it came. **Most interpreted that long space** as God failing to act; Peter said it was God demonstrating his patience, giving people space to repent.
 - In fact, Methuselah... “when he dies it comes.” 969 years.
 - *2 Peter 3:8–9: the Lord is not slow... one day as 1000 years... the Lord is not willing that any should perish...*
 - Even now, Peter says, people assume the delay of the **coming of Christ** means he’s not really coming back. But he is. **Don’t use what God intends to be space to repent with God’s absence.**
 - *You say, I can repent tomorrow. Tomorrow will be just like today. Maybe not: thief in the night.*
 - **Illus. Indonesia tsunami:** What was it like to see that 70 foot wall of water? The cross and resurrection of Jesus is like that spot of receded water... but the tidal wave of God’s judgment is coming.
 - Don’t let this time lull you into complacency. Flee in repentance to Christ for salvation.

2. **The problem isn’t ‘out there,’ it is ‘in here.’**

- **This story is the first one in Judges** where the actual oppression comes not from outside Israel, but from within them—it is **one of their own people**, the son of one of their greatest leaders—that is the oppressor.
 - And **so finally it is made clear** that foreign nations are not Israel’s problem; **they** are their own problem.
 - (This has kind of **always been the case**, but now we see it clearly.)
- In fact, think about this... There really is **no special outpouring** of judgment in this story... no fire from the sky... God just allowed them to experience the results of their own sinful choices.
 - **Gideon’s self-centeredness and glory-lust** produced a son who murdered his brothers so he can be king
 - **Shechem’s disregard for God’s commands** and their self-interest led to them selecting an opportunistic man.
 - **Abimelech’s treachery** and backstabbing lead to his downfall.
- *Sin is its own curse. Our sin, not God, curses our children.*
 - **C.S. Lewis said** to those people who objected to the idea of God judgment: “In the long run the answer to all those who object (to God’s judgment)... is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ To wipe out (people’s) past sins and... to give them a fresh start... and offering miraculous help (in their new life)? But that’s exactly what he’s done (through the cross)! Are you asking him to forgive them? But they refuse to be forgiven. Are you asking him to leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what he does... In the end, there are only two kinds of people: those who say to God ‘thy will be done’ and those to whom God says, ‘thy will be done.’”³

Which leads me #3...

3. We need a new King, a better Judge

³ Combined from *Problem of Pain* and *The Great Divorce*, with minor editorial license taken!

- Like the Israelites, we come to God thinking we **primarily need him to deliver us from some bad thing...** pain, broken relationships; lack of money. And we may need those things. **But that’s not what we most need. What we most need is freedom from our own heart. We are our own curse.**
- So any salvation that fails to deal with the human heart is not a real salvation.
- Think about it... what if God answered all our prayers and gave us all that we ask for: prosperity; education; perfect government... would that create heaven on earth?
 - **What if we all had infinite amounts of money—are the richest people the most virtuous?** Does the name “Kardashians” mean anything to you?
 - those people in the higher brackets of wealth and education—are 4x more likely to cheat at a card game (when a \$50 voucher is at stake).⁴
 - **What if we were all educated?** Does education eradicate evil? **Stalin and Lenin** were extremely well-educated men.
 - **Even if we are perfectly governed...** does good government guarantee goodness in people?⁵

⁴ <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2012/02/27/are-rich-people-unethical/>

⁵ **Beatrice Webb** (part of British socialist movement of 19th century) wrote in her diary in 1890 – *“I stake everything on the essential goodness of human nature.”* She referenced that statement 35 years later and then said, *“I realize now how permanent the evil and instincts and impulses in us that mere social machinery will never change.”* **Ernest Becker** (Jewish agnostic of the 20th century) said early in his career– *“The real problem in the world is that the privileged are oppressing every body else through oppressive social structures and therefore, it is social science applied with government that will deal with evil.”* (But in a preface to a later book, he said) – *“I am now looking at humanity full in the face for the first time. In my previous works I have failed to see how truly vicious human behavior is. This is a dilemma that I have been caught in along with many others who have been trying to keep alive the enlightenment tradition. This enormous problem to see that humanity is so evil causing now requires some third alternative beyond bureaucratic science or despair.”* **Cyril Joad**

- **Best answer to this:** One of the most striking accounts of this came from **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**, the man who was imprisoned for years in the gulag by Joseph Stalin. He said, “(I entered into the Gulag thinking it was the Communists who were evil.. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, then we could separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy... his own heart?”⁶
- *That’s always what we think—evil is them—the Communists; the Jihadists; the Republicans; the Democrats; the undereducated; people on Wall Street...*
- **The heart has to be changed... YOUR heart needs to be changed. We need a Savior who can deliver us not only from the curse**

wrote a book in 1952, right after World War II, called *The Recovery of Belief*. Up through WW2 he had been a socialist and an atheist. In this book, *The Recovery of Belief*, he described his journey back to belief in God. He said, “*It is because we rejected a doctrine of original sin that we on the left are always being so disillusioned. The behavior of both the people and the leaders were inexplicable to us because we didn’t believe in the ancient doctrine of sin.*” Another guy, the Lord David Cecil, after the Holocaust of World War II, said, “*The philosophy of progress had led us to believe that the savage and primitive was behind us, but it turns out that it was within us.*” Dorothy Sayers in her essay, “*Creed or Chaos?*,” explains: We were given to believe that we are essentially good human beings evolving into higher, better beings; that we were essentially teachable, and so to us “*the appalling outbursts of bestial ferocity in the totalitarian states, and the obstinate selfishness and stupid greed of capitalist society, are not merely shocking and alarming. For (us), these things are the utter negation of everything in which (we) have believed.*”

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/FR92401.htm>

⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, Part 1*.

around us, but the curse within us as well. We don’t just need a Savior to fix our situation; we need a Savior who can fix us.

- **We need a King** who will **not only rule** with love and justice, but who can **make us like him**.
- And that’s **why all these stories point us**, through their messiness and disappointments and failures, to the **ultimate King** who would come, the Lord Jesus:
 - **Jesus, you see, in many ways would be the opposite of Gideon.** *Unlike Gideon, he had every right to demand service as a King. And unlike Gideon, he rightfully wears the ephod because he **is** the tabernacle of God’s presence on earth. **But unlike Gideon, Jesus successfully resists the temptation to rule in power over the nations** (when Satan offered it to him unlawfully in the TEMPTATION). **Until the very end of his life, Jesus maintained that he ‘did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’.**⁷ **He didn’t take our treasures to make a garment of gold for himself;** he poured out his blood to clothe us in his righteousness and give us a seat at his table forever.*
 - **Jesus was definitely the opposite of Abimelech.** Unlike the trees of the forest who were too self-interested to rule, Jesus was more than willing to be our Shepherd... **But then we chopped him down** and killed him. **Yet he didn’t burn us** to the ground in his anger; he willingly took the fire of God’s judgment for us into himself, in love, to save us. **The millstone of God’s judgment** was dropped on his head for us.

He is the **true King** we seek in every reform... you think salvation is a better situation (a new marriage; better finances); salvation is being embraced by the Savior for whom you were created...

And **knowing him changes our hearts** so that we become *like* him!

⁷ Based on Tim Keller, *Judges for You*, 99.

III. Conclusion: Tola and Jair (Judges 10:1–5)

Which leads me to how I want to conclude this series, for now... I want you to see how chapter 10 opens; it's a good place to put a bookmark in this series until we come back to it this summer:

[10:1] After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo (tough names)... and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. [2] And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died... [3] After him arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years.

What can you learn from just those details? It is what is NOT said that is instructive: Two unusual things to notice:

- First, notice again that we are **no longer told from whom Tola and Jair delivered Israel**—because that is becoming increasingly irrelevant. *Israel's wayward heart* is their problem.
- But, more important, **noticeably absent from this account is anything about Israel crying out for salvation**; yet God *keeps saving them*.
 - Throughout this book we are **confronted again and again** with the fact that it is *God* who pursues his people. It's not that they are coming to him, pleading for him to be on their side. He pursues them when they are not looking for him.
 - **He seeks us** when we're lost; when we're broken; when we are wandering... Rom 5:8
- **THE VOICE: In my first sermon on Gideon** I pointed out that when Israel cried out to God for deliverance from the Midianites, God first sent a prophet who confronted them in their sin... but then I pointed out that when the prophet gets to the **end of his sermon, we are expecting to read about Israel's response**, but the next thing we see is that God is raising up Gideon. God doesn't wait for their response. **Before they repent** God has already started to work their salvation. He is **so passionately in love** with them that before they repent he is coming for them, pursuing them.
 - That afternoon, we were **discussing the sermon as a family** at dinner. Allie: On "The VOICE... You know how

after they sing for a while the judges turns the chair around and it says, "I want you"? It's like God turns his chair toward us... before we ever start singing."

- **So I can tell you this weekend that if you'll lift your eyes to see**, you can see the Father's chair is ALREADY turned toward you... his face radiating in love toward you; his arms opened wide to receive you.... If you'll come home, he will have you.
- The **Father's face is radiating** with openness toward you... he is your King, your deliverer, your Father... **turn to him and live!**