The Book of Judges
Abimelech, The Man Who Would Be King
February 8, 2017

Session Five

Brief Review:

When Joshua died, a period of nearly 400 years began in which a number of leaders (deliverers or judges) came into prominence. Some of these were known only in small areas while others were nationally recognized.

The people of Israel went through a time of SEVEN spiritual cycles. At the top of the cycle the people were right with God and in a period of Godly renewal. Then backsliding or apostasy set in and the people drifted away from God. At the bottom of each cycle, they were overrun by other nations, pagan ones, who led them through decades of degradation. In crying out for help, God sent them key leaders such as Gideon and Samson and Deborah who brought them victory.

In today’s lesson we take a look at several of these judges.

ABIMELECH, THE USURPING JUDGE

What happened in Israel when the great Gideon passed away?

Judges 8:33-35

And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god. [34] And the children of Israel remembered not the Lord their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: [35] Neither shewed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel.

We remember from our previous study that Gideon had many wives who bore him 70 sons. Besides that, Gideon also had a concubine (mistress) who bore him yet another son, this one, a disaster!

Judges 8:30-32

And Gideon had threescore and ten sons of his body begotten: for he had many wives. [31] And his concubine that was in Shechem, she also bare him a son, whose
name he called Abimelech.  [32] And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulchre of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites.

Before we jump all over Gideon for having all those wives, let's remember that was part of his day's sociology. It seems to me that having 71 sons would be penalty enough! Think of supporting that crowd!

But let's consider a noble act on his part. After the historic and supernatural defeat of the Midianites, under whose cruel regime the Jews had lived for seven years, the victorious Israelites wanted to make Gideon their king. His response was remarkable: Judges 8:22-23  Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. [23] And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you.

Gideon was wise enough to know he was "king material."

"A man's gotta know his limitations." – Saint Eastwood

Gideon understood the victory over the Midianites was totally because of God, not himself. That victory did not qualify him to be a king. Besides, as we will learn in I Samuel, it was not the will of God for Israel to even have a king. God raised up Gideon to be a JUDGE, not a monarch.

He did well in not allowing the opinion of the people, even if it was a majority, to influence his life more than God's will for it. Gideon knew who was in charge. He said so matter of factly: THE LORD SHALL RULE OVER YOU!

However, our man was not perfect. We learn in verse 24 he wanted something: Judges 8:24  And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) The weight of the gold he wanted was about 43 pounds - so we are talking about a real haul here! Gideon is now well-off financially. Sadly he doesn't think he needs God as much as he did previously. He did not leave a great spiritual legacy, unfortunately.

The "down-slide" was not ready for the decline of the people once again. A corner has been turned.
Now a new judge will lead Israel - and this one will be simply awful:

Judges 9:1-6

And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem unto his mother's brethren, and communed with them, and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, [2] Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you? remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. [3] And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem all these words: and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech; for they said, He is our brother. [4] And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him. [5] And he went unto his father's house at Ophrah, and slew his brethren the sons of Jerubbaal, being threescore and ten persons, upon one stone: notwithstanding yet Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left; for he hid himself. [6] And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Millo, and went, and made Abimelech king, by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem.

We don't know much about justice in this world. Abimelech should have been tried for murder; instead he is handed the reins of government. With money given to him by his clueless following, Abimelech hired trained assassins.

We don't know the details of this man's plan to kill his brothers. We know that he somehow got them together in their father's home - Gideon's place. The town was known as Ophrah, several miles north of Jerusalem. It was a brutal, calculated act of cold-blooded murder. But in the blood-bath, the youngest brother somehow managed to escape. His name was JOTHAM.

Abimilech's goal was reached: Judges 9:6 And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Millo, and went, and made Abimelech king, by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem. The house of Millo was a mound or rampart built up and filled in with earth and stones to raise. It was a fortification near Shechem, which is a city in north-central Israel, one of the places where God made an eternal commitment to Abraham to bless the Jews.

J. Vernon McGee made an fascinating observation about this scenario with Abimelech: Some Bible expositors rate Abimelech as a judge., He may have been a judge, at least it is said that he "reigned three years over Israel." But the fact is he brutally murdered the seventy sons of Gideon and set himself up as king. His abortive reign reveals, I feel,
the truth of the statement in Daniel 4:17:  

_This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men._

Even today when a good ruler comes into office, many folk say, “God raised him up.” What about the wicked ruler? God permits him to come to the throne also. Do you know why? Because the principle is, “...like priest, like people.” That is, people get the ruler they deserve. The people of Israel wanted this boy Abimelech to rule over them; and they got the calibre of man they deserved. Friend, when we look around our world today, we find this principle is still true.

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At the top of this page is a photo of great historical importance. Many my age remember the fate of Benito Mussolini. In the 1920’s, he was cheered and respected. In April of 1945, his bullet-pierced dead body was strung up (upside down, hanging by his feet) along with his mistress Clara Petacci at a filling station in Milan. I point this out because
Abimelech is going to suffer at the very hands of the people who thrust him into his illegitimate power three years earlier. While attempting to stop an insurrection against him, in the very place where he had been coronated, he met a fatal fate: Judges 9:52-57

And Abimelech came unto the tower, and fought against it, and went hard unto the door of the tower to burn it with fire. [53] And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull. [54] Then he called hastily unto the young man his armourbearer, and said unto him, Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me, A woman slew him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died. [55] And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man unto his place.

[56] Thus God rendered the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren: [57] And all the evil of the men of Shechem did God render upon their heads: and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

The Bible declares emphatically that we reap what we sow. But we should remember that despite Gideon’s final heroics in the earlier chapters, he also fathered a son (Abimelech) by his mistress. This is a sad ending for the life of Gideon. God had elevated him to a place as deliverer and judge for the nation. How sad that a man who had accomplished so much, should allow this in his life of which God did not approve and which resulted in civil war in Israel.

TOLA, THE NEXT JUDGE

You may be thinking, “Tola? I’ve never heard of him.” Don’t be sad for neither have most people. We have only two verses about him:

Judges 10:1-2 And after Abimelech there arose to defend Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar (of the tribe of Issachar who was one of the sons of Jacob, the ninth, and a brother to Joseph); and he dwelt in Shamir in mount Ephraim. [2] And he judged Israel twenty and three years, and died, and was buried in Shamir.

Shamir – we don’t know the exact location of that ancient community, but probably on the hill slopes near Shechem. (Sidebar: a man named Yitzhak Shamir was a two-time prime minister of Israel in the 80’s and early 90's. He was a good man who died at the age of 96.)

All we know about Judge Tola is that he lived and died after serving as a deliverer (from what we don’t know) in Israel, a judge, for 23 years.
JAIR - AND HIS DONKEYS

Judges 10:3-5

And after him arose Jair, a Gileadite, and judged Israel twenty and two years. [4] And he had thirty sons that rode on thirty ass colts, and they had thirty cities, which are called Havoth-jair unto this day, which are in the land of Gilead. [5] And Jair died, and was buried in Camon.

This fellow came from the eastern side of the Jordan River, a region known as Gilead. It extended from the lower end of the Sea of Galilee to the northern part of the Dead Sea — all in the nation we know today as Jordan. It was in Gilead where we found Jacob running for his life from his father-in-law Laban. Camon was a town in the area of Gilead.

Finding information about Jair, outside of Scripture, is a tough task. Not much is known about him. Here is what we DO know:

- He led Israel for 22 years. That’s pretty impressive when you think that no president of the U.S. has ruled for longer than 12 years and 3 months (FDR).
- Jair apparently had lots of money. Each of his sons owned a donkey, which in those days was like owning a Mustang car today.
- He had 30 such sons (and so at least 30 donkeys). A donkey was known as the “animal of peace” and was the mark of prosperity.
- Each of those sons had authority over a community. The word “cities” in verse 4 is probably better expressed “tent encampment.”

As I pursue various commentary resources regarding Jair, I find that many of the writers give a lot of negative remarks about this man - probably because Scripture says so little. I don’t agree with them. Why not? Because Jair ruled Israel for 22 years and it was a time of peace and tranquility. When he died, Israel went into another cyclical collapse spiritually: Judges 10:6-10 And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim, and Ashteroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served not him. [7] And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon. [8] And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were
on the other side Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. [9]
Moreover the children of Ammon passed over Jordan to fight also against Judah,
and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore
distressed.
[10] And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, saying, We have sinned
against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim.

Some people are really slow learners! Wouldn’t you think that after all these cycles the
people of Israel would know better than to turn to idolatry?

I am sadly amused by some TV preachers who tell us how wonderful we are. One of
those fellows told his audience recently that he believed 99.9% of all human beings are
just plain old good people. Really? Here’s what the Bible says: Jeremiah 17:9 The
heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?
Someone might fire back, “Well...that was just Jeremiah’s opinion.” No, Scripture is
given to us by the Holy Spirit through people such as Jeremiah. So it is God’s opinion
that the human heart is wicked. What does the New Testament teach? Romans
1:21-25 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither
were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was
darkened. [22] Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, [23] And
changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible
man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. [24] Wherefore God
also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour
their own bodies between themselves: [25] Who changed the truth of God into a lie,
and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for
ever. Amen. And God adds: Romans 3:9-18 (From the Living Bible)

Well, then, are we Jews better than others? No, not at all, for we have already
shown that all men alike are sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles. [10] As the
Scriptures say,

"No one is good--no one in all the world is innocent."
[11] No one has ever really followed God's paths or even truly wanted to.
[12] Every one has turned away; all have gone wrong. No one anywhere has kept
on doing what is right; not one.
[13] Their talk is foul and filthy like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues
are loaded with lies. Everything they say has in it the sting and poison of deadly
snakes.
[14] Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.
[15] They are quick to kill, hating anyone who disagrees with them.
[16] Wherever they go they leave misery and trouble behind them, [17] and they
have never known what it is to feel secure or enjoy God's blessing.
[18] They care nothing about God nor what he thinks of them.

This is why we MUST HAVE a Savior! For what you and I consider pretty neat stuff, good works and all that, God considers filthy rags. Nothing more. And unless we cling to God and His sovereign grace, we are in for a world of hurt! Why is that so hard for the modern clergy to understand?

GOD'S RESPONSE TO THE IDOLATERS

Judges 10:11-16
And the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Did not I deliver you from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the children of Ammon, and from the Philistines? [12] The Zidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, did oppress you; and ye cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand. [13] Yet ye have forsaken me, and served other gods: wherefore I will deliver you no more. [14] Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation.

[15] And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. [16] And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the Lord: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

And the cycle goes on and on. By the way, as you read the Old Testament you are going to find this behavior clear up to the time of the Babylonian’s third invasion of Israel in 586 B.C. The people were such slow learners! But then....aren’t we all?

Now the people search once again for a JUDGE to lead them:

Judges 10:17-18 Then the children of Ammon were gathered together, and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled themselves together, and encamped in Mizpeh. [18] And the people and princes of Gilead said one to another, What man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

War clouds are forming once more over Israel - this time from the east, Jordan. The Israelites lacked human leadership. God almost always uses people to accomplish His purposes, thus we are vital to His redemptive plan. When people turn away from God, leadership disappears from among us. As we will see next week, the Israelites turn to a very unusual man for guidance.