

BaptistWay Bible Series for Nov. 13: Regardless of leadership, follow God

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Regardless of leadership, follow God

- Judges 8:22-23; 8:33-9:15

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Conventional wisdom: “Be careful what you wish for; you may get it.”
“Something is better than nothing.”

Conventional wisdom has many and varied expressions. Some people call it “common sense.” And sometimes these old sayings are true. Sometimes they are not. As we learn from the Scripture passage for this lesson, let’s re-examine those two axioms as they relate to leadership.

In the afterglow of triumph over the Midianites (and forgetting that the Lord God was the true source of the victory), Israel asked Gideon to rule over them (8:22). There is no evidence in Scripture of their seeking God’s will. Their reasoning was that Gideon had “saved us from the hand of Midian.” Things had worked so well, they reasoned, they simply needed Gideon and his heirs to be their kings for this success to continue.



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Gideon, however, demurred, reminding the people (v. 23) God was to be their king.

Then Israel returned to their idolatry. The Lord God had made covenants with them and their forebears. Now they were worshipping Baal-berith or “Lord of Covenant.” Their thinking may have been that one covenant god is as good as the other. Similarly, they may have thought one leader is as good as the other. Neither assumption is true. One’s object of worship makes all the difference. The same can be said of the leader one chooses to follow.

Idolatry again resulted in oppression and hardship. This time Israel did not repent. The people seemed to assume God still would raise up a leader to deliver them. They were taking God for granted. Why repent? They always had been delivered somehow.

Since they would not follow God, Gideon’s death left a leadership vacuum in Israel. Into that void stepped Gideon’s son, Abimelech. Gideon had fathered Abimelech by a Shechemite concubine. Abimelech probably was reared by the mother as a Shechemite and would identify more with that city. Gideon’s 70 other sons would be identified more with Israel.

Where Gideon had said there would be no dynasty, his family warred against each other to make one. Abimelech won, due to support from his mother’s people in Shechem and using money from the shrine to Baal to

hire assassins to kill all his half brothers. Jotham, the youngest, hid and was the only survivor. Abimelech was made king —literally by elimination.

But, in Judges 9:8-15, we read that Jotham was not done and had something to say. From the heights of Mount Gerizim (the traditional site where the Israelites had, once upon a time, annually renewed their covenant with God), he shouted a parable down on Israel.

Jotham's story was designed to cause dissension among the Israelites by calling into question Abimelech's motives and style of leadership. The parable was one of the trees asking, in order, an olive tree, a fig tree and a vine to be their king. All three candidates were useful trees, but all turned down the offer.

The olive tree preferred to keep its status as related to gods. The fig tree wanted to keep its wealth. The vine enjoyed its ability to intoxicate.

Then, the bramble volunteered. He offered nothing. His "protection" was meaningless. However, he demanded and received the trees' submission, threatening their destruction if they did not submit.

Jotham's bramble, of course, represented Abimelech and said something about the kind of king Abimelech intended to be and became—self-serving and tyrannical.

But neither would Jotham have been a fit ruler. Not called by God, Jotham lacked courage, running and hiding when the time was tough. And after telling and interpreting the parable, he ran away again (v. 21).

Israel's choices seemed to be between corrupt leadership and cowardly leadership. Under God, both are oxymorons. Godly leadership is the servant leadership exemplified and taught by Jesus. It requires compassion, integrity and courage. Unworthy leaders stress personal gain rather than the good of people they serve and with whom they serve.

Even today, we sometimes care far too little about the type leaders we choose to follow. To simply settle for the one available is far too tempting. When we do this, we are agreeing that “Something is better than nothing.” But the story of Abimelech shows otherwise.

With all the available choices and options in our lives, we can too easily yearn for someone who will make things simpler by making the choices for us. Though a far and sad departure from our Baptist heritage, we may find ourselves asking someone else to tell us what to believe and do. This lesson reminds us “Be careful what you wish for; you may get it.”

“Be done with lesser things,” a line from one of our hymns reminds us. That has to do with the God we serve and worship. He alone is worthy. Any other god is unworthy. Further, God calls and equips people—ministers and laity alike—to lead.

In response, our responsibility is two-fold. If and when God calls, we must each be the kind of leader God would have us be. Also, we must have high standards for those we choose to follow. God wants the best for his people and his church. We are never to settle for less.

Discussion questions

- What are the criteria you have for leaders whom you follow?
- How consistent are those criteria with the example set by Jesus—a servant leader?

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