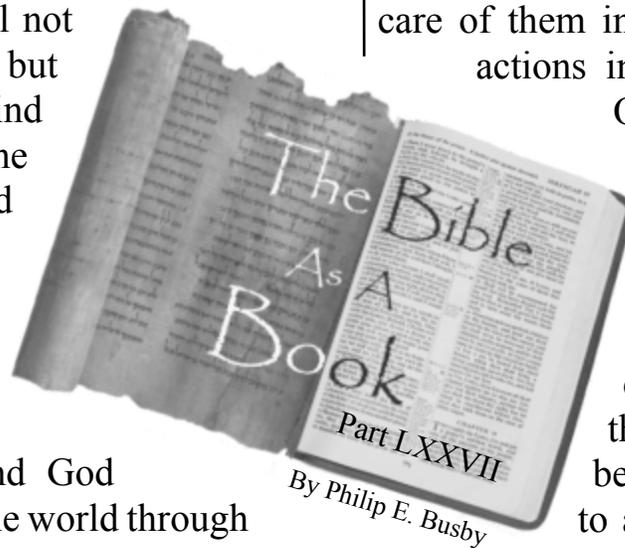




Shaqah

*“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”
Colossians 2:8*

As we continue our overview of the Book of Judges, last time we took a bit of a side step off the direct overview of the book so we could look at some chronology of events taking place during the book that led to Israel having a king. In that segment we also talked a lot about how it was working out for Israel not to have a human king but how the human mind was building the argument that they did need one due to all the invasions Israel was suffering. With that we discussed the fact God was Israel's true King and God had wanted to show the world through the chosen nation that it was possible to live and run a nation without the traditional king most countries had. Because men see things through the eyes of men even some Bible commentaries and teachers today will tell you Israel was in need of a king, but the fact Israel was eventually given one was not evidence of that. Instead, it was simply the first time we see God allow a large change in the plan He originally established for the chosen nation due to the disobedience of the



people. In covering all that, we never really got back to our overview of the chapters and verses, so we are ready to pick that up again this time beginning with chapter 9 verse 1.

After Gideon's death we are told the nation did not consider his family or take care of them in any way. While Gideon's actions in establishing an ephod in Ophrah caused Israel to stumble, the fact he did what he did shows us he dedicated the remainder of his life in attempting to help Israel. This Gideon did in spite of refusing to be the king Israel wanted him to be. While Gideon had refused to actually take up the title of king, we find after his death one of his sons did not feel the same way. We are told Gideon took many wives and by them he had 70 sons. Then we are told he also had a concubine in Shechem and she too had a son, giving him 71. We are not given any real details about this concubine other than the fact she lived in Shechem and from the further story we are told about the son she gave birth to, it appears she was of a family rooted in that city/area. Shechem



is, of course, a prominent place not just in location but in all the times we find events take place there during the Bible's history. However, there is nothing within those accounts to give any indication Shechem was a particularly bad place, so the fact the son of Gideon who came from there turned out to be bad doesn't seem to have anything to do with his origins.

All that said, it does appear Shechem was a place that had taken on the worship of this baal-berith Israel had started worshiping after Gideon's death. Whether that had anything to do with this son going bad is also hard to say, but it did likely play a factor in why he was able to get people to go along with him in his attempt to rule. The son we are talking about is a man named Abimelech, and as mentioned he was the son of Gideon's concubine in Shechem which means Abimelech likely did not grow up around the rest of his half-brothers. This no doubt helped him in what he wanted to do because he came to the men of his mother's house and proposed to them it was inevitable that sons of Gideon rule over them. This probably played well in the minds of these men due to the fact the nation had gotten so used to going to Gideon for advice, that while he never took the title of king he served in that role at least to the degree a tribal king or the like would have. This meant it would be customary for his eldest son to take his position upon Gideon's death. What we see is that there is no indication his eldest or any of the other 70 sons of Gideon had taken on that role or wanted it. However, I'm sure plenty of people had asked them to and came to various ones seeking advice like they had of Gideon.

This is why I say the idea Abimelech lays out to his mother's family played well in their minds. Abimelech asked them if it was better he rule over them, being a son of Gideon and one of their own, or if it was better other sons of Gideon, who were not of their house or town, rule? The bottom line thought is, if one or a group of the sons became ruler, Abimelech was so far removed from the rest of them it would likely not involve him! So what Abimelech is really saying to his relatives is, if you want me to be the winner of who would be king you need to support me now before another choice is made. The family of Abimelech's mother agreed with this plan and began to speak to all the others in Shechem to convince them this was the right move. In the end, their efforts were successful and they would take 70 pieces of silver from the treasury of baal-berith to help Abimelech finance at least his first steps in establishing himself as a king.

With this money Abimelech would hire men to be with him. He did not hire the best and the brightest and certainly not the honest and wise. Instead, he hired men who would be very agreeable to following his wishes in the hope they could share in his power and glory as king. Sadly, this is not so different than the way many people in leadership end up surrounding themselves with close supporters even today; whether intentionally or unintentionally. Of course, Abimelech certainly needed men who were not of high ideals as we see about the first action he takes in his new position was to go to his father's house and kill all his brothers. This despicable act we are told was done "...upon one stone..." and what this means is that this was not a battle

between Abimelech and the rest of the sons of Gideon. No, Abimelech executed his brothers in cold blood, and this could only be accomplished if none of them had attempted to surround themselves with men in order to hold power. We also see his brothers were not even bound together in some way. Thus, there was no defense mounted against Abimelech's sudden aggressive actions. His brothers were simply living their lives and Abimelech takes the first opportunity he gets to dispose of them so they could never rise to power, even if that was just to lead the charge to put Abimelech down. However, he missed one, as the youngest of Gideon's sons, Jotham, hid in order to survive this.

Abimelech may not have tried too hard to find Jotham. After all, Jotham was Gideon's youngest son which means of all the sons of Gideon, Jotham would be the lowest man in the line for any throne his father might have held. Thus, Abimelech returns to Shechem, and we are told all the men of Shechem and the house of Millo came together to make Abimelech their king. The reference here to the house of Millo has to do with the fact Millo refers to a fortified location of some kind; what we might call a citadel. Some say this is a reference to the idea there was a citadel in Shechem, but it does not refer to the place rather the "house," family, or group of Millo. This means there were men of power in this region, maybe a standing army or military leadership, involved in this ceremony. This makes sense because as we look at where Shechem is located we see it is central in Israel and close to the border

between the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Both these tribes are the half tribes from the sons of Joseph, and the reason Joseph is not the name of one of the twelve tribes in Israel.

When one considers who Joseph rose to be in Egypt it is not hard to see how these two tribes might be considered leading tribes in Israel, or at least the tribes most likely to produce a king. More specifically we find that throughout the Bible's narrative Ephraim holds this accolade. We also saw it was the men of the tribe of Ephraim that confronted Gideon during the battle with the Midianites about the fact they were not specifically called to that battle from the start. This confrontation is handled with diplomatic skill by Gideon, but it most likely arose from the fact Ephraim was accustomed to having a leading role in such matters among Israel. Thus, when we see the men of the house of Millo referenced as a specific group which comes to crown Abimelech king along with the men of Shechem, we see Abimelech would not have the same problem Gideon faced. Whatever men there might be who could be offended by not being consulted as to who should be king were in on this plan to see Abimelech elevated to the position it would seem. Thus, Abimelech had the support he needed to be king of at least this core territory of Israel, which put him well on the way for being named king of all of Israel if he wanted it!

We also find that Abimelech's crowning ceremony took place near the pillar in the plain of Shechem. This was an

important spot because we see Shechem was a place where Jacob came to after he came from Mesopotamia to live in Canaan once more. It was there that Jacob cleansed his house before going to Bethel to build an altar to worship God as God had told him to. (Gen. 35:1-5) Shechem was also one of the cities of refuge where someone could run in Israel if they had killed another person by accident in order to seek a fair trial before being killed as tradition would grant to the family of the one who had died. (Josh. 20) Further, Shechem was the place where Joshua gathered the children of Israel to give his farewell speech after they were finally settled upon the land and he made a covenant with the nation that they would serve The One True God! (Josh. 24) The idea there would be a special pillar maintained in this place is no surprise, and I'm sure it seemed a perfect place for these men to crown Abimelech. However, this is where allowing Jotham to live shows up as a bigger mistake than Abimelech might have thought. They took Abimelech to a special place to crown him, but when Jotham found out what they had done he goes to Mount Gerizim which is one of the two mountains Shechem sits almost directly between and where Israel was commanded to perform a ceremony to commemorate the fact they would serve God or be cursed for it. (Deut. 27:9-26, Josh. 8:30-35)

On Gerizim Jotham would cry out and tell a parable about how the trees went out to set a king over the trees. They first asked the olive tree, which is a very valuable tree, but being their king wasn't as important to the olive tree as doing what God had created it to do which was produce olives. So they go to the fig tree and ask it

but they get the same response. After that the trees step down from those in the same class of plants as they are and ask the vine to be their king but the vine gives them the same answer as the olive and the fig trees. Being desperate to have a king the trees finally turn to bushes that have no real value at all because the bushes referred to in the parable are actually the kind of plant farmers would despise and have to fight to keep out of their fields in order to grow good crops. These weeds accept the trees' proposal with the condition that fire would come out of the weeds to devour the very best trees of Lebanon if the trees ever turned back on their commitment to make it king. This is incredibly poetic because fire would normally begin in the underbrush of a forest before it started consuming the trees, but in the end both underbrush and trees get consumed.

Thus, in this parable Jotham goes on to tell those who had made Abimelech their king if they thought in doing all they had done they had honored and/or treated the family of Gideon right, specifically killing all the other sons of Gideon, then they should be glad they had made Abimelech their king and Abimelech should be glad to be their king. However, if the opposite was true he warns fire would come out of both sides of this agreement and burn all of them to the ground just as it happens in nature once a forest fire really gets rolling. What Jotham said was a warning that they had done a foolish thing before God and they would pay a heavy price for it! Jotham, knowing this would make them very angry and they would seek to kill him once more, then runs away to a place they could not reach him. In this we see Jotham being used

Following the Biblical Stream:

By Philip E. Busby

In our last segment, we continued the story of Abraham's servant being in Mesopotamia to seek a wife for Isaac. In that segment we only covered a couple verses, but this was due to the fact all of what is going on in the story gave us a chance to talk more about how God was illustrating through the three men consisting of this servant, Abraham, and Isaac, the nature of God Himself. Since the servant is representative of The Holy Ghost, we spent time talking about how The Holy Ghost works on this earth. In the same way this servant of Abraham's had gone to find, prepare, and bring back a wife for Isaac, who is representative of God The Son, The Holy Ghost is here with us now preparing each of us for the day we will actually be with our Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus, we discussed the fact He is doing this preparation by working in the lives of each believer to the extent we learn to and/or are willing to allow The Holy Ghost to work. This also gave us a chance to talk about the baptism in The Holy Ghost as well as a bit about speaking in tongues which comes along with that. Another fact we found in those verses which we did not know before was the fact there were other servants with this servant. This gave us a chance to see how these other servants were representative of angels and how they do not show up in the text until very late in the story, and only a couple times, because we were meant to see, just as the servant was doing, The Holy Ghost works directly with us not through angels or other mediums. All this brought us through Genesis chapter 24

verse 32, and we are ready to begin 33 this time.

In verse 33 we find the servant has gotten all the chores done and is now sitting in the house with the family ready to eat a meal. This is his first opportunity to speak to the family about what he has been sent to do, and the servant wastes no time. In spite of how quickly God has brought all this together, the servant does not eat, drink or relax before continuing in his task. I say, in spite of how quickly God has brought this all together, but it's not in spite of that fact that the servant is so hasty as much as it is due to that fact. In stories such as Abraham being told to take Isaac and sacrifice him at Moriah, we talked a lot about how Abraham wasted no time in doing what God had told him to do. This servant has shown us that same thing in handling what Abraham has sent him to do. Now, in seeing how God so quickly brought the connection to the woman and the family he has been sent to find, the servant feels if God is not delaying in getting things done on this matter he should not be the one to slow the pace. We see this both here as well as later in the story when the servant is ready to leave.

When I think about this point I find myself thinking back in my life about times God was (whether I had the eyes to see it or not) moving something swiftly along but I did not keep pace. We should never get ahead of God's timing because we are too eager to get to something or get something

done. However, there are plenty of times we hesitate because we don't want to do the thing, or we doubt if it's God's will. Other times I believe we find ourselves just caught up in the cares of this life and don't put God first. We see God working something out and moving it ahead but we just don't find the time to respond. Then there are those times we just take our own sweet time as the saying goes. It's not that we feel we don't have time or that we are refusing in any way but we just don't think it's important to keep moving ahead in the same way or at the same pace God is moving. All these times show us something about our faith and this story emphasizes it so well. Abraham was a man of great faith and he had sent a servant to accomplish this most important task who was also a man of great faith. That is why we see this man sit down and be what many cultures and people might describe as "rude."

All the excitement about Rebekah going to the well and meeting this man is a bit of a surprise as we have talked about, but we see in this the fact God was already working in her heart and the hearts of the family. That is why Laban runs out to meet the servant and bring him back to the house. This is an exciting time for all involved and it's one of those times where tradition would dictate celebration go hand in hand with that excitement. Now, if there is one thing almost all people from all cultures around the world can agree on, it's the fact that celebrations almost without exception involve food! Whether it be something simple, like just a sweet treat, a meal, a whole banquet, or whatever; sharing something to eat with each other is a must when it comes to celebrations. So in this story we see the servant has accomplished the first major step in the task he has been sent to accomplish.

Not only has he found the right family but what appears to be the right woman to take back for Isaac. He is as excited as the family, and now they are ready to celebrate this occasion by eating a meal together but the servant says no!

No, he would not eat until he had told them more specifically why he was here. All through this story we see the servant focused on his task and God had blessed him every step of the way. He would take the steps that were needed for him to take in order to get the job done but when he sees how fast God is moving this along, he refuses to let anything, even his hunger or the traditions of men, delay him. He did not consider it rude to refuse to eat until he told his story and he trusted that if this really was as it seemed, that he sat among people whom God had already prepared to be a part of His plan, then they too would have no trouble stopping to hear him out before any of them began to eat! For most of us this would take what we call, "a lot of guts," but for this servant, he just trusted God had it all in His hands and a plan for how this should come out. This is due to his faith. As I have pointed out so many times before, too many people think faith is blind belief, and even the statement I just made about the servant trusting God was working all this out, might sound like a description of that. However, it's not. The servant had that trust because his relationship with God (faith) had informed him of the right thing to do.

So often when we look back and see those times we hesitated, pulled back, or maybe those times we jumped ahead, they were all times we did so because we doubted God or our ability to know His will. About the only exception to that is when we do

know, or believe we know, and we just are refusing because it's not what we want. However, even in those cases we are failing to know the power of God and the fact He knows what's right for us. I'll readily admit the flaw in our faith is a large trust issue, but the reason we do not trust is because we don't feel that comfort with God that we would feel with a close friend or family member whom we know to be well qualified to inform us on an issue or help us with a task. Again, we come to one of those moments when how we related to each other is helpful to understanding our faith while at the same time our faith so greatly helps us relate to others! When we trust another person, whether that be with a specific issue or in general, we do not do so in blind belief. That's why most of us are weary of those we just met. We no doubt trust blindly as a child when it comes to our parents and sometimes other adults, even strangers, but almost everyone has a story of when they first saw their parents or someone else they trusted was not perfect and often those are eye opening moments.

The reason those moments are so profound for so many people is that we suddenly realize we had just been blindly believing. Our belief that they were infallible or something extra special was unqualified. Of course, none of this is to say we should stop trusting at that point, and if you had/have good parents or people in your life, no doubt you did not. However, the question is, why did you not stop trusting? The answer is, we come, or need to come, to see how that moment was not really about our parents, it was about us! The trust we put in other humans needs to be earned. Trust

needs to be based on something more solid than just our blind belief, and for many that was the moment we began to be aware that we needed to take on responsibility for judging who we should trust and who we should not. Now, this all goes into a lot of discussions about our own personality because some people are by nature just more trusting and others so very much are not. Our experiences, especially as children growing up, also affect how trusting we end up being and how good we are at judging who to trust and who to be weary of. While those are factors when it comes to how we relate to God, thankfully when it comes to Him it's only a discussion about learning to trust, not if we should!

My overall point here is that we do not blindly trust other people and faith is not God asking us to blindly trust Him! We might for a long period of time, and in some ways maybe for all our lives, blindly trust God on many issues and in many ways. However, what we see in great men of faith, like Abraham and this servant, is that they are not just blindly trusting God to work it all out. Yes, they are allowing God to lead the way but they are in step with what God is showing them and doing their part in the circumstances. This is why God wants us to grow. Blind belief alone does not allow us to do this, at least not in most cases and circumstances. Again, when we look at why we trust certain people we see we do so because we have built a relationship with that person. We can work together well because we trust each other and the better we are versed on how the other person thinks, feels, and reacts to various situations, the better we can trust we know what steps we

should and need to take based on what we know they will do or can do. This is why people who build really solid relationships can come to a point when they see the other person go off in an unexpected direction and still trust them. It might take some time to catch up with what the other person is doing and the entire circumstance might come to a close before we understand why they did the unexpected thing they did, but through it all we trusted they knew what they were doing in spite of that lack of understanding on our part.

Some would say, that's blind belief, but I beg to differ! Blind belief is what we do as children in obeying our parents. For those who had/have bad parents who did/do bad things we might look back and feel guilty that we ever followed what they told us because it turns out we were so very wrong for doing what we did at their behest. However, if you're carrying some of that kind of guilt in your personal life let me just say, this is why God tells us to honor our father and mother. (Ex. 20:12) God takes responsibility for the fact He constructed the family unit in the way He did and children need to obey their parents for that to work, especially to work well. As a child we might have blindly trusted our parents and done things we now realize we're wrong, but we were obeying our parents as God intended and that was right! Living in a sinful world is a messy task and it is for that reason we need God's forgiveness and grace which He offers without measure to those who love Him. However, my point here is blind belief can take us in all kinds of directions whether right or wrong. If we just have blind belief there is no telling what we will end up doing and in what way we will live our lives believing we are in the right just because our

belief tells us we are. This is what people so often do when it comes to religion, and this is true no matter if the religion we follow claims to be of The One True God or not!

If we simply believe there is merit in going to church and living as the church tells us to live because it claims to be of God, we can go to a church that is very legalistic and end up going nowhere good. However, before those who grew up in a strict church hurt their neck nodding in agreement with that, the same problem is why you can also feel comfortable going to a liberal church that sets almost no bounds on how one lives and feel all is right. Are we right? I believe the Bible clearly shows us we are not! The example we see in Israel is that often they were punished for no specifics other than the fact they had taken on the practices of neighboring cultures. Why was this a problem? Because it was God's will to build in/with the chosen nation a specific culture designed by Him. We can argue all we want about whether believers in Jesus as The Messiah should take on specific stipulations of the Law or not but that would be missing the point. For Israel, God had laid out a Law for them to follow. For Israel there was and even now should not be any doubt about how God wants them to craft their lives and live in a specific way. It simply does not matter if God wants that for all or just for them, we know God wanted it for them and when they turned to take on the ways, lifestyles, etc. of neighboring cultures they were disobeying God!

If a nation that was given a set of written rules to follow still could not get it right and please God, how futile do you think it is for us to go to some church or follow some denomination, preacher, etc. and get it

What About God's Chosen People?

Part LI

From Living Springs' Questions and Answers

"Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people."

In our last segment, we stepped back to talk about the fact history tells us the Roman Empire was a Christian empire in its last decades. This entire conversation is difficult to have and it has wound its way through at least the last two if not three segments of this study. What makes it difficult is that one needs to know where we came from to understand the point of where we are going. To try and shorthand that as a refresher and/or for those just coming into this study, we were looking at the fact the "barbarians" to the north of the Roman Empire were being harassed by the empire and vice versa. Where the ultimate point in all this lies is in seeing the fact there was a conflict between these Northern people and the Romans that eventually took down the great Romans and all they had built. The oddity is that after this had taken place the barbarians looked around at what was left and began to lament what they had destroyed. Victory was won but to really be sweet they needed to take charge of what was once great and make it great again with themselves at the helm! To be really short, we need to see how the barbarians remade what had been the Roman Empire and how the anti-Semitism remained!

To talk about that we began talking about religion and the contrast the religion of the barbarians had with the religion of the Romans which was basically a Hellenistic

system. Thus, we find ourselves talking about why the two systems were both alike and different. They were different in that the barbarians were not going to accept the prosperity philosophy the Greco-Roman system held. Life was just too hard in the North country to accept such a thing. That aside, the way the systems were the same is that they were both basically nothing more than a Baal worship (the worship of the creation rather than the Creator). (Rom. 1:25) This fact is why when the barbarians came out of the harsh North and ransacked the Roman Empire they became comfortable in the same ways the Romans had been on many levels and wanted to rebuild (and reshape) what they had destroyed. In doing that, it was not a far leap for them to go from the Baal worship they had culturally grown up with to the Baal worship of the Greeks and Romans!

What complicates this discussion is the fact history tells us the Roman Empire was not so Hellenistic by its ending decades because it had become "Christian"! This is the point we spent our last segment really hammering on. Again, to be short, there is a big difference between true Christianity and the religion of Christianity! This is a point most who claim to be Christians find shocking to hear and most simply will not accept it. People who teach it are considered outside the mainstream and often accused of all sorts of hateful things I won't get into. This is the typical reaction to those who teach the truth in a world of sin and it's something Jesus both went through as well as warned us



would happen to us. (John 15:18-27) In spite of all this, the truth is the truth, and the point remains there is true faith in God which spurs striving to live for Christ and like Christ. This is what makes one a true Christian! On the other side, there is the religion of Christianity, which far more than the Protestant branches of the religion wants to and/or are willing to admit, is still so very Catholic. That is to point out some of what we covered last time which is the fact the religion was built to be very universal! This is why it's so easy for ministers to believe in some form and at some level that it's a base concept of Christianity we have to make the message as "acceptable" as possible to the greatest number of people we can!

True Christians focus on faith and holiness, which is to have a relationship with our Creator and be separated for/to His purposes. In doing so we have something to share with a lost and dying world, and those who are seeking the answers to life can find them. The religion instead wants to organize, apostolize, and evangelize the world. Now in hearing that, many would ask, is that not what we are called to do? Yes, but making the truth available to people is far different than attempting to package it into a neat turn key, say a sinner's prayer, formulation about how to get to heaven and at that strive to make it the most appealing version of how to go to heaven so that the greatest number of people will accept it. That is what was done and what most of what we call Christian doctrine today is based on. The longer I live the clearer I see this fact! I grew up in church and I loved The Lord my God with everything I had as I was taught. Then (and even in a greater way once I entered the ministry), I realized that was not what most churches actually focused on. Those who

read what I write may ask why I bring up the church's "Golden Rule" teaching so much? However, the answer is simple if you think about what the church teaches the "Golden Rule" to be! They say it is to love your neighbor as yourself, but Jesus Himself made it clear that is the silver or second rule because the golden or first is to love The Lord thy God with everything you have! Does that not say it all in a nutshell?

True Christianity understands and teaches that the strait and narrow gate has to be passed through in order to walk the strait and narrow path and that living by faith requires we put God first in all things. (Matt. 7:13-14) The religion of Christianity teaches that how we treat each other is the key to being a good person and therefore worthy of going to heaven. It might sound like a small picking at details thing but it's not! The truth turns an individual's focus to God; the other turns one's focus to men. The one is the Garden of Eden which God specifically planted as a place for man to find and meet with the direct presence of God; it is the tabernacle upon which God's presence descended as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; the temple in Jerusalem which was the place God set His name forever on this earth! The other is the Tower of Babel where man attempted to find his way by elevating himself in the hope of not needing God, now or into eternity. Of course, since Christianity can't put the part about not needing God in blatant terms like those at the tower, we attempt to shroud the fact God is not our focus in a lot of talk about loving God. However, the shroud is pretty thin, and if one listens one can clearly see where the focus is in truth. This is why the religion's "Golden Rule" is so important. It's a clear example of what I just said. It's something

Christians readily accept and yet is a blatant contradiction to what Jesus said with His own mouth. (Matt. 22:34-40)

This is what we've been discussing because the religion of Christianity does not have its roots in the "Dark Ages," as they are often called, but in the ending period of the Roman Empire. Knowing this, brings a fresh perspective to saying the Roman Empire became a Christian Empire! It brings a perspective that affects how we see the issue of Hellenistic thinking clashing with the pagan religions of the barbarians. It also informs us a lot on why those barbarians were so eager in the end to rebuild a "Christian" empire which they had destroyed and to be the kings over it! In taking down the Romans and then taking time to look around at what they had gained they realized what they had defeated was exactly what almost all pagans would wish to build. They had taken down the most durable and largest attempt to keep the beast of Revelation, which began at the Tower of Babel, alive. I say "durable" there because Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream in Babylon makes it clear the most glorious attempt was accomplished by the Babylonians. (Dan. 2) They were the head of gold! By the time we get to the Romans we are at the Iron legs of the statue. A strong durable kingdom to be sure, but not as glorious as what the Babylonians had or even the Medes and Persians or the Greeks which followed. If we can see this we can understand how these Barbarians were not really that different from their predecessors.

Each conquering people looked upon what they took down and wanted to build or

rebuild the same. All this is because once they stood at the top of the hill they saw what they defeated as just what they themselves had hoped to accomplish. The irony in all of it is that each one never seems to take into account the reason they wanted to destroy what they came after in the first place. They never considered that exactly what they hoped to build was the same thing that angered them when someone else attempted it and/or tried to force it upon them. The true beast of Revelation was born at the Tower of Babel but was also given its deadly wound that made it disappear in any large form for a time. This is why the Assyrians are the first head of the beast after the one that had a deadly wound. The Assyrians finally accomplished what no other people since those at the Tower were able to accomplish. They revived the beast, and that was no small feat to be sure! They, along with the Tower of Babel, existed before the time the statue in the king's dream was covering so we don't have a metal to relate them to. However, this is fine because they have their own laurels to stand upon by being the first to raise the beast back to its feet.

As we transition to the first empire that is represented in the statue, we go from the Assyrians to the Babylonians and see more of a basic political shift in who was more powerful. Thus, the Babylonians were simply able to take it from there, which makes them the first and really the only power that was able to build upon what had been started rather than have to rebuild what they burned down. In many ways, this is why they got to be the head of gold but everyone who followed would sustain at least some damage to what had been before continuing

the beast in earnest. This is why the metals in the statue change as they descend. They turn from metal that is highly valued for its beauty to ones with more value in what can be done with them. This is why when the Medes and Persians came marching in to take down the Babylonians they took us from gold to silver. They didn't totally burn down what the Babylonians had and were but they did defeat them in battle, which always brings a certain amount of destruction and chaos. They were able to maintain silver from what had been gold for this reason as well as the fact they were already well on track with the whole reviving the beast idea themselves. In this way the Medes and Persians incorporated what they gained into what they already had. In spite of that, they could not be as great as the Babylonians in beauty of their accomplishment but at the same time they brought more endurance to the beast. If you buy silver jewelry instead of gold you will pay less but you will get a piece that can take more day by day wear and tear without fading away. This fact is why the Babylonians were never going to make it. The confounding of man's language made it impossible to have the glorious thing man was building at the Tower of Babel, so in a way this transition was a good thing for the beast in spite of not being as attractive.

Now, the Medes and Persians would go on to do exactly what the later Romans did to the Barbarians. In their attempt to expand their empire to include the entire world (little did any of these empires understand how impossible that was) they angered the Greeks who were jelling into a small but successful version of the beast themselves. The angry Alexander, who would become known to history as "The Great," would do a lot of burning and

destroying as he marched his way to Babylon to become the new head of the beast. This is why they would be the brass in the statue. Brass is some pretty good looking metal but it's not valued for much in the pure jewelry and embellishment marketplace. That aside, it makes impressive looking armor and withstands great amounts of heat. Brass is often used in our day in particular places that involve water or critical pieces of gas lines because of its resistance to corrosion. This represents the Greeks and more specifically the Hellenistic ways very well. Hellenism was such a good combination of beauty compromised with work-ability that no one after them has ever totally let it go. From the Romans to the educational institutions of today, both the Greek language as well as their way of living is looked upon with more than admiration!

Moving from the Greeks to the Romans we see a true conflict. In a way, one could say the Romans and the Greeks held a respect for one another. Some might dispute this, but this fact is a lot of why we still use terms like "Greco-Roman" today. No matter how much the Romans wanted to be who they were they could not deny that much of what the Greeks already had was exactly what they hoped to be. If more diplomacy could have taken place between these two powers instead of the wars that define the transition from Greek Empire to Roman we might have never seen a full transition. However, the Romans couldn't help but be appalled by the lack of unity that existed among the Greek Empire (especially by the time the Romans rose to enough power to be a player in this imperial game). The Romans were nothing if not organizers, and that's what they wanted to do. This fact is why the Romans are the empire/people credited with

building more roads, walls, and guard towers than any other. They gave us both the checks and the balances we admire and which a Republic form of leadership (government) uses to maintain itself. The system demands organization while at the same time admits something all other systems of the beast had lacked, including the tower itself! The system of the Romans believed all men could rise to become Asshur (someone greater than man but less than God).

This kind of thought is what makes them the iron of the statue. Iron is only used in jewelry when the intent of strength is meant to be portrayed or when it's about the only metal available or affordable to the one crafting the piece(s). That said, it's durability will take more than a lifetime of abuse! What brings the better picture of why iron is used to represent the Romans is the fact almost all men in the world came to use iron as their go to metal for tools and the like. In turn this means it's very much a metal of the people, and that brings us back to that Asshur thought. Do you see how the Tower of Babel effect was doing its job? As we step "down" from the Babylonian head of gold to the Roman legs of iron, we see the beast was forced in each iteration to comply and recognize more and more the will of the individual people. This takes us back to our Golden Rule fact! When we are told the silver rule we see that God only ask us to love our neighbor as ourselves. In other words, look at what we would want and how we feel and recognize the other humans we share this planet with have all the same rights as we have to pursue what they want and feel. This is where the Christian founders of the United States got ideas like, all men are created equal, and we find that truth to be self evident. Each has a right to life, liberty, and

the pursuit of happiness.

As each empire stepped down from being the, all power belongs centralized at the top idea, they became more workable and stronger but also less of what the beast was meant to be. To survive, the beast had to yield to the truths God created us with, without being able to brainwash all humans from birth into one universal doctrine such as they were able to do at the Tower of Babel. The beast was having to become more of what God intended for men, and in doing so was becoming a greater contradiction to its original purpose. This is why we finally get down to the statue's feet and toes specifically which were a mixture of iron and clay. The strength and true ideas the beast wanted to promote are still there but only as part of a greater whole that includes common men who do not necessarily all buy into the same exact ideas. In the end of the grand experiment of resurrecting the beast, as the Assyrians did, we find this pathetic barely operational version of the beast is the best that can exist in the world, especially as a true global force. This shows us how badly Satan and the plans of men have already been defeated by God! Man, and Satan, will continue to try, but all they will accomplish is further destruction in this life and world. We've been witnessing that truth in our day by day lives over the last few years in the most obvious of ways!

Getting back to how the religion of Christianity can be a part of this, recognize the reason the religion readily teaches and accepts what they do as the Golden Rule is founded on the same premise the beast was forced to yield to! It is a piece of the remnant of what is left of the beast now that there is no world empire as there was during most of the

time the statue shows us. It's a beast that was, and is not, yet still is! The organization and centralization of it all may be sorely lacking but the idea is more widespread and accepted than it ever has been since the days the human population was concentrated in one spot and attempting to build a tower that would reach heaven and rid man of the need for God! You see, we can recognize there is a God and the people at the Tower of Babel no doubt did. We see this truth all along. Recognizing God is not something Cain had a problem with, but he didn't want to live his life before God. (Gen. 4:9-16) Recognizing God is something Lot did, but he would rather have lived in Sodom and Gomorrah and the lush valley than in the dry hills where Abraham lived and worshiped God. (Gen. 13:5-13) Recognizing God is something Saul had no problem with, but he just never got the point that to recognize God was not the same as obeying God. (I Sam. 15)

The religion of Christianity gets little to no points for recognizing God, especially if you believe the number one rule is to consider how we treat each other instead of having no other gods before The One True God. Even Baal worship recognizes the powers of nature God created. This may not be recognizing God Himself but it's, at the very least, recognizing the fact there are powers greater than man himself. What we see prioritized throughout the history of man is not the idea he refuses to recognize the fact there are powerful things above him but the classic thought of, how can I/we harness those powers to my/our benefit? When this becomes the question one can not live alone and gain much ground. This is why the idea of pulling together is so idolized among men.

It's like idolizing a good thing for all the wrong reasons, and it's why when people go their own way they are so often villainized for that. Seeing this in the world should not surprise us at all, but what should appall us is seeing it happen in what calls itself the church! If reaching the lost is for their benefit and not the mutual benefit of us all then why do we care so much if someone believes they, in their personal walk with God, feel the need to go in a different direction than the herd? The answer is not the bleeding heart, we care so much for every soul, answer we hear from the church. The root problem is that we don't like people who don't use their strength to pull with the rest of the team.

Not only does that mean we have one less person to help us pull in our cumulative effort, but what the religion fears far more than that is the fact that one might encourage others to join them or at least go their own way as well. This is the opposite of what the beast, I mean a universal religion, is attempting to accomplish. The fact we are all created to be Adam, one life living before God, who all happen to share the same time and physical space is not something we teach in a universal religion. That's why the idea is far more often than not totally lost in the Christian mind and along with it the fact we will all stand before God one day and each of us will actually stand by ourselves answering for our actions alone! (Rev. 20:11-15) A great deal of our actions will be actions that involved how we treated others around us, but that's why we should be crystal clear on the fact that how we treat others should not be based on how they treat us but on our own view of what is the right way to treat others. This we can get a good day by day feel for by

thinking, how would I like to be treated? Then treat others with that same amount/kind of respect, consideration, etc. (Luke 6:27-38) However, that only gets us so far and more importantly, it's not all we were created to be! Actually to say, "more importantly" is a severe understatement. When we see God say it wasn't good for Adam to be alone as the only human, understand that determination was made after Adam had totally been formed (meaning God was not in the planning stages for how to create man). In this, we clearly see how even having to think about other humans is a byproduct of a secondary determination on God's part when He created us.

Loving The Lord thy God with all you are made of isn't just the Golden Rule, it's the very essence of what we were created for. Before sin man might have lived indefinitely learning very slowly over who knows how much time (we're talking possible eons here), that listening to God and learning from Him is the only true path of growth. However, that was all fine because God certainly had eternity, and thanks to The Tree of Life, so did each human. When standing before God alone, truly all things were lawful. (I Cor. 10:23) Why do you think both Adam and Eve were naked and thought nothing about it? What would end up mattering was that byproduct of being around other humans, but even that didn't matter so much because God could guide us like parents can guide children to keep us from harming one another, and in turn this on its most basic level would teach man how much he needed the God who created us! All things would truly have worked together for good as long as man didn't take of the tree that granted the knowledge of good and evil. (Rom. 8:28) Once we did that we doomed ourselves with

responsibility God did not want us to have to take on until we were ready. This in no way diminished our need for God's guidance, it amplified it a million times over! We were suddenly out of time to take eons in learning that lesson, and this is something Adam and Eve grasped on an emotional level right after taking of the tree. This is what caused them to attempt to cover their nakedness and what God's words to them was trying to get them to see.

The idea championed at the Tower of Babel, the one that came to be so important to trace and understand through prophecy, the one that ultimately is represented to us as a beast in Revelation, is the idea that we can do it without God, we just need to do it together! Why did this disturb God so badly you might ask. Was it because He created us to be with Him and He didn't like the idea of man leaving Him out? No, these are the lies the devil likes to tell. God was disturbed by this for two main reasons. First, none of this was going to keep man from dying and having to stand before Him for righteous judgment. It was not going to allow any human to live the spotless purity needed to avoid the judgment of death. On the other hand, man could cumulatively create a utopia (on the surface at least) on this earth, but all that would serve to do is hide the very facts God laid down the curses to be sure we never forgot. We are out of time! We can no longer hope to live indefinitely in this universe. Our inability to handle the knowledge of good and evil with perfection will continue to create pain and suffering. No matter how much peace and ease of living our working together might be able to bring it won't solve basic problems individuals will still face. In fact, it is a way of minimizing them and ignoring them. This is the second main

reason God didn't like man's idea at the Tower and it's why I often say, God confounded our language at the Tower of Babel in order to protect the individual we each were created to be!

If nothing we can do by ourselves or as a group is capable of bringing about the purity to stand before God and be judged worthy of life eternal then this life is all we have without God. God will grant eternal life to those who love Him and want what He created us to be in the first place, but for everyone else, this life is it. Putting aside the fact it greatly pains God that anyone will be lost, there is the truth God grants us our free will. If God will allow us our free will in spite of the fact it may cause us to be lost for eternity, how bad do you think it is for our free will to be thwarted by other men? At first glance this might sound like a bit of a strange point to make, but think about what God did for Cain. We are told how that story ends for a very good reason, and what the end shows us is that Cain was granted God's protection to not be killed by other humans in judgment for killing his brother. This was granted to Cain regardless of the fact Cain had every intention of going out from the presence of God to live this life as he pleased.

You see, without God even the silver rule of loving our neighbor as ourselves can be easily twisted back on itself and used as a weapon against the individual. Long has the cry been heard that this person or that group is not considerate or caring because they care more about themselves than they do the greater group! Men like to believe the good of the many always out weighs the good of the one or the few and anyone who does not believe that is true (in the way they define it)

is the selfish one who is in the wrong. This is a great trick man no doubt got help from Satan in devising. You see, the silver rule is truly only as good as the one executing it. That is to say, where is the mental condition of the person attempting to love their neighbor as themselves? Do they love themselves; are they comfortable with who they are? How well does each individual even know who they are, what they want, what's good for them, etc.? If you can make people feel bad about themselves for not "caring" about the greater group or whole, you can effect this dynamic and what gets lost is that each of us have the right to choose for ourselves what we want in life. This is true no matter if we do or do not want God. Even if we don't want God, all He asks of us is that we understand our limits to self indulgence are dictated by giving everyone around us the same consideration we want for ourselves. This means if our plans require us to use other individuals in order to get what we want at their expense we should give up those plans. The trick Satan has twisted us into believing is that the group should determine what the plan should be and any individuals who don't go along with it are the ones expecting to get more for themselves by not yielding their life to the group. It sounds good on the surface, but what we should see is that the group is what is in violation of the rule by asking us to give up our liberty to go along with what they want. The beast is the epitome of wanting its plans at the expense of others.

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

***Questions submitted to the Institute,
answered by Philip E. Busby.***

FBS continued from pg. 8

right by living as they tell us to? The truth is, that shouldn't make us feel we have it right, but that's what blind belief does to people. We blindly believe in God so we blindly believe what those who claim to be working in His name say is right. Since not all those claiming to work in His name teach the same thing(s) this setup easily lends itself to us feeling comfortable in choosing which teaching makes us most at ease. Some will desire a strict and legalistic system because they feel that is what is needed to assure they will make it to heaven. Others will pick a system that allows them the most freedom to live as they choose. All this is why blind belief is just not going to work. There is a way that seems right to a man but the end of those ways are destruction and death. (Prov. 16:25) We must learn to live our lives according to what God wants for us and knowing God for ourselves, having a relationship with Him, is the only way to do that!

That is what we see in this servant's actions. The servant looks at how fast God is moving this all along and is determined not to be the one who is dragging behind. You see, it didn't really matter in the end if the family considered him rude or not in refusing to eat before they heard him out because he knew that is what God wanted. He would let God be true and every man a liar! (Rom. 3:4) He felt confident in the pace God was moving at and it made no difference what people thought of him, he would act and live as God directed him to act and live. If the family had thought him rude the servant felt confident that would tell him they were not the right people and he would waste no time moving on to find the right people. The point here is that the servant

knew God was quickly moving his task forward and he knew he should keep pace, not just on the basis the physical events seemed to be moving quickly but because he felt The Spirit of God moving at that pace.

Now, in the very verse we find this fact about the servant's actions which we have been discussing, we also find he was totally correct in feeling this was the right way to go about it. The verse shows us the family was ready to hear what he has to say, and later we see that while there is a bit more hesitancy on their part, this rapid pace continues to play out all through this interaction between the family and the servant. In discussing the speed of this interaction I want to take the opportunity to make another point here about faith. In prophecy and other places we see God use language that clearly tells us Jesus will return quickly and that His coming is very soon. Of course, the coming quickly part has to do with the swiftness of Jesus' return when the event does take place because Jesus told us there would be many who would come claiming to be Him but we were not to believe them. (Matt. 24:23-28) We would hear rumors about how The Messiah was over here or there at this place or that, but we are to ignore those ideas. Why Jesus wants us to understand this has nothing to do with a specific anti-christ, as in the person described by many "Christian" teachers today; it has to do with knowing Jesus' Second Coming will not be like His first. He will not be a man born as a child who grows up among us. No one will have to search for Him in among the world or even the chosen nation. One of the beauties of being a believer in Jesus is that we no longer wait for The Messiah's first appearance, and this puts us in step like the servant was in step with

the plan and will of God. We clearly await Jesus' Second Coming and we know that will be very different than His first.

Why is this so important? One example we see is in an excuse some used to say Jesus could not be The Messiah, and that was the fact His parents and family were known. (Matt. 13:53-58, John 7:37-44) As Christians we shake our heads and say, of course they were known, prophecy tells us where The Messiah would be born and how He would live. However, this argument made sense to many because religion, not faith, had them thinking ahead in prophecy and wanting The Messiah to be the powerful King we are told He will come as the second time. Religion can often be ahead of God's will because people want something and we want it now. Blind belief will let us do this but true faith allows us to feel the timing of God and better recognize Who Jesus was and why He did what He did during His first appearing. All things must be fulfilled and in order. This is something Jesus pointed out to John the Baptist when Jesus came to be baptized by him. (Matt. 3:13-15) Thus, Jesus came to this earth and He will return, but we are not to take how He came the first time as a model for how to look for His Second Coming. His Second Coming will be swift and life changing for all who are living on this planet. That is why we also do not have to worry Jesus' Second Coming has already taken place at some point in the past and we missed it. When Jesus comes back the whole world will know and any history written after His Second Coming will be written while He is still sitting on the throne in Jerusalem!

Now, turning to the point Jesus said His Second Coming would be soon, some would point out it has been close to two thousand years since He left and He hasn't returned yet. To some this is evidence Jesus is not coming back but for those who still await His return there is the question of, why would God tell us that when it was going to be so long into our future? One of the most basic answers to this is to point out what we are told in II Peter 3:8, which is that with God a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as a day. This can seem a little harsh because in the very statement which informs us God looks at time differently there is the admission God knows we do not see things a long period of time ahead of us as being, near, soon, etc. What's important is that we understand God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. (Isa. 55:8) Why? So we can seek His thoughts and lean not to our own understanding. (Prov. 3:5-6) What is soon to God may not feel so soon to us but that's what we were talking about in discussing the faith of this servant. Paul describes faith as the substance of what we hope for and the evidence of what we have not yet seen. (Heb. 11:1) This is where we need to stop fracturing Scripture into small pieces and have the faith to see it as a cohesive structure. Compare what we are told about how God looks at a day and a year with how Paul describes faith and you will see that the structure of time is the same in both statements.

We, as humans, look at time as a means to an end. There has to be a better way to say that, but what I mean is that we often see time as a road leading us to somewhere.

For those who do not believe in God that road is about physical accomplishments which come in various shapes and sizes. For some it's important that they leave their mark on the world. They might found a company or do so because of what they feel they can accomplish with that company. For some it's getting into politics and attempting to become high up in leadership; leave a legacy of some sort. Some people will do charity work and ironically the same thoughts that take people into doing charity, is what leads others into politics. In short, for some the goal is to simply attempt to leave the world a better place than they found it. We could go on and on in listing the different accomplishments people believe makes life worth living, but one more very important one is that many people feel just continuing life on this earth is important and at least partly their responsibility. For them, having children and raising a family is of great importance and many feel there is something missing in their life if they do not do so.

That last statement is important because missing something in our lives is a lot of the feeling I'm speaking to when I say people see life as a means to an end. Most people feel there are markers in life they must reach; accomplishments and goals they must complete for their life to hold meaning. Whether people say they believe in God or not, these same feelings often abound. Of course, many who claim to be believers in God would say making it to heaven is their ultimate goal; the place life's road is meant to take us! This is not far off the mark but it's still enough to confuse us about why God speaks of His return as being soon. We just don't see how God is not about time as in, it passes and it's gone. The fact we think this way is why we don't see how God can look

at a day as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. We don't really get that the real marker in life, the real point in existing, is faith itself and it does not matter if that's here or in heaven. This is why Paul tells us faith is the substance of what we hope for. When we live our lives waiting to go to heaven, we miss the fact faith is the substance of that hope, and if heaven is what we want as bad as we say then faith should be the thing we seek to have as much of as possible in the here and now! The fact faith is also the evidence of what we have not seen is a way of saying, our relationship with God now is how we know heaven is a place worth going to and that's a reason the thoughts of men don't grasp!

The servant in this story is working in haste because he wants to get Rebekah to Isaac. He had not been sent to do his own work but to retrieve Isaac's bride. (John 16:12-15) The servant understood nothing else mattered. It might sound unkind to say he did not care about Rebekah's family, but on so many levels her family had nothing to do with his goal other than to release her. You will remember early on in this story I mentioned how Rebekah reacted to this servant as if the thing her whole life had been about had somehow just begun. That is a beautiful picture of faith being the substance of what we hope for and the evidence of what we have not seen. Just meeting this servant was a substance of what Rebekah had been preparing for all her life. What he gave her was the evidence what she always felt would happen but as yet had not seen was as wonderful as she had ever imagined! All this relates to what The Holy Ghost does in our lives. Our faith might seem blind at times and in ways but The Holy Ghost can open our eyes to see what lies beyond. We

know it's going to be wonderful but He can bring wonderful things into the here and now. That doesn't mean He seeks to give us this world but that He brings a part of the world that we are waiting to get to, directly into our lives here!

So how does this all relate to the idea of Jesus' return being soon when generation upon generation have already passed since those words were first given to us? It relates because in thinking outside our faith and more like the world thinks, we miss the whole point of why Jesus and prophecy tells us Christ will return soon. It's true, untold thousands upon thousands of people have lived and died since Jesus first walked this earth in human form, but there in is the point. Life for us is short, and we need to understand that for each of us as individuals the day our earthly life ends is the coming of The Lord for us! It is really a technicality that those of us living for Christ that are physically still alive and remain to the actual moment of Christ's return will be caught up to meet Him in the air. The larger point of the verse(s) that tell us that information is that the dead in Christ rise "first." (I Thes. 4:13-18) The real message about not waiting or putting off living for God is that we never know when our lives will end, the way all men's lives have come to an end!

When Jesus told the parable about the servant who turned to smite his fellow servants because the master was away and he believed he had time to do as he pleased then get it straight before the master returned, Jesus was speaking far more to the fact we all face death at an unknown moment than He was the idea we might

actually live to be walking this earth at the moment He splits the eastern sky. (Matt. 24:42-51) In an attempt to persuade others from waiting until the last moment to ask for forgiveness, Christians will often present the argument of how hard it would be to wait until the last moment and "be sincere enough" about it to still get to heaven. The idea is that it's hard to truly be sorry for sins you willfully committed when you would still be out there committing them if you thought you had more time, and I won't disagree with that for a moment. However, once again, that's not the point. The truth is, if we did not want to live for God all those years of our lives, facing death is not likely to change that reality. I believe there is an understanding within the human mind that getting to go to heaven is more than just a formulated thing. I think we all understand deep down that we can't just say a sinner's prayer one day and expect it to punch our ticket to get in. However, admitting that is only a first step in allowing the truth to see the light of day in our lives. The fundamental fact we need to grasp is that Jesus is waiting for us and The Holy Ghost has been sent to bring us to Him. Thus, the questions are: do we believe that and do we understand what that means, not just for what we see as the "future," but for what is right now? While it will be a great joy to go see the place Jesus has prepared for us, His coming into our hearts is a substance we far too often ignore on levels we do not see in so many ways! Most everyone wants to go on to a better place but do we want to go on to be forever in a close relationship with the God Who is offering that relationship even now?

Until next time, Shalom!

of God to bring the truth to light in a very pointed way, not just to those who would make Abimelech their king but any in Israel who thought it was up to them to choose a king instead of what Gideon had told them, which was that God was their King!

Abimelech would go on to rule for three years. The words in English tell us he ruled “over Israel,” but more specifically all that is being said is that he was the only king of any kind recognized in all of Israel. This did not mean he had the power and authority to rule over the entire land, but he probably did draw in some surrounding cities and places that looked to him as their leader on some level. The real test is that Abimelech was never challenged by an invasion the people would have looked to him to drive out. No doubt he thought it was all going great, but just as Jotham had prophesied his troubles would come. God would send an evil spirit among the men of Shechem and they would begin to turn against Abimelech, and why not? There is no evidence Abimelech did anything to prosper them, and since no invasion of their territory had taken place, it would seem they had no real need for him. Thus, these men specifically set out to undermine Abimelech's rule and threaten his life. They sent men to go out and wait to ambush Abimelech in the mountains which would be places needed to travel through to get around Abimelech's “kingdom.” However, these men would not simply wait to kill the king, they began to rob everyone who passed by. This is an act Abimelech would have to figure out how to put a stop to or the people who looked to him for leadership would be very upset he could not protect

them as a king should by enforcing the law.

While Abimelech is attempting to figure out what he should do, it gets worse. There is a man named Gaal who by all accounts has no notoriety or claim to fame at all that we know of. Was he a military commander or the son of someone special like Abimelech was? Who knows, but we are told the men of Shechem totally turn on Abimelech and put their trust in this Gaal instead. This means in the same way they chose Abimelech to be king of whatever territory he could be king over, the men of Shechem simply went out and chose another man to lead them. They would make no secret of this choice either. They would go out with this man and gather grapes to eat, drink, and be merry in the house of their god(s). Since kings are often attributed with gaining their power in some way from the gods, this was more than just a small snub by these men. To top it all off Gaal would specifically mock Abimelech and his chief officer telling the people they would all be better off with him as king. Gaal would also go so far as to challenge Abimelech to come out and prove him wrong in battle if Abimelech had the guts. This was a direct threat to Abimelech's power and he either had to do something about it or walk away from his position in disgrace.

This point was emphasized by the fact Zebul, who was the head man of the city, heard these challenges and made sure Abimelech knew about them. He sent this communication secretly and also instructed Abimelech to gather his men and wait overnight outside the city in order to catch Gaal off guard in the morning. Abimelech

would take the advice and divide his forces into four groups to wait. When Gaal got up and went to the gate in the morning Abimelech and his army began to move in and Gaal told Zebul about it almost as if he thought Zebul should do something. Zebul told him he was seeing shadows but Gaal insisted he saw men. It was at that point Zebul reminds Gaal of the arrogant challenge he had made against Abimelech and tells Gaal to go out and make good on it if he could. Gaal goes out to fight Abimelech but it did not go well for him as Abimelech set Gaal and his men on the run, killing many of them. After this Abimelech dwelt in a town near by Shechem and Zebul would ban Gaal and his family from living in Shechem. However, this would not quell Abimelech's anger toward the city for the fact they had betrayed him.

As life returned to normal for Shechem, Abimelech would divide his men into three groups to ambush the people of the city when they came out into their fields to work. As the people did so the group of men that were with Abimelech rushed up to block the entrance of the city while the other two groups closed in on the people in the fields to kill them. Abimelech would also attack the city itself, destroying the entire cities infrastructure and sowing the area with salt to make it useless for cultivation. This was truly fire coming out of Abimelech to devour the men of Shechem who had once supported him as king. However, the leading men who were gathered in this city were not likely in the city itself, and when they heard what Abimelech had done they barricaded themselves in an inner chamber

of the temple for baal-berith. Abimelech took his men to a nearby forest in the mountains and instructed them to cut down large branches to carry back to the temple. They piled this wood against the temple to block anyone from escaping while at the same time used it to start the entire place on fire, and one thousand men and women perished in that fire.

All this success apparently brought Abimelech's pride to a whole new level. Abimelech no doubt decided it was time to put all the cities in the area that were not totally loyal to him under his thumb. We can only guess that is the reason he turns his attention to attacking a neighboring city called Thebez. Taking the city itself was easy for Abimelech and his men but the people of the city had ran into a tower that was meant to protect them against just such an attack. Abimelech turned to the same technique he used to destroy the people of Shechem who had barricaded themselves against him. The tower was probably made of stone so it would not burn but the door would. As he and his men prepared to do this a woman looked down, and seeing Abimelech working below her she dropped a milling stone on Abimelech which seriously injured him. This, of course, would not be a large millstone that would take several men or animals to turn but a simple daily use millstone women would use in their home. Nonetheless this was still a formidable stone, and it injured Abimelech badly enough he knew he would eventually die. Thus, Abimelech requests his armor bearer to draw his sword and kill him so that it could not be said a woman had

killed him. Abimelech would die, and no doubt many would know how his life ended in spite of the technicality he had his armor bearer kill him, which means he still died in disgrace in the view of the customs of the day.

Through these events Israel had entered what can only be described as civil war. All these actions and deaths were brought about not because an invading army or enemy of some sort had afflicted Israel; all this was brought upon Israel because they once again insisted on disobeying God. Now the war and its destruction might have been mostly local to Shechem and the surrounding area, but we should not forget this was the area that had become home to the false god many in Israel had turned to worshiping. In the fight against the people of Shechem we even see at least one temple, if not the main temple of this god, was destroyed directly in the fighting. However, what is interesting is how all this ends because it ends with the death of Abimelech. Israel had wanted a king and Abimelech had become a king, at least of a limited area. However, once Abimelech died we are told every man simply returned back to his home. Jotham's prophecy had come to pass. The experiment of having a king had failed, and in a sign of how much it was all uselessness from the start, life simply returned to normal in Israel almost as if none of it had ever happened. The forest fire Jotham's prophecy spoke of had taken place and burned itself out and all was as it should be once again.

Now, after all this we are told about a couple more judges in Israel who began to work in Israel for no specifics we are given.

I say no specifics because on almost every other case we are told a certain power invaded Israel or caused a problem of some kind, and due to those events Israel would cry to God for help. God would hear the cry of Israel and raise up a judge to defend them. Interestingly enough, the next two judges we are told about have no such story that brings them to work, and we are not told of any unrest in Israel that they put down during the time they were judges. There is a simple record of the fact they lived, served as a judge for so many years and died, but why? The answer is that what we are seeing in Israel is the downgrading conditions that existed when it comes to knowing and living God's commandments. We have talked extensively about the fact Israel wanted a king but God had not intended for them to have one. However, now we see the effects of what and why we are told in Exodus 20:5 that God visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations. As God looks down on this sinful world He continually looks for those who would desire a relationship with Him. However, men continue to fall deeper and deeper into sin. This means the truth of what is right and what is wrong gets clouded over more and more as time passes. God has done great things to pull man back up or slow his fall but it still happens. In spite of that truth, if men can come to the knowledge of Who God is and they desire to serve Him, God's mercy makes a way. Always has and always will as long as this world stands!

How this relates to our discussion of Judges is that the first generations of Israel to come out of Egypt should have been crystal clear on the fact God did not intend the nation to have any king besides Him.

However, as the generations passed this understanding was becoming more and more clouded, and what we see in Judges is that we are finally coming down to generations of Israel whom God is not going to hold as responsible for knowing that fact as those of the past. That said, God still wanted Israel to grab hold of the Law, understand It, and find that understanding again! You see, while it's true no outside force was invading Israel so much at this time, an internal enemy was attacking, and that was the enemy of lost knowledge. Through God's Word and the work of The Holy Ghost the knowledge can always be regained, but as the world crumbles and falls away from God the journey back to truly understanding some things is a very long road and harder hill to climb than it once was. Thus, many people attempt to serve God in sincerity today but are living very unrighteous lives compared to past generations due to false teaching they have been fed from their earliest days of life and/or as believers specifically. Laying aside something one feels is what they should be doing in order to serve God for the sake of having a clearer path to find and grow in true faith is the hardest thing any believer will ever do, and many simply will not make the transition.

Israel had made it to a point in their history where knowing how to look to God directly for their leadership was becoming a lost concept. Maintaining the tabernacle had already been almost completely neglected. This means the ability to maintain the priesthood, especially a priesthood that had the ability to know the will of God or seek

God for it when the people came to ask as the Law prescribed, was all but lost. About all that was left was the nation's ability to hear the words of a prophet when God would send one, and in this time more specifically the people were judges that God was sending. As we began the study of this book by talking about, that is basically what a judge was; someone who could hear from God and take action and/or lead the people to take action. Judges were the kind of prophet Israel needed because their minds were set on having a human to lead them not just tell them what was wrong as so many other prophets did. This is why at this point we see judges working in Israel just for the sake of there being a judge, and this becomes more and more the case. The best example of what I'm talking about is the final judge named Samuel. Samuel did not rise to be a judge just because people like the Philistines were a constant thorn in Israel's side. God rose him up because Israel no longer knew how to follow the Law and maintain the tabernacle and the priesthood. Thus, what we see in Samuel is a man who was not of the priestly line and lineage but who basically serves as the best priest Israel had, had in a long time! Such circumstances only make sense in the context of God's grace to continue reaching to us in order to get us back on the road to the truth no matter how far behind we've fallen from where past generations have been.

Let's stay in God's Word!