

Isaiah 1:27-31

27 Zion will be redeemed by justice, those who repent, by righteousness. 28 At the same time both rebels and sinners will be broken, and those who abandon the Lord will perish. 29 Indeed, they[g] will be ashamed of the sacred trees you desired, and you will be embarrassed because of the garden shrines you have chosen. 30 For you will become like an oak whose leaves are withered, and like a garden without water. 31 The strong one will become tinder, and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to extinguish the flames.

INTRODUCTION

- In January of 1933 a 42 year-old Austrian-born politician ascended to the office of Chancellor of Germany at the head of the National Socialist German Workers Party. He rose to this office on the wings of his cunning and oratory skills. He convinced the German people that they were being systemically disenfranchised by the restrictions placed on them by the Treaty of Versailles and that their national purity and home soil was being polluted by the existence of the Jews. He won the German people with a story of the revitalization of national honor and purity that would usher in a period of economic and social flourishing the likes of which had never been seen in Germany. Within 8 months he had established himself as a dictator, taking control of the army and dissolving any political or social institutions that might pose a challenge to him... and by 1945 the entire world had become a battlefield. Much of Europe, and most of Germany, lay in complete ruin. Somewhere between 35 and 60 million people had died, 4.2 million of those people the very Germans who had bought into the narrative of Adolf Hitler. Germans who had at one point seen him as the savior of Germany.
- Listen... Many in 1933 thought they were getting the thing they wanted most, the thing that was BEST for them, a strong and inspiring leader who would lead them into an age of prosperity.
 - But in the end, he delivered to them a feast of bitter destruction and death.
 - In our society today... we have continually elected leaders and pursued policies that have led to the destruction of our mental and physical health, fractured our sense of national unity and purpose, and facilitated the slaughter of 60 million unborn children.
 - We will see from our text that this is not a new phenomenon.
 - When given the option between obedience to God or the pursuit of ungodly self-interest, humanity regularly pursues that self-interest.
 - When presented a new cultural or political savior which promises to rescue us, we empower them to do things that ultimately prove evil and destructive.
 - And then, as surely as night follows day, we reap the harvest of what we have sown.
- We have been reading in Judges the repeating story of the people of Israel. A people who time and again go after unrighteous things that they think will bring them prosperity, blessing, and abundance, all while suppressing the truth of God in their unrighteousness.
 - And time and time again God disciplines them for their rebellion and then rescues them.
 - In his mercy He raises up earthly deliverers to lead them out of oppression and correct their iniquity.
 - But the story of Abimelech, found here in Judges Chapter 9, is different...
- **Main Point: The story of Abimelech illustrates what happens when God gives a person *and a people* over to their ungodliness.**
 - Last week Pastor Ryan wrapped up a three-week study on Gideon, the flawed man of faith, who both delivered his people and destroyed his people, fought for the faithfulness of his people but also facilitated their idolatry.

- Although on the surface Gideon passed the test of pride when offered the kingdom... the implication of the last section of Judges 8 and the first section of Judges 9 is that in the end he had adopted a heart attitude of being king... even naming his illegitimate Son Abi-Melech: “My Father is King.”
 - In chapter 9 it is implied that his 70 sons are in fact ruling over the people in some way...
 - He was acting as a king whether or not he identified publicly as one.
 - Upon his death the nation throws itself wholeheartedly back into the worship of Baal
 - Gideon had not trained his people in righteousness... he had merely restrained their evil...
- In the text, the transition from calling him Gideon to using his Caananite name “Jerubbaal” coupled with the people’s enthusiastic return to Baal worship indicates that the culture had become fully Caananized by the time of Gideon’s death.
 - Which brings us to our passage... and our first point...
- What happens When God gives a people, a culture and its leaders, over to their sinful pursuits? Well...

- **Ungodly cultures produce profane and wicked rulers.**

- Judges 9:1-6

Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem and spoke to his uncles and to his mother's whole clan, saying, "Please speak in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem, 'Is it better for you that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you or that one man rule over you?' Remember that I am your own flesh and blood." His mother's relatives spoke all these words about him in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem, and they were favorable to Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." So, they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-berith. Abimelech used it to hire worthless and reckless men, and they followed him. He went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, on top of a large stone. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, because he hid. Then all the citizens of Shechem and of Beth-millo gathered together and proceeded to make Abimelech king at the oak of the pillar in Shechem.

- Ungodly cultures produce profane and wicked rulers.

- And Gideon's son Abimelech is the paradigm of this.

- We are going to see that Abimelech is both a cunning and ruthlessly ambitious man, filled with a predilection toward violence.
 - Like many politicians through the ages, he rises to power by enflaming the embers of dissatisfaction amongst the elites.
 - And notice... he does it with such subtlety and cunning...
 - He never comes right out and makes the appeal to be king... he politics...
 - He leverages his relationships on his mother's side to start to spread his campaign message among the elite of Shechem:
 - And his message is very simple and appealing... and it smacks of the serpent in the garden... whispered questions to confuse reality...
 - Isn't better that you would be ruled by a family member, from your very own town, your very own clan?
 - The rule of Gideon's 70 sons is oppressive, confusing, wouldn't it just be better if I, your own flesh and blood ruled?
 - Reminds me of those campaign commercials where politicians are trying to convince you that they are just an aw shucks down home American boy with hometown values and wisdom just like you that will go up to that big bad Washington DC and make real change on your behalf.
 - And these questions IGNORE the fact that GOD said the people would not pick the king... God would establish their ruler...
- But those who are in power in Shechem hear the question and think... yeah... that sounds great...
 - Abimelech is a hometown boy with some good connections.

- Someone we are already close to... not some group of wanna-be Gideons in Ophrah...
- He is someone we can more directly influence...
 - Someone who can help us enlarge our own claims and interests.
- And so the lords of Shechem... literally the baals of Shechem... take money out of the temple of the demon god Baal in order to fund Abimelech's campaign.
 - Now... this isn't just where they were banking their money.
 - There is a demonic element to what is happening here
 - They are pulling resources out of the treasury of Baal as a picture of Baal's resourcing/empowering of Abimelech
 - And this sinister undertone is confirmed by what Abimelech DOES with the money..
 - The text says he hires worthless and reckless men...
 - ...the Hebrew words there paint a picture of empty vessels, devoid of anything noble, who are boiling over with pride...
 - He hires men committed to wickedness to be his bureaucracy... his cabinet...
- Further proof of their demonic empowerment is what they do next:
 - They travel to the city of Ophrah, to his fathers house and they don't just MURDER his 70 step-brothers...
 - They **sacrifice** them on a stone alter...
 - The destruction of the house of God's flawed servant Gideon is financed by the house of the demon god Baal... whom these brothers are sacrificed to...
- And upon his return to Shechem the demonic twisting continues as the ruling elite make Abimelech king at the oak in Shechem...
 - This oak, or grove of oaks, feature prominently in the story of Israel
 - The same oak that Abraham was brought to and told of God's promised land.
 - The same oak where Jacob had buried all household idols as an act of purification.
 - The same oak that Joshua had led the people in setting up a stone of covenant faithfulness beside.
 - And here a false king is raised up... at this place of solemn remembrance of their true ruler Yahweh and his gracious covenant with them...
 - Here Abimelech is raised up in defiance of God and His law, while the blood and stench of pagan sacrifice is still on him...
 - God was to appoint the inevitable king over Israel, not the baals of Shechem.
 - The King was to come from Judah not the tribe of Manasseh
 - Abimelech is an anti-Christ. Committed to injustice, violence, and the perversion of true religion.
- Don't we frequently see that same thing today...
 - Who is regularly voted into office?

- Politicians devoted to an agenda that is committed to the expulsion of God and biblical virtue from every part of public life... backed by huge amounts of money from the ruling elite... hiring and appointing those who are proud and *devoid of virtue* to every level of their administration...
 - All while using the language and residual cultural pathos of Christendom to justify it.
 - Child murder is couched in terms of individual rights or health care access.
 - Medically facilitated suicide is wrapped in the language of human dignity.
 - Exploitation of workers and the environment represented as obedience to the cultural mandate.
 - Perversion and promiscuity is promoted as love and blessing.
 - Rebellion against God and His order is represented as obedience to nature or liberation.
- People with unrighteous and ungodly ideologies then place their hands upon a sacred text as an invocation of God's blessing and go on to institutionalize that which is EVIL and tear out that which is good...
 - They make the sacred profane.
 - They exchange righteousness for wickedness.
 - And then they replicate... hiring worthless and reckless men and women to administrate it all.
- Ungodly cultures produce profane and wicked rulers... God have mercy upon us....

To make matters worse...

- **Ungodly cultures reject righteous warnings.**

- In his mercy, God uses the youngest of Gideon's sons, the one who escaped, to give them a chance to turn away from their wickedness...
- Judges 9:7-21

7 When they told Jotham, he climbed to the top of Mount Gerizim, raised his voice, and called to them: Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, and may God listen to you: The trees decided to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, "Reign over us." But the olive tree said to them, "Should I stop giving my oil that people use to honor both God and men, and rule[c] over the trees?" 10 Then the trees said to the fig tree, "Come and reign over us." 11 But the fig tree said to them, "Should I stop giving my sweetness and my good fruit, and rule over trees?" 12 Later, the trees said to the grapevine, "Come and reign over us." 13 But the grapevine said to them, "Should I stop giving my wine that cheers both God and man, and rule over trees?" 14 Finally, all the trees said to the bramble, "Come and reign over us." 15 The bramble said to the trees, "If you really are anointing me as king over you, come and find refuge in my shade. But if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon." 16 "Now if you have acted faithfully and honestly in making Abimelech king, if you have done well by Jerubbaal and his family, and if you have rewarded him appropriately for what he did— 17 for my father fought for you, risked his life, and rescued you from Midian, 18 and now you have attacked my father's family today, killed his seventy sons on top of a large stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the citizens of Shechem 'because he is your brother' — 19 so if you have acted faithfully and honestly with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech and may he also rejoice in you. 20 But if not, may fire come from Abimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo, and may fire

come from the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo and consume Abimelech.” 21 Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and lived there because of his brother Abimelech.

- This lone survivor, whose name means “The Lord is Perfect”, takes a risk and stands up on Mt. Gerizim to tell a story as a warning to the people.
 - There are a few things we need to notice about this fable.
- First, Jotham does not direct his warning to Abimelech.
 - Even though Abimelech and his henchmen murdered 69 of his family members, he does not take a particularly condemning tone towards him.
 - He is calling out the responsibility of the people who PUT Abimelech in his position of power.
 - Now, God will hold Abimelech accountable... we will see that...
 - But the trees... the lords of Shechem... were seeking to be ruled...
 - Just not by the rule of Yahweh or the one whom Yahweh would choose for them...
 - No they wanted the benefit of a strong leader of their own choosing.
 - So, they went to the Olive Tree...
 - The wealthy one that produces things to honor both God and man...
 - But the Olive tree declines because... it is already obeying God and being fruitful.
 - So they go to the fig tree.
 - The wise one that produces security and allows people to enrich their lives
 - But the Fig tree declines because... it is already obeying God and being fruitful
 - So they go to the grape vine...
 - The encouraging one that brings forth things that please God and man...
 - But the Vine declines because... it is already obeying God and being fruitful
 - So, in their unwillingness to be ruled by the Creator of the Olive tree, Fig tree, and Grape vine, they turn to something fruitless... something fit only for the fire... they turn to the bramble...
 - And the bramble is more than happy to rule over the trees, to assume a position of power and authority.
 - The bramble says, yes come... take refuge in my shade...
 - Not to press the analogy... but What is the only way to get shade from a low lying bramble bush?
 - To lie on the ground... to be brought all the way down to the dust...
 - And the bramble says do this... or I will burn down the Cedars of Lebanon..
 - Do this or I will consume and destroy everything and everyone noble and good unless you scrape in the dust before me...
 - And don't we see this today...
 - The people who SHOULD be candidates for positions of power are often too busy doing what is good in the sight of God...
 - ...and the people who should never be moved into positions of power are all too happy to provide shade from their moral bankruptcy.

- There are faithful and godly people in this congregation who I have encouraged to run for mayor who have declined for the same reason as the olive, fig, and vine.
 - And we all see the destructive consequences and groaning that follow these fruitless leaders...
- So Jotham stands on Mt Gerizim... the mount from which God's blessings for covenant faithfulness was declared in Deuteronomy 27... and warns the people of Shechem of their unfaithfulness...
 - It is a picture of God's merciful warning against disobedience...
 - Jotham appeals to the mercy that God had shown through their deliverance by Gideon.
 - He appeals to the debt of gratitude owed to both God and Gideon
 - He stands on the mount of God's covenant blessings and appeals to them...
 - It is a call to repentance... to turn away from their path of destruction...
 - Because if they do not, fire will consume them... they will be destroy themselves...
- What a merciful and gracious act by Jotham and by God...
 - But it is clearly rejected. Jotham has to flee to escape Abimelech and his people.
 - They do not heed Jotham's warning.
 - They do not turn from their ungrateful faithlessness.
 - They do not call out to Yahweh...
 - They do not submit to Yahweh...
- Which leaves only one outcome...

- **Ungodly cultures will experience the wrath of God.**

- Judges 9:22-24

22 When Abimelech had ruled over Israel three years, 23 God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem. They treated Abimelech deceitfully, 24 so that the crime against the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come to justice and their blood would be avenged on their brother Abimelech, who killed them, and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him kill his brothers.
- So the story gets even more brutal here...
 - The characters in this story have chosen commit themselves wrongdoing.
 - To commit themselves to the defiance of God, His law, and the covenant.
 - To worship the demon god Baal and raise up a demonically empowered ruler.
 - They have devoted themselves to EVIL...
- So God demonstrates his sovereignty and justice by giving them exactly what they have devoted themselves to...
 - He sends an evil spirit to orchestrate the destruction of these guilty parties.
 - I am going to summarize the narrative found in verses 25-55, but I suggest you go and read it after to ensure that what I am telling you is true...
- An evil spirit stirs up strife between the elite of Shechem and the false-king Abimelech. The elites begin to sabotage the regional economy in an attempt to undermine Abimelech... to step out from his shade... going so far as to back another leader, a man named Gaal.
 - Now, in what should not be a surprising twist, the name Gaal means something loathsome...
 - So now this ungodly culture raises up something loathsome to be their ruler...
 - Now they don't take him to the oak and make him king, but they do throw a party for him.
 - During the course of which one of Abimelech's henchmen, sends a message to Abimelech to come and deal with Gaal.
 - So Abimelech marches on the city in the morning, defeating Gaal's forces and driving him out.
 - Thinking that this Gaal business is now all settled, the common people of Shechem head out into the fields the next day to do their labor and clean up the battlefield.
 - Here Abimelech's evil and unkingly-ness is magnified.
 - Where Gideon had set upon the enemy, the Midianites, with three companies of soldiers, Abimelech sets upon his own people with three companies.
 - Blocking the gates of the city, he prevents the common folk from being able to retreat, and he spends the entire day slaughtering them.
 - And when he is done killing them, he sows the land with salt in utter contempt for the people, the land, and the God who gave it to them.
 - The people left within the city, the elites, are terrified... and so they gather for safety in the stronghold of the temple of Baal, the temple whose treasury had funded the rise of Abimelech.
 - Upon hearing this, in a move filled with theological implications, Abimelech goes up to a place called Mount Zalmon... which is likely the Canaanite name for Mount Ebal... the Mountain from which the curses for breaking the covenant were declared in Deuteronomy 27... and cuts down tree branches, carries them to the city, lays them against the stronghold of Baal, and burns it down with about 1000 men and women inside it.

- *Don't miss this...* These people who had rebelled against God and broken and perverted the covenant were consumed by a fire started by the king they had raised up... and it was fueled by the trees on the mountain from which God's curses for covenant breaking were pronounced... all while they sought refuge in the house of their false god...
 - Brothers and sisters: This is the wrath of God being poured out on the people of Shechem... he is giving them exactly what they sought after...
 - Because this is the end result of following false kings... false saviors... false gods... they will turn on you and become the agent of your destruction...
- But lest you think God is unfair in punishing just the ungodly culture, we will see that God deals with the wicked and profane ruler...
 - After burning the stronghold at Shechem Abimelech moves on and attacks a near by city called Thebez. Whether he does this from bloodlust or because they too had entertained Gaal's rebellion is unknown. But, as was the custom the people hid within their city's stronghold and climbed onto the roof. As Abimelech approached this stronghold to burn it down, a woman threw the upper part of a millstone and hit him in the head, crushing his skull.
 - Do not miss the theological implications of this...
 - This is the language of Genesis 3, in which God promises the seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the serpent...
 - Abimelech is an anti-Christ... an anti-deliverer... an anti-king... he is in league with and under the power of demons... he is intent on his people's destruction... and here a woman takes an instrument of fruitfulness, and crushes the head of this seed of the serpent...
 - In his pride and foolishness Abimelech calls out for his armor bearer to kill him so that he would not die at the hands of a woman...
 - But we all know what happened... and so we read:
- Judges 9:56-57
56 In this way, God (in his sovereignty over all the affairs of men and angels and demons) brought back Abimelech's evil—the evil that Abimelech had done to his father when he killed his seventy brothers. 57 God also brought back to the men of Shechem all their evil. So the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal came upon them.
- Brother and sisters, if they do not repent... Ungodly cultures (and their leaders) will experience the wrath of God.
- So what do we do with this story... we allow it warn us...
- Let us be warned, be exhorted, to the following things:
 - Any savior other than Christ will destroy you.
 - Any king... any savior... any idol... that you set up for yourself in defiance of God's true Messiah, will ultimately turn on you and destroy you.
 - When you look to money, or pornography, or food, or sexual expression, or temples, or the New Age, or political philosophies, or surgery, or presidential candidates, or geographic locations to be your savior from perceived oppression... to be your hope for happiness... to be your sovereign guide... God will do the worst thing you can imagine and give you over to those things...

- Give you over to your addictions... give you over to your toxic relationships... give you over to your demon gods... give you over to reckless and worthless men and women...
 - Romans 1 makes it clear that God will give you over to the sin that you long for and you will inherit the just consequences of it...
- But God... God stands on the mountain of blessing calling out warnings to you...
 - Repent and believe the Gospel.
 - Jesus, the 2nd person of the triune God says Come!
 - Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden with yokes and bondage of sin... you suffering under wicked and profane leaders even though you may have chosen them... and I will give you rest... I will free you from that bondage...
 - Come to me you who are facing the specter of righteous judgment and be given a righteousness that is not your own...
 - In Isaiah God says Come... "Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water; and you without silver, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without silver and without cost! 2 Why do you spend silver on what is not sustaining, and your wages on what does not satisfy?...3 Pay attention and come to me; listen, so that you will live.
 - He says come! Do not pursue that which will destroy you and starve you and sow your soil with salt...
 - Heed this warning. Respond to this invitation. Come to Christ. Throw yourself upon his mercy and goodness. For he is the true King.
- There is no neutrality.
 - Many in the public sphere will attempt to exclude God and the things of God from the public sphere, claiming that the public square should be neutral when it comes to that kind of thing.
 - But brothers and sisters there is nowhere in scripture where it says Jesus is merely the king of your own personal values and spiritual journey.
 - All things are under Christ's sovereign rule, from the laws of physics to the laws of men, from your personal devotion to your public vocation, from the courts of heaven, to the mayors office, the governors office, and the oval office.
 - In the same way that it was vain imagination that Abimelech was the true king, it is vain imagination that the public square is somehow neutral when it comes to God.
 - There is no neutrality.
 - The war against the spiritual powers and principalities in the heavenly places is playing out in the earth in the public square as much as in the private.
 - People are either for Christ or against him
 - Cultures are either for Christ or against him
 - Rulers are either for Christ or against him
 - In the end they will bow before Christ, either from the grace they have been given or because he shattered them like pottery.

- We must stand like Jotham proclaiming public warnings to those raising up Abimelechs... those staggering toward slaughter, those walking the road to death... even though they may hate us or want us dead...
- Our methods must not be carnal.
 - We will be tempted, in walking a world that is not neutral towards the true king, to operate as the world does.
 - Tempted to raise up our own Abimelech's to fight the Abimelech's of the culture.
 - Tempted to revile the people who oppose us and try to slay them on an altar.
 - Tempted to subdue and salt the earth of those who fight against us.
 - But that is not what we are called to...
 - In 2 Corinthians Paul assures us that though we are in a battle on all sides, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal.
 - They are not the same weapons that the world uses.
 - We have the arsenal of faithfulness.
 - Regular and faithful intercessory prayer, worship, and sacrificial service.
 - Faithful families, raised to love the call to holiness and the command to disciple the nations.
 - Faithfulness in and to the local church, the local expression of the house and stronghold of God.
 - Faithful and unceasing gratitude and remembrance of what Christ has done for us.
 - Faithful love for our enemies and prayer for those who persecute us
 - Faithful forgiveness, even as Christ forgives.
 - Faithfulness to take up and wield the sword of the Spirit... the word of Christ... not vain deceits rooted in the traditions of man, or empty philosophies based on the elements of the world...
 - And we faithfully preach that word and the Gospel it presents,
 - We do it in the power of the Spirit, believing that it has the power to save
 - Believing it is the means by which God has ordained the world will be transformed
 - We faithfully preach until death comes to usher us into the presence of God.
 - We remain faithful to the God of the New Covenant, who is so faithful to us.
 - We will be tempted to raise up or follow Abimelechs... false kings who walk in the way of the serpent... but we must only pledge ourselves to the true King... to Christ..
- Where Abimelech is an anti-Christ.... Christ is the anti-Abimelech.
 - Where false kings are vicious, Christ is humane.
 - Where false kings are cruel, Christ is kind
 - Where false kings are brutal, Christ is gentle
 - Where false kings are proud, Christ is humble and lowly

- Where false kings are violent, Christ is gentle
- Where false kings are malevolent, Christ is merciful
- Where false kings construct empires for their own benefit, Christ builds a kingdom for the Glory of God and good of his people
- Where false kings exact vengeance upon any who rebel by putting them to the sword, Christ takes upon himself the iniquity of the rebels, bears it to a cross, and dies with the assurance of their pardon upon his lips...
 - Bow your hearts to this king today, I urge you...
 - As we close and the worship team comes back up, allow the words of this 17th Century hymn reinvigorate your commitment to Christ this morning. When we are tempted to follow ungodly leaders in ungodly pursuits, as we face persecution and trial for the message we proclaim... may we ever declare in our souls:
 - Now I will cling forever
to Christ, my Savior dear,
My Lord will leave me never;
with him I need not fear.
He rends death's iron chain;
he breaks through sin and pain.
He shatters hell's dark thrall;
I follow Him through all.

Pray with me,

God our King... we bow our hearts and bend our knees before you and you alone. Truly there is no king, no savior, no judge, no ruler like you. Your grace and your mercy is beyond description. You have not dealt with us as our sins deserve, nor repaid us for our iniquities, but you have demonstrated your compassionate love for us in this... that while we were yet sinners, you died for us. Lord, we confess that our hearts are prone to raise up Abimelechs, to raise up idols of comfort, or success, or carnal pleasure. Crush our idols... rescue us from covetousness... give us a spirit of repentance. We pray for our nation and culture, Lord. That in your mercy you would send revival to our land and we would turn away from the deeds of darkness we are so committed to. Forgive us for scorning our fathers and mothers. Forgive us for our envy and greed. Forgive us for proactively tearing out any vestige of You, Your Law, Your Gospel, and Your Kingship from the public square. Revive us we pray.