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THE JUSTICE OF THE LORD

Judges 9:22-57

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October 31, 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's call for an overhaul of medieval Catholicism and the birth of the Protestant Reformation. One of the highest priorities of the Reformation was making the whole Bible accessible to everyday Christians in their own languages, so that we all might know the whole story—even the most dismal chapters, like Judges 9.

Here's why we take time to study these old stories: Jesus' Bible was the Hebrew Scriptures, i.e. the Old Testament. Jesus' teachings and actions were profoundly shaped by the back story that we read in the Old Testament. Those who don't know that back story are easy targets for people who repurpose Jesus as the mascot or spokesman of their particular cause. We encounter so many repurposed Jesuses today, whether the Republican or Libertarian or Democrat Jesus, the black Jesus or the white Jesus, the capitalist or the socialist Jesus, etc. The possibilities are endless. Yet Jesus was not made in America, nor is he the champion of any of our causes, be they ever so noble. The whole story of the Bible makes it clear that Jesus is the king of his own kingdom, and he is at work repairing everything that is broken in our world.

We study these old stories for the same reason that the doctor asks how you broke your toe, or the plumber asks how your pipes became clogged. If we're to understand what and why and how Jesus is repairing all that is broken in our world, then we need to hear the authoritative back story, i.e. the one Jesus assumed whenever he spoke and acted. How did the world get broken in the first place? Why did prior attempts to fix it fail? Why did God have to send his only son to live and die among us to repair our broken world? We learn these things from reading the back story.

The book of Judges is a chapter in a larger epic story that Jesus came to fulfill. Judges tells of the downward spiral of the Israelites as their relationship with God disintegrated and they turned against one another. Each week this fall the sun goes down a little earlier, it gets a little colder outside, and these stories get a little darker. They're pointing us forward to Christmas, when God sent his only son to do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. In this message we'll learn about the inevitability of God's justice and the generosity of his grace in and through Jesus Christ.

The Gideon Trilogy (Judges 6-9)

At the center of the book of Judges is a trilogy of stories about Gideon. If these stories were set as an epic space adventure, they might be titled:

Episode 1. A New Hope. (Judges 6-7)

Episode 2. Baal Strikes Back (Judges 8)

Episode 3. The Return of the Lord (Judges 9)

In Episode 1, Israel found a new hope in an unlikely, ordinary guy named Gideon. God patiently prepared Gideon for leadership, taking him from fear to faith. Then God led him to victory, not only over the marauding nations that were oppressing them, but also over the dark master Baal, the bloodthirsty god of the Canaanites. After he destroyed his father's altar to Baal, Gideon became known as Jerubbaal, or the *Baal-fighter*.

In Episode 2, Baal Struck Back. The people wanted Gideon, the triumphant hero, to be their king. At first, Gideon piously refused, saying that the Lord should be their king instead. But then he took every opportunity to enjoy whatever royal treatment the people might afford him. He dressed in purple robes, he had lots of children with foreign wives, and he became the priest of his own syncretistic cult that allowed Baal to nose his way back into the tent. As his relationship with God disintegrated, Gideon also began to oppress and wage war against his own people. So by all accounts, Gideon became indistinguishable from any other pagan king.

Then Gideon died, and we learn that he had an illegitimate son by a Canaanite woman. It was probably she who named her son Abimelech—which means *My-Dad-is-King*—maybe as a way of laying claim to daddy's fortune. Instead of growing up in the same town as his father, Abimelech was raised by his mother's family in Shechem, situated in the mountain pass between Mt. Gerizim and Mt Ebal. In Hebrew, the tops of mountains were called "heads," and here between them was Shechem, which means "shoulder" or "nape of the neck." So Shechem might be translated as *Shoulderville*.

Shoulderville had been one of the holiest places in ancient Palestine. It was here by the great oak that God appeared to Abraham and told him, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). It was here centuries later that Abraham's descendants renewed their covenant with God after entering the Promised Land. Joshua said to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of the Caananites or the Lord. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And by the great oak in *Shoulderville*, the Israelites erected a pillar to remind them of their relationship with the Lord. Here all twelve tribes recited the blessings that would come from remaining in relationship with God, as well as the curses that would follow if they abandoned God. So, it's a bitter irony that when Baal struck back, it started in *Shoulderville*. What had once been a thin place for people to draw near to God became an altar to Baal, the ruthless god of Abimelech's mother and her kin.

When Abimelech came of age, he spoke with his relatives in *Shoulderville* and said, "I am your kin. Now that Gideon the *Baal-fighter* is dead, wouldn't you prefer me as king rather than his other sons?" The people said yes, not only because Abimelech was their relative, but also because Baal was their god. Abimelech hired a squad of "worthless and reckless fellows," who rounded up his 70 brothers and sacrificed them to Baal on a stone altar.¹ Baal had struck back and gotten his revenge.

The third and final episode in the Gideon trilogy is about the Return of the Lord, but you wouldn't know it from the text of Judges 9.² The name of the Lord—*Yahweh* in Hebrew—is almost completely absent from chapter 9. The only place it appears is hidden within the name of the one brother to have escaped the bloody massacre. Jotham (*Yah-tam*) in Hebrew means *Yahweh-Settles-Things*. So, even though the Lord's name isn't explicitly mentioned in Judges 9, the message of this chapter is that the Lord's justice will prevail. As Jotham's name implies, *Yahweh* will settle everything.

In Judges 9:7-21, Jotham foretells how God will settle everything through a prophetic parable that he preaches to the people of *Shoulderville*. In it, the trees seek a king to rule over them. Noble trees like the olive, the fig, and the grape decline to take the throne. So the trees make a worthless bramble their king instead, and before long the entire forest is burned to the ground. The bramble, of course, is Abimelech, whom Jotham sees for what he really is—not kingly material, but an opportunistic power grabber with no regard for anyone or anything other than himself. The message of Jotham's parable is that if you make a scoundrel your leader, he will inevitably take all he can while giving you nothing in return. It's a message that is just as relevant today as it was 3500 years ago.

How Yahweh Settled Things (Judges 9:22-57)

Judges 9:22ff tells how Jotham's predictions came to pass. The way the story unfolds, thugs from *Shoulderville* started robbing people on the highway, and this somehow became a nuisance to Abimelech (9:25). Then perhaps because *Shoulderville* developed a reputation as a haven for opportunists, it wasn't long before a new scoundrel came to town: Gaal son of Ebed (9:26). Ebed is Hebrew for "slave." Gaal is Hebrew for "loathsome, foul, putrid." Let's call him

¹ Like his father, Abimelech had an impaired relationship with God, which led to broken relationships with his brothers.

² In commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a vernacular translation of Judges 9 follows in an appendix at the end of these notes.

Stinky Slaveson. Not long after Stinky moved to town, the leaders (*baals*) of *Shoulderville* had thrown their lot in with him.³

At *Shoulderville's* harvest festival, after a few drinks, *Stinky* found the courage to call the *Shoulderville baals* (leaders) to himself in rebellion against Abimelech. In vv 28-29, if *Stinky's* speech sounds familiar, it's because he used the same argument with the people of *Shoulderville* that Abimelech had used with them three years prior. Abimelech once asked them, "Who is Gideon the *Baal-fighter*, and who are his sons?" Three years later, *Stinky* asked, "Who is this Abimelech fellow? Isn't he the son of Gideon the *Baal-fighter*? Why are we serving him? After all, you're the *baals* (leaders) of *Shoulderville*, the city of Baal. Follow me and we will rid ourselves of the *Baal-fighter's* son."

Prince (Zebul), the Mayor of *Shoulderville*, sent word to Abimelech (9:30). Before dawn Abimelech surrounded *Shoulderville* with four companies under four leaders or "heads" in Hebrew (9:34). Then *Stinky Slaveson* woke up, very likely hungover, and as he looked out the city gate he saw Abimelech's forces descending from the tops or "heads" of the mountains (9:35-36). Mayor *Prince* savored the moment, and then sprung his trap, saying "Where's your mouth now, you big talker?" (9:38). *Stinky* marched out as the singular "head" of the *baals* of *Shoulderville*, to oppose Abimelech's forces (9:39). Clearly the odds were in Abimelech's favor, because it was four "heads" against one.⁴

Stinky Slaveson led his one company, or *head*, against Abimelech's four *heads*, and Abimelech emerged victorious. But Abimelech wasn't satisfied. He wanted revenge against his hometown, which had so quickly rebelled against him. So he returned to annihilate them.

In the final verses of the story, pay attention to the narrator's headcount. The first day, Abimelech led four *heads* or companies against *Stinky's* one. The next day, Abimelech went out with three *heads* against the survivors (9:43). Two *heads* remained outside the city where they slaughtered the people in the fields (9:44). Meanwhile, Abimelech led the one remaining *head* into the city where he killed everyone else (9:45). Then Abimelech razed the city, sowed it with salt, and left the once sacred *Shoulderville* desolate for generations to come.

³ The narrator emphasizes the idolatry in *Shoulderville* by using the Hebrew word *baal*, "master," to describe the elders of the town. We inevitably become like whatever we worship. Baal was an opportunistic scoundrel with no regard for anyone or anything other than himself. So, not surprisingly, both Abimelech and the leaders of *Shoulderville* became *baals* too, just like the god they served.

⁴ By this time in Judges 9 the narrator hopes his hearers (and readers) have noticed how he keeps repeating the words *head* and *baal*. English versions tend to smooth out the story according to the tastes of modern readers, adding more variation in the way words are translated. So, for example, in Judges 9, only 3 of the 10 occurrences of the Hebrew word for "head" end up being translated into English as "head" in the English Standard Version. The narrator wants us paying careful attention to these two words, *head* and *baal*, as he builds toward the climactic ending of the final episode.

Yet he still wasn't satisfied. Just as Jotham had predicted, Abimelech the bramble began to burn down the entire forest. As it turns out, there were still some 1,000 survivors hiding in the Tower of *Shoulderville*. So Abimelech and his men piled brambles at the base of the tower and then they burned it down with everyone inside (9:46-49). Another 1,000 burnt offerings offered up to Baal.

Even then, Abimelech still wasn't satisfied. Again, we inevitably become like what we worship, and Abimelech had become as insatiable in his thirst for blood as Baal himself. He was a homicidal maniac on a rampage. So he set out for Thebez, some ten miles to the north, perhaps because they had another very flammable tower there (9:50). At this point, Abimelech was down to just one company, one *head*, presumably the same head that burned the last tower to the ground. But this time, as Abimelech drew near with a burning bramble in hand, an anonymous woman threw a millstone down from the tower (9:52-53). Where do you think it landed? It crushed Abimelech's last remaining *head*. So with no more *heads* left, Abimelech's bloody rampage finally came to an end. When the men of Israel saw that he was dead, everyone who was left went home, if they still had a home (9:55). Thank God the killing had stopped, but what a tragic ending for those who remained behind.

The Justice of the Lord

We all know how these blockbuster trilogies are supposed to work. Episode 1 establishes the good guys and the bad guys. Episode 2 takes a sinister turn, leaving the audience waiting in suspense to discover how the good guys will pull it out in the end. Episode 3 is then the final battle with the bad guys defeated and the good guys victorious.

That's precisely the outcome of the Gideon trilogy as well.

As the son of Gideon, Abimelech really should have been a good guy, but instead he turned out just like the bloodthirsty god he worshiped. According to the Law of Moses, being stoned to death was the appropriate punishment for a murderer. Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers (9:56). Abimelech got what he deserved.

The people of Shechem (*Shoulderville*) got what they deserved as well. Their city existed as a permanent reminder of God's promises to his people. Only a few generations earlier, they had sworn under Joshua that they would serve the Lord, but soon they turned away to idols. Then having turned away from the Lord, they soon turned against one another. The people of Shechem really should have been good guys, but they ended up on the wrong side, and it led to their destruction. Thus God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their *heads* (9:57).

Jotham (*Yahweh-Settles-Things*) was right. God's justice will prevail against bad guys. It always does. Which then begs the question: what will God do with us? If truth be told, none of us has a perfect track record. Some have no relationship with God. Others are distracted by a host of idols. When our relationship with God falters, we then have broken relationships with one another. In short, all of us have secrets that we don't want to come out into the light. Where then do we stand in relationship to God's justice? We should be good guys, but we're not. So then why should our fate be any different than Abimelech's and the people of Shechem?

The very first sin recorded in the Bible led to broken relationships: a vertical breach in humanity's relationship with God, as well as a horizontal breach in their relationships with one another. In response to that sin, not only did God promise justice, he also offered grace (Gen 3:15). God spoke to Eve of a savior who would someday rescue humanity from sin. The savior would come to wage war with the enemy, the serpent, the father of Baal and every other idol that vies for our allegiance. In that first Gospel promise, God said that the serpent would bruise the Savior's heel, but the Savior would crush the serpent's head.

Abimelech's downfall represents the second time in the book of Judges that a courageous woman stepped forward as God's agent of justice to crush the head of the enemy. Jael did it to Sisera in Judges 4. The anonymous woman of Thebez did it to Abimelech in Judges 9. Both stories remind us of God's promise, given to the first woman, of a savior who would crush the head of the father of all enemies, Satan himself.

According to the Bible, God's penalty for sin is death, and because no one is perfect, all of us should face the death penalty for our sins. None of us, by ourselves, is a good guy. Apart from God's grace, we deserve for the evil we have done to come back on our own heads.

Thankfully God's justice, as important as it is, is not the main storyline of the Bible. The more dominant storyline in the Bible is one of grace. God so loved the world that he kept the promise made to Eve in the garden, and he sent his only son, Jesus, to die in our place. Jesus was sacrificed on the cross for our sins, suffering God's justice, and then God raised him to new life in order to crush Satan's head. Through Jesus we can receive God's unqualified forgiveness instead of his justice.

So how do we take full advantage of God's gracious gift of forgiveness in Jesus? Not by trying to clean ourselves up good enough to pass God's standards. Five hundred years ago, when Martin Luther called for the reformation of the medieval church, people often believed that they could work hard and pile up good deeds on the scales of eternity, and thereby somehow outweigh their sins. They believed they could clean themselves up well enough for God to save them. Luther, however, was a student of the Bible. He read the back story, and he knew that the only way any of us could ever satisfy God's justice would be for Jesus to do it for us. Luther called the church to return to the good news of God's forgiveness not through our own good works, but through confessing our sins and putting our faith in Jesus Christ. All we need to do, all we can do, is to trust in Jesus for God's forgiveness and grace.

Asking Jesus for help is the last thing a self-respecting person would do today. We live in a time of unprecedented self-righteousness. We are a civilization who believes, by and large, that if God exists, and if he has any standards, then whatever his standards are, we're good enough to meet them. Within the moral universe, in relation to all the really bad guys out there, we're quite certain of our inherent goodness.

Jesus himself would have us think otherwise. In Matthew 9:10-13, he shared a meal with people who knew that they deserved God's justice rather than his mercy. Those people—people who knew they were broken—were the ones who welcomed Jesus long ago. It's the same today. Others in Jesus day, just as today, rejected Jesus because they were confident of their own righteousness. They believed they were good enough to pass God's standards. To them and to us, Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

Yahweh will settle things. He always does. God's justice will be satisfied, one way or another. The Lord Jesus will take care of it for you. All you have to do is ask.

Judges 9 in Contemporary English

¹ *My-Dad-is-King* (Abimelech) the son of *Baal-fighter* (Jerubbaal) went to *Shoulderville* (Shechem) to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, ² "Say in the ears of all the *baals* (leaders) of *Shoulderville*, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of *Baal-fighter* rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." ³ His mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the *Shoulderville baals*, and their hearts inclined to follow *My-Dad-is-King*, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴ So they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of *Baal-of-the-Covenant* (Baal-berith) with which *My-Dad-is-King* hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. ⁵ He went to his father's house at *Dust-town* (Ophrah) and killed his brothers the sons of *Baal-fighter*, seventy men, on one stone—but *Yahweh-Settles-Things* (Jotham) the youngest son of *Baal-fighter* was left, for he hid himself. ⁶ Then all the *Shoulderville baals* came together, and all the *House-of-Fulness* (Beth-millo), and they went and made *My-Dad-is-King* the king, by the oak of the pillar at *Shoulderville*.

⁷ When it was told to *Yahweh-Settles-Things*, he went and stood at the head of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you *Shoulderville baals*, that God may listen to you. ⁸ The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' ⁹ But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁰ And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' ¹² And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹³ But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁴ Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' ¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.' ¹⁶ "Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made *My-Dad-is-King* the king, and if you have dealt well with *Baal-fighter* and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved—¹⁷ for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, ¹⁸ and you have risen up against my father's house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made *My-Dad-is-King*, the son of his female servant, king over the *Shoulderville baals*, because he is your relative—¹⁹ if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with *Baal-fighter* and with his house this day, then rejoice in *My-Dad-is-King*, and let him also rejoice in you. ²⁰ But if not, let fire come out from *My-Dad-is-King* and devour the *Shoulderville baals* and *House-of-Fulness* (Beth-millo); and let fire come out from the *Shoulderville baals* and from *House-of-Fulness* and devour *My-Dad-is-King*." ²¹ And *Yahweh-Settles-Things* ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of *My-Dad-is-King* his brother.

²² *My-Dad-is-King* ruled Israel three years. ²³ And God sent an evil spirit between *My-Dad-is-King* and the *Shoulderville baals*, and the *Shoulderville baals* dealt treacherously with *My-Dad-*

is-King,²⁴ that the violence done to the seventy sons of *Baal-fighter* might come, and their blood be laid on *My-Dad-is-King* their brother, who killed them, and on the men of *Shoulderville*, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers.

²⁵ The *Shoulderville baals* put men in ambush on the *heads* of the mountains. They robbed all who passed by, and it was told to *My-Dad-is-King*.²⁶ Then *Stinky Slaveson* (Gaal son of Ebed) moved to *Shoulderville* with his kin, and the *Shoulderville baals* put confidence in him.²⁷ They went out into the field, gathered grapes from their vineyards, trod them, and held a festival. They went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled *My-Dad-is-King*.²⁸ *Stinky Slaveson* said, "Who is *My-Dad-is-King*, and who are we of *Shoulderville*, that we should serve him? Isn't he *Baal-fighter's* son, and isn't *Prince* (Zebul) his officer? Serve the men of Hamor, father of *Shoulderville*; but why should we serve him?²⁹ Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove *My-Dad-is-King*. I would say to *My-Dad-is-King*, 'Increase your army, and come out.'"

³⁰ When Mayor *Prince* (Zebul) heard the words of *Stinky Slaveson*, his anger was kindled.³¹ So he sent messengers to *My-Dad-is-King* secretly, saying, "Behold, *Stinky Slaveson* and his kin have come to *Shoulderville*, and they are stirring up the city against you.³² Go then by night with your men and set an ambush in the field.³³ At dawn, rise early and rush upon the city. When he and his men come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do."³⁴ So *My-Dad-is-King* and all his men rose up by night and set an ambush against *Shoulderville* in four *heads*.

³⁵ *Stinky Slaveson* went and stood in the entrance of the city gate. *My-Dad-is-King* and his people rose from the ambush.³⁶ When *Stinky* saw them, he said to *Prince*, "Look, people are coming down from the *heads* of the mountains!" And *Prince* said to him, "You mistake the mountain shadows for men."³⁷ *Stinky* spoke again and said, "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one *head* is coming from the direction of the Diviners' Oak."³⁸ Then *Prince* said to him, "Where is your mouth now, you who said, 'Who is *My-Dad-is-King*, that we should serve him?' Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them."³⁹ So *Stinky* went out as the *head* of the *baals* of *Shoulderville* and fought with *My-Dad-is-King*.⁴⁰ *My-Dad-is-King* chased him so he fled before him, and many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate.⁴¹ *My-Dad-is-King* stayed in the *heights* (Arumah), while *Prince* drove out *Stinky* and his kin so that they could not stay in *Shoulderville*.⁴² The next day, the people went out into the field, and *My-Dad-is-King* was told.⁴³ He took his men, divided them into three *heads*, and set an ambush in the fields. He looked and, seeing the people coming out of the city, rose against them and killed them.⁴⁴ *My-Dad-is-King* and the *head* that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the city gate, while the two *heads* rushed upon all who were in the field and killed them.⁴⁵ And *My-Dad-is-King* fought against the city all that day. He captured it and killed the people in it. He razed the city and sowed it with salt.

⁴⁶ When all the *baals* of *Shoulderville* Tower heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of *God-of-the-Covenant* (El-berith). ⁴⁷ *My-Dad-is-King* was told that all the *baals* of the *Shoulderville* Tower were gathered together. ⁴⁸ So *My-Dad-is-King* went up Mount Zalmon, he and all his men. *My-Dad-is-King* took an axe in his hand and cut off a tree branch and laid it on his shoulder. He then said to his men, "hurry and do as I have done." ⁴⁹ So every one of them cut his branch and following *My-Dad-is-King* laid it against the stronghold. Then they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of *Shoulderville* Tower also died, about 1,000 men and women.

⁵⁰ *My-Dad-is-King* next went to Thebez and encamped against it and captured it. ⁵¹ There also was a strong tower within that city. All the men and women and all the *baals* of the city fled to it, shut themselves in, and went up to the roof. ⁵² *My-Dad-is-King* came and fought against it and drew near to the tower's door to burn it with fire. ⁵³ But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on *My-Dad-is-King's* head and cracked his skull. ⁵⁴ 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.'" So his young man thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ When the men of Israel saw that *My-Dad-is-King* was dead, everyone went home. ⁵⁶ Thus God returned the evil of *My-Dad-is-King*, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ And God also made all the evil of the men of *Shoulderville* return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of *Yahweh-Settles-Things* the son of *Baal-fighter*.