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In Need of a Judge
Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series
Judges 9
Pastor Matt Meyer

Well, good morning. My name is Matt Meyer. I'm the Life Groups Pastor here at Lincoln Berean. I've been around the church for a long time, been on staff for the last seventeen years, primarily in the college ministry working with small groups there, and just this last January, I stepped into the role of helping with life groups and doing that for the entire church. So now you know a little bit more about me if you didn't know who I was, and I'd love to meet you after the service if you'd be so inclined.

But I want to ask you to ponder a couple questions with me this morning as we get started. The first one is this. Have you ever found yourself in a place of need? Maybe you find yourself in a place of need this morning. Maybe there's an overwhelming thing going on in your life and you just can't handle it on your own. You need someone to come to your aid; you're in need. Maybe it's not so overwhelming; maybe it's not a huge overwhelming situation; maybe you just need some advice. Maybe you have some decisions coming up that you have to make, and you'd like to just maybe talk it through with somebody. But you're in need; you're in need of some assistance. Maybe you're not in need this morning, and that's okay. Most of us, at times, find that there are times where I just don't feel like I'm in need. I'd like to ask you, then, to think back with me for a moment to a time when maybe you were in need, and just think about that situation. What was the situation? What did it feel like? How long did it last? What were the emotions that were going on inside your head during that time? Perhaps for some of you, that time was this last year during the pandemic. I've talked to so many people in the last year. The isolation during the time of the pandemic was almost suffocating for them. I talked to several just in the last couple of weeks or had interactions with several, who talked about how much they struggled during that time. And I found myself, as I sat and I listened to what they were talking about, thinking, "I would not have thought that you would struggle this much." That's not meant to be an insult; it's actually meant to be a compliment. But really, it's just a recognition that the isolation, that the things that happened for an extended period of time—the situation, the stuff that was going on—created huge needs in our lives. Or maybe it just helped us recognize or reveal huge needs that were already there, and we were perhaps trying to fill them in different ways on our own. For many, it seemed like God was absent in a lot of ways during the last year and a half, and we just need to recognize this morning that we're all in need far more than we realize. And often we try to do life on our own, in our own way. We try to maintain control because we don't like to be people that are in need.

But I ask you to ponder another question just for a moment with me. Have you ever found yourself in need of a judge? I'm not talking about when you need somebody to decide the property line dispute between you and your neighbor. That's not what I mean. Have you ever found yourself in need of being judged? It's kind of a weird question. Why would I want someone to judge me? That's where the nation of Israel finds itself this morning in our passage. If you want to follow along, I'd invite you to turn to Judges, Chapter 9 with me. Judges 9 is unique in the book of Judges in several ways. First of all, it's the longest chapter—57 verses are in this chapter. Secondly, there's

no judge in this chapter. There's no Yasha to deliver the people. There's also no foreign enemy, no Midianites or Amalekites or any other “ites” that are coming in and oppressing the Israelite nation. Also found in this book is the very first parable in the Bible, and we're going to look at it together in just a little bit. I would describe this chapter as a nightmare, and there's hardly any good news anywhere. It's just a terrible, terrible story. It is a picture of what happens when humans decide to rule themselves on their own without God, and everyone suffers, including the actual land. Everyone...everything.

I also want to do this a little out of order this morning. We're not going to cover the entire chapter because we just don't have time to read all of it. But we're going to read a good portion, so we understand the story. I'm going to fill in the details for you. You can read all of it on your own later today or tomorrow. We're going to start in verse seven though, because the parable starts in verse eight and I want to start with that. Then we'll kind of jump back to the beginning. So go to verse 7:

Now when they told Jotham, 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. (*NASB, Judges 9:7)

So, a couple of things to talk about here. Mount Gerizim and Shechem are significant locations; they're important places. Mount Gerizim was where Joshua was at the end of his time. After they had conquered the promised land and he was urging the people to follow God, he utters this famous statement that many of you have on a plaque in your house right now. You can probably say it with me. *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”* He says that to his people and the people say to him, *“We, too, will follow the Lord. We're not going to go into idolatry; we will remain faithful to our God.”* And that happens for a time. But we've been in the book of Judges all summer and we've recognized that there is a continuing cycle of unfaithfulness of the Israelites to their God, and now Shechem is a center of Baal and idol worship. not in a place of faithfulness.

Secondly is the statement that Jotham makes at the end when he says, “Listen to me,” where he's urging the people of Shechem, **“Listen to me, that God may listen to you.”** It's really important; it's critical to our story. He's saying, “Things are in bad shape. You're in sin and you are in need, and your need is God. The person that you need to deal with is God. So listen to me, so that if and when you decide to call out to God, He may listen to you.” What does he want them to listen to? Well, verses eight and following are the parable:

“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 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!’ (Think thorn bush.) 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.’ (Vs. 8-15)

So, what is this all about? Trees wanting kings, other trees to rule over them. This group of trees wants a king, so they go to the olive tree and they say, “Rule over us,” and he says, “Why would I want to do that? I'm growing olives, doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Why would I want to come reign over some other trees?” So they go to the fig tree and they say the same thing, “Come rule over us,” and he says, “Why? I produce figs. They're important to the nation of Israel. Why would I want to go wave over some trees?” So they go to the grapevine and they say, “Come rule over us; reign over us,” and the grapevine says, “I produce sweet wine that cheers God and cheers man. Why would I want to do that?” So finally, they go to the bramble—to the thornbush—and the thornbush agrees, and he says, “Come, rest in my shade.”

Now think for a minute with me. How much shade is there in a low-to-the-ground bramble or thornbush? Think tumbleweed. There's not any shade. But then he goes on to say, “But if you don't rest in my shade, if you cross me, I'll burn you. Fire will come out and consume you.” So what's Jotham talking about? He's going to get to his point here. Verse 16:

Now therefore, if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, (Keep that in mind.) and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal, (That's Gideon.) and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved—

Here's the thing. Abimelech, if we remember, is the son of a concubine. He's one of Gideon's sons, but he's the son of a concubine—a concubine, by the way, that Gideon should not have had in the first place. But remember what Ryan talked about last week? At the end of Gideon's life—the end of chapter eight—Gideon said, “I'm not going to be king. I'm not going to rule over you. God will rule over you.” But then he took tribute from the people. He had lots of wives; he had concubines; he did everything that a king did, including naming his son of a concubine, Abimelech, which means: *My father is king*. He's pretty much living as the king, Jerubbaal as he's now being called. Let's remember that nickname was given to him back early on in his life as he's getting ready to go fight the Midianites, and that name means: *Let Baal contend against him. Baal is going to get you; Baal is going to contend against you*, and as Gideon began to be successful and defeat the Midianites, it kind of became this nickname, this reminder that Baal didn't get him. Baal didn't succeed because Gideon succeeded in wiping out the Midianites, except that now Shechem is a center of Baal worship. So maybe Baal did win? We'll wait and see.

Jotham is talking in these statements about what happened at the beginning of the chapter, so go back to verse one with me for a minute, and we'll see all he's detailing for us.

And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, (Remember, this is shortly after Gideon's death, his father.) 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 (Keep in mind, I'm one of you.) 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 Bale-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him. 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-milo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the yoke of the pillar which was Shechem. (Vs. 1-6)

So, Abimelech goes to Shechem and basically says, “Hey, is it better for these seventy guys to rule over you or do you want me to rule over you? And keep in mind, I am one of you. So, which do you want?” So, his relatives go and they talk to the leaders, and the leaders think, “We're going to follow Abimelech; he is our relative.” And they give him seventy pieces of silver with which he basically hires mercenaries, and they go out and they slaughter almost all the sons of Gideon. Only Jotham escapes. It all happens in one day, in one place, on one stone. It must have been a bloody massacre, and somehow Jotham escaped. He hides, and they come back and make Abimelech their king. Now this certainly doesn't seem like what God would want. Right? It doesn't seem like they're acting **in truth and integrity**, which is exactly Jotham's point in verse 16. Go back there with me.

Now therefore, if (after all that you know) 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— (He goes on to say) for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; (And he's saying, “You owe Gideon, my father.”) 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, (Remember he's illegitimate. He's not even supposed to be here.) king over the men of Shechem, because he is your relative— (You did this because he didn't have anything else that he was doing. So he decided he wanted to be king, and you just said we're going along with it. He's our relative; we know him and then he kind of repeats himself, verse 19:) 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 Jothan escaped and fled and went to Beer, and remained there because of Abimelech his brother. (Vs. 16-21)

Because he's afraid. I mean, I would be afraid. “They just murdered all seventy of my brothers and then I'm uttering this kind of curse against him. I'm going to go and hide.” Here's what Jotham is saying. “If you've been fair to Gideon's family, in making Abimelech king, and—side note, let's face it, you haven't—but if you have, then may you find great blessing in the rule of king Abimelech, even though Israel's not supposed to have a human king, because God is the King. But if you haven't dealt in truth and integrity—and let's face it, you haven't—then may each of you get, (I hope that you get what you each deserve) him burned by you, and you burned by him, and the rest of this chapter is how that actually plays out. Read verse 22:

Now Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years.

Abimelech must have thought, “It seems to be working. Maybe Jotham was wrong. I’m the king. I’m wealthy; it seems like it’s working out.” Look at verse 23:

Then (God intervened) God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,

Now this is a turning point in the story. God is intervening, but not necessarily in any overt way that the people can see. And the people, God is intervening for them when they are in need, and they don’t even know it; they don’t even realize it. Now, I’m going to tell you how the rest of the story plays out. Like I said, you can read the rest of it later today.

So, the men of Shechem are at odds with Abimelech and they go up to a high point near the entrance to the city, because Shechem was on a major trade route. They are basically hanging out up there and, as the people come in, they attack them. They rob them, as the merchants are coming into trade there and do their business. They attack them, and they rob them, which does a couple of things. It allows them to, first, keep the money from Abimelech because they’re stealing it now and stealing the goods. But basically, it shuts off that trade route, at least to Shechem, so he’s effectively taken down Abimelech in that way.

So that’s going on, but then a guy named Gaal—and we don’t know anything about him—but he shows up and he’s kind of partying and saying, “Hey, who’s Abimelech?” And the people of Shechem decide, “Maybe we want Gaal to rule over us.” They go out and they gather grapes. They have a party. They’re eating; they’re drinking. It says they’re cursing Abimelech. Gaal gets a little bit carried away and he’s like, “Who is Abimelech? Why does he get to rule over Shechem? He should gather his troops and come down. I’ll show him who’s boss.” Now what Gaal doesn’t know is that Abimelech’s lieutenant, Zebul, is in the room, and he kind of sends word. So, Abimelech hears, and he gathers his troops and begins to come down off of Mount Gerizim. So as Gaal looks, he starts to see these people descending. He looks and he says, “Are those people coming down off the mountain?” And Zebul says, “No, no, no, that’s just the shadows creeping.” But then he looks closer, and he realizes, “This is an army, and Zebul kind of eggs him on and says, “You were talking a good game. Where’s your boasting now? It’s time to fight!” So Gaal has no choice. He gathers his troops; he goes out, and Abimelech’s men just slaughter them and run him out of town. It says they recapture the city of Shechem, and they think that this is kind of done so people will know they have this big battle. They run them out of town and the people think that’s the end of it.

But remember, they didn’t hire a good guy to be their king. They hired the thornbush, and they didn’t rest in the thornbush’s shade; they crossed him. They decided they wanted to be with Gaal. So, the people think everything’s okay. They go out to gather their crops again in the field and Abimelech and his men are hiding in the field. They raise up and they slaughter all the people, and it says, “They recaptured the city.” It says, “They raid it,” which means they just burned it to the ground. It says they sowed salt in the land, so they couldn’t grow crops anymore. It’s basically infertile; everything is suffering. It’s a terrible story and when the rulers of Shechem hear about this, they flee to the inner chamber of the tower of their idol. This is still in the heat of the battle, and they find out, “Man, Abimelech, he’s nuts. We better go find a place to hide.” So, they go up and this is a big tower, like a thousand people are in this tower. So, Abimelech goes and gets some

branches and tells his army, “Everybody get a branch.” They all carry it over and lay it against the tower, light it on fire, and they burn the tower to the ground. All thousand people in the tower die.

Remember what Jotham said about the thornbush? If this wasn't done with integrity, if you don't turn from this direction, then fire may come out from the thornbush and consume you. But Abimelech is not finished. He wants the city of Thebez too, so he goes against it and captures it, so the people of Thebez hide in their tower, and Abimelech is going to do the same thing. So, as he's going, they've put their branches up; he's going to light the fire, and a woman leans out the window and drops a millstone on his head and it crushes his skull. And as he's lying there, he says to his swordsman, “Quick, draw your sword and kill me. I don't want to be known as Abimelech, the guy who died because a lady dropped a stone on my head.”

Now if you go to 2 Samuel, chapter 11, how do you think they remember Abimelech? As the guy who died because a lady dropped a stone on his head. So much death! So much heartache and pain! There's really hardly any good news anywhere. So, what do we do with it? What possible application can we find from it for our lives. I think there are several things to consider.

First of all, Judges 9 is about the fact that ultimately sin does not pay off. It does not work to do our life on our own, in our own way, under our own power. The issue in Judges 9 is just like the issue in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve decide: “I'm not going to trust God. I'm going to be my own god. I'm going to take it for myself. I don't think He has our best interest at heart.” Every other leader in the book of Judges is called by God, and they are not seeking the office. Abimelech takes it for himself. It does not work to go against and live against the way God has told us to live. It may seem like it works for a time, three years in this passage. But ultimately, it doesn't pay off. Ultimately doing life on our own, deciding we're in charge, results in pain and heartache and just a lot of death and destruction. Because the nature of sin is that it separates and destroys and leads to death. Judges, chapter 9, is just a picture of Romans 6:23. “*The wages of sin is death,*” and almost all we see in Judges 9 is lots and lots and lots and lots of death. It's heartbreaking and I think we have to ask the question; I think the people in the story at the time are asking the question, “Is God absent?”

As we read it from Judges, chapter 8, verse 34—so in the middle of the end of Gideon's story—from 8:34, all the way through 10:6—so including everything in our passage—God is not mentioned by his covenant name Yahweh at all. The name that reminded the people of Israel that He was their God and they were His people, and that He would work on their behalf to keep His covenant with him, that name is not found anywhere in the passage. And as the Shechemites use idle money to fund a massacre, and Abimelech works his bloody way around Israel, it sure seems as if God is absent. Think about Jotham sitting in Beer for three years, afraid of his brother. How many times do you think he sat and thought to himself, “God, where are You?” as he's waiting in need. Maybe that's been your experience. Maybe you think back to your time of being in need and where you were saying, “God, where are You? How long?” And as the Shechemites and Abimelech, himself, lie dead at the end of chapter 9, it is as a result of a vengeful feud and a fortunate throw by a woman. And it sure seems like Yahweh isn't present, because His name isn't mentioned at all, directly. However, Abimelech's name means *My father is king*. Jotham's name means *Yahweh is perfect or blameless*. It's just a subtle reminder, all the way through the passage: God is not absent. He might be silent; He might be allowing people to live with the results of their

sin. He may be allowing them to live their own way and reap the results of their sin, but He's not absent, and we're told very specifically in verses 23 and 24—we looked at that—and in verses 56 and 57—which we haven't looked at—that God is present, and He's acting but not necessarily in an overt way.

In those verses, the narrator kind of pulls back the curtain on human affairs a little bit and shows us what God is doing. We're told that God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem. Why? In order that the crime against Jerubbaal's seventy sons—the shedding of their blood—might be avenged. God may have been silent, but He wasn't absent. You know that while what seemed like the natural course of events to them, He was acting as a judge and delivering them. There was no lightning bolt from heaven, but there was justice and judgment, and make no mistake, everyone in this passage needs a judge. And I would venture to say everyone in this room today and those watching online, myself included, we need a judge. And God as a God of grace and mercy is not willing to let us be consumed and eaten alive by our sin, and so He judges us.

Now, I want us to think about that phrase for a little bit, as we close this morning, because we can think about that term in multiple ways. He judges us by the continuing cause and effect relationship, that sin leads to death. He judges us by the continuing cause and effect relationship that *He set up* that sin leads to death. What do I mean by that? That sometimes judgment comes through the outworking of human sin. We get what we deserve. There are consequences to our actions. Shechem was destroyed because of its disloyalty. Its greatest sin was its downfall. They just keep picking one guy after another, and eventually it burns them. Abimelech was destroyed because of his desire to maintain his position, to keep control at any human cost. He had no need to attack Thebez. His greatest sin was his downfall. God, in His judgment, uses the tools of human rebellion against those who rebel at times. He judges us at times by causing circumstances to happen in our life. Sometimes He just lets the things play out. Other times He intervenes, but not always in an overt way. Why? So that we come to our senses.

A couple of ideas we need to keep in mind about God's present judgment in our lives and these are in the passage. The first one is this: It comes unseen. The people at that time had no way of seeing or knowing about the evil spirit. They couldn't see it, that God sent the evil that was in the Shechemites hearts, against them and against Abimelech. And in our day, we have no divinely inspired narrator to pull back the curtain for us, to show us where and when and how God is judging people. We might be thinking it's happening, but we can never point to any one event in our lives or in someone else's life and say, "God is judging you for this particular sin that you have committed." That is not our place.

The second thing that we need to keep in mind: God's judgment. His present judgment in our lives comes after a wait. Three years between the time Jotham utters the judgment and the actual judgment comes. That period is covered in a single verse in the text, but it had to have seemed considerably longer for Jotham as he sat in need and waited and waited and waited. He had to learn patience and trust and perseverance. Maybe that's what we need to learn.

Finally, God judges us as a deliverer. There is no Yasha, no judge, no deliverer in this passage that God raises up to deliver the people from an outside enemy, because there is no outside enemy. The people are their own enemy because of their sin. But God is not absent in this passage. We see

Him work to deliver Israel from Abimelech, and we need to remember the larger picture in the book of Judges. The larger picture in the Scriptures, is that God relentlessly offers His grace to people who do not deserve it or seek it or even appreciate it, sometimes even after they have been saved by it. I will say that for you again. The larger picture is, God relentlessly offers His grace to people who do not deserve it or seek it or even appreciate it, sometimes even after they have been saved by it.

See, the book of Judges is not a book of role models to follow. There are a few good examples right at the beginning, and we hardly know anything about them. But the point is, there's really only one true Judge, one true Deliverer and, ultimately, Judges is about God, His grace abounding to sinners. See, I have full confidence that if Abimelech had repented, if the people had turned, He would have poured out His grace and mercy and prevented so much death. It's why he sent Jotham in the first place. There's no Yasha in this chapter but there is, in the larger picture, Yeshua...Jesus. He is the one who can deliver us from our sin. He is the one who can free you from the thing that's enslaving you, from your need to control. He can heal you. He can carry the burden that you were never meant to carry, but only if you turn to Him. He's not going to steal it from you.

I don't know where you're at this morning. I don't know what sin you might be struggling with, trying to keep hidden. Maybe you've successfully kept it hidden for a while from people around you. It feels maybe like you've kept it hidden from God. Judges 9 would say: He's aware. Wouldn't it be great to stop hiding and deal with that sin before God, before it destroys your life? What if your three years is up tomorrow? Is that what you want? Sin destroying your life and possibly the lives of so many people around you? Because the nature of sin is that it separates and destroys and leads to death. But maybe what you're struggling with this morning is not something you think of as sin. I don't tend to think of this as sin, but maybe it's your desire to control. This is what God seems to point out to me so often in my life, my desire to control. Maybe it's a certain relationship in your life, and we kind of all know you can't really make relationships work the way you want them to work. That's not actually a relationship if that's what's happening. Maybe it's something with your job. Maybe it's something with one of your kids, or, kids, maybe it's something with one of your parents. Maybe it's something with your spouse. Maybe it's something that's coming in your future that you want so badly to work out, make work out the way you think it should work out the right way. But really, you don't have the power to make that happen, but you want to hold on and make it happen. Whatever it is, you probably know what it is. The Holy Spirit's probably bringing it to your mind right now. Maybe it's time to lay that down.

The major sin in this chapter is that Abimelech seizes control and makes himself king. It is the sin that starts all of the heartache and pain and destruction and death. Maybe it's time to give up control today and surrender to God. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking about being irresponsible and not having a conversation or not acting when it's appropriate. But most of us know in our heart when we're trying to control something that we can't really control and don't have the ability to control. We know when we're holding on tight, and maybe God is saying, "It's time to open your hands and trust Me."

This next song talks about what Jesus does for us as our judge, as our deliverer. Maybe this morning you're not wrestling with sin; you're not wrestling with control at all. And that's great if that's you. I would encourage you to sing this song, then, in worship of what God has done and

what Jesus has done in your life. But maybe you are struggling this morning. Maybe there's a sin where you've done your best, trying to keep it hidden, and if you're struggling with something like that today, Judges 9 is here to tell us, "It's not going to work out, because the nature of sin is that it destroys, and it separates, and it leads to death." Maybe you're wrestling with control this morning. Judges 9 is here to tell us we were not meant to be in ultimate control. We need to let go, trust God, and wait...and it might be a while. I would encourage you during this next song, if you're struggling, if you're wrestling, come to Jesus. Talk to Him about it. Release it. Lay it down. And then I want to encourage you to do one more thing later today, tomorrow, or sometime this week. Talk to someone else, another person that you're close to, about what you talk to God about in the next few minutes, because bringing it into the light with another person is what's going to help you get the freedom in this area of your life.

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