**Abimelech**

In the movie, There Was a Crooked Man, Kirk Douglas plays Paris Pittman, a ruthless thief and killer who is jailed for stealing $500,000 which he hid before he was caught. While in jail he enlists fellow prisoners to plan an escape, promising to share in the stolen money. During the jail break, he and his closest allies kill the men who assisted, then Pittman kills his followers to avoid sharing the money. When he retrieves the bag of stolen money, a rattlesnake in the bag bites him and he dies. There are no virtuous characters in the movie as even the righteous lawman trailing Pittman keeps the $500,000 for himself. In our study of Judges chapter 9, we see a falling out among wicked men that leads to their destruction.

At the end of Judges chapter 8, we were introduced to Abimelech who was the son of Gideon and his concubine who lived in Shechem. Chater 9 begins with Abimelech going to his uncles in Shechem, telling them that he should rule over them rather than one of Gideon’s 70 sons born of his wives in Ophrah. Gideon’s concubine was a Canaanite and Shechem was apparently a Canaanite stronghold within the border of Manasseh. The men of Shechem decided to follow Abimelech and gave him 70 shekels of silver from the treasury of the local temple of Baal. Abimelech used the money to hire a band of marauders who went with him to Ophrah to kill the 70 sons of Gideon. They killed all but Jotham who escaped. When Jotham heard that Abimelech had been crowned king of Shechem and Beth Millo, he climbed to the top of Mt. Gerizim (see Deut. 27:12) to address the citizens of Shechem. There he told a parable about trees ruling over the forest. The trees of the forest went to an olive tree, a fig tree and a grape vine, asking each to rule over them. Each replied that they would not leave their valuable service of providing fruit to become a king. The thornbush which served no useful purpose agreed to become king, offering its meager brush as a refuge of shade and the other trees accepted the thornbush as king. After telling his parable, Jotham told the men of Shechem that if they had acted honorably towards his father’s family, then Abimelech and Shechem would enjoy the benefits of his kingship. If they had not acted honorably, then Abimelech and Shechem would destroy one another.

While Abimelech ostensibly ruled over Israel, it is likely that he controlled only the small area in the vicinity of Shechem. After he ruled for 3 years, God sent an evil spirit to create conflict between Abimelech and Shechem. Matthew Henry wrote that God permitted Satan to sow discord between the parties who were receptive to the evil spirit since they were Baal worshippers. He continued that their evil lusts were the evil spirits and God gave them over to those. Shechem rose up against Abimelech not because they repented of their complicity in the murder of Gideon’s sons but rather a falling out among the wicked.

A man named Gaal moved with his brothers to Shechem and challenged the leadership of Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem were willing to trade one despot for another, perhaps weary of the royal demands of tribute. Abimelech had an imbedded spy in Zebul who reported the budding rebellion to Abimelech. A battle between the rival armies ensued with Abimelech defeating Shechem after which he burned the city to the ground. The survivors retreated to the temple of El-Berith which Abimelech also burned down, killing about one thousand men and women. Next he moved on to the nearby city of Thebez where the people of the city had locked themselves into a tower. Abimelech stormed the tower with his army but a woman threw down a millstone from the tower mortally injuring him. He ordered his armor bearer to kill him with a sword so it could not be said that he died at the hands of a woman. His death brought an end to hostilities but God had punished both Abimelech and Shechem for the murder of Gideon’s sons. Jotham’s prophecy that Abimelech and Shechem would destroy one another came true. The last verse of the chapter refers to that prophecy as a curse, ironically pronounced from Mt. Gerizim.

This chapter records one of the shorter periods between a sinful act and God’s punishment. We are often puzzled that God allows innocents to suffer while the guilty escape punishment (see Rev. 6:10). In chapter 3 which we studied a few weeks ago, Israel was subjected to the rule of the Moabite king Eglon for 18 years because they stopped worshipping God. God used Ehud as a judge to take revenge on Eglon and restore Israel to a relationship with Him. In the case of Abimelech, justice was swifter but no relationship with God was restored because Abimelech and the people of Shechem had no relationship with Him.