

Judges 9-10 – “Abimelech’s Abysmal Actions”

Here we get a lengthy chapter on the story of Abimelech. Abimelech means ‘My father is king’. Remember, Gideon had said that he didn’t want the role of ruling over the people, God was to be their ruler (8:22-23). But at the end of Gideon’s life, he began to live more and more like a king in a way that did not reflect God’s heart. He names his son Abimelech as a reminder of his own legacy and position as a king.

Gideon began to take multiple wives, and he took a Canaanite woman as a concubine with which he has Abimelech. And this unfaithfulness to God and inappropriate union with this concubine will cause much tragedy and turmoil in Israel.

- Our sin, though we might think can be handled and managed, will pose problems that go much further than we ever thought. It never pays to underestimate the harm of sin.

1. Abimelech – 6th Judge – 9:1-57

9:1-2 - *Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother’s brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother’s father, saying, ² “Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: ‘Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?’ Remember that I am your own flesh and bone.”*

Abimelech comes to his mother’s home. His mother was Gideon’s concubine, and concubine in these times typically remained living at their father’s home and being cared for by the family. So, Abimelech returns and speaks with his uncles and all the family there.

And he’s appealing to the men of Shechem to help him advance to the position of king. He’s being led by ambition and self-promotion.

- Now remember, establishing a line of kings was not an Israelite practice, it was a Canaanite practice. Thus Abimelech approaches the men of Shechem, a people of Canaanite origin, and he appeals to them on the basis that they’re family and it would be far better to have one ruling over them that has come from their own ranks; one that is ***flesh and bone***.

9:3-4 - *And his mother’s brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to*

follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is our brother.”⁴ So they gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.

Abimelech then takes money that’s been devoted to, and tainted by, idol worship. And he uses that money to hire a mob to do his dirty work. Abimelech is a man lacking in character, the kind of character God looks for in leaders, and so he picks men who are reckless. They’re not being ruled by character and righteousness, but by what they desire to do.

9:5-6 - Then he went to his father’s house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself.⁶ And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem.

Here we see the character declining more and more as Abimelech ruthlessly and brutally kills his 70 brothers on the same stone. One after one they face their execution while seeing the blood mount greater and greater with each passing brother.

- A leader that God can use is one that comes with a sacrifice for himself and a sacrifice of himself. It’s a person that has a contrite spirit recognizing his own sin and need for the grace of the living God. Abimelech however comes with a calloused heart that is serving himself with harshness and brutality.

And this whole act wasn’t making Abimelech the king of Israel, he was simply being given rulership over the Shechemites.

“Abimelech’s “coronation” was a farce, an empty ritual that was never accepted or blessed by the Lord. The new “king” not only blasphemed God by the promises he made, but he defiled a place sacred in Jewish history. The coronation took place at the “great tree at the pillar in Shechem” (Jdg. 9:6, NIV). This is probably the “oak of Moreh,” where the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised to give him and his descendants the land (Gen. 12:6). It was near this site that the nation of Israel heard the blessings and curses read from the Law and promised to obey the Lord (Deut. 11:26–32; Josh. 8:30–35). Jacob buried the idols here as he called his family back to God (Gen. 35:1–5), and here Joshua gave his last speech and led the people in reaffirming their obedience to

the Lord (Josh. 24:25–26). All of this sacred history was degraded and dishonored by the selfish acts of one godless man.”¹

We also see the Sovereignty of the Lord in allowing Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, to escape and not be found out, and the Lord is going to use him to carry out His work. The Lord is always at work orchestrating things in ways that will fulfill His purposes.

9:7-15 - *Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them: “Listen to me, you men of Shechem, That God may listen to you!”⁸ “The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’⁹ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Should I cease giving my oil, With which they honor God and men, And go to sway over trees?’¹⁰ “Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us!’¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit, And go to sway over trees?’¹² “Then the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us!’¹³ But the vine said to them, ‘Should I cease my new wine, Which cheers both God and men, And go to sway over trees?’¹⁴ “Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us!’¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in truth you anoint me as king over you, Then come and take shelter in my shade; But if not, let fire come out of the bramble And devour the cedars of Lebanon!’*

Jotham bravely sets himself up on Mt. Gerizim to call to account the men of Shechem for readily appointing Abimelech to be their king.

- Mt. Gerizim was an important place in Israel’s history. It was the place that the people of Israel pronounced blessing when they came into the land (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12-13). It overlooks the city of Shechem and provides a natural amphitheater. Mt. Ebal was the place that curses were to be pronounced. But it seems there’s a reversal taking place. The blessings that were to be to the people for obedience is now a place of cursing for their disobedience and refusal to follow God.

Jotham uses a parable, a fable, to present the foolishness of picking a man like Abimelech as king.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1994). *Be available* (p. 82). Victor Books.

- This is the first parable in the Bible. And one of just a few fables in the Bible. A fable was a short story that personified either animals or inanimate objects to reveal a certain truth.

So Jotham lets loose with this parable for all to hear what a bad mistake was made in crowning Abimelech.

The parable pictures these trees looking for a king. The olive tree, fig tree, and vine were all worthy and valuable trees and have been used symbolically to represent Israel throughout Scripture. They had a fruit bearing ministry that honored God. Some of their fruit was given as a sacrifice to God; the drink offerings poured out before God were products of these trees and they did not want to give up this ministry to be king.

The trees then turned to the bramble with the same request. And the bramble, which is a useless thornbush, boasted in the ability to provide for all these trees and told them to come and take shelter in its shade. The bramble however provides no shade. It doesn't have any real redeeming qualities. It produces no fruit, provides no shade. Its wood was really of no use except for kindling. And with that it boasted of burning all the other trees if they didn't want him to be king.

This parable of the bramble pictured Abimelech's leadership style – fiery! Anyone who disagrees with him will get burned.

- That's a good way to test the quality of a leader – how will they respond and react to those who don't see eye to eye with them.
- And just as the bramble was fruitless, so too, Abimelech won't bear any fruit.

9:16-21 - “Now therefore, if you have acted in truth and sincerity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done to him as he deserves—¹⁷ for my father fought for you, risked his life, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian; ¹⁸ but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and killed his seventy sons on one stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother—¹⁹ if then you have acted in truth and sincerity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. ²⁰ But if not, let fire come from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and Beth Millo; and

let fire come from the men of Shechem and from Beth Millo and devour Abimelech!”²¹ And Jotham ran away and fled; and he went to Beer and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.

Jotham breaks down what he shared in his story. Basically, he’s asking the people of Shechem if they truly have acted in truth and sincerity. Did they pick the right person and in the right way? Have they dealt properly with their former leader Gideon and his family. For all that he’s done in delivering them from the Midianites, have they responded rightly?

Has their choosing of Abimelech been done in haste simply because he’s one of them?

If they’ve acted in truth and sincerity, then rejoice in your choosing of Abimelech. But if they’ve not done this wrongly, then they will reap what they sow.

- “His point is that “a friendship based on ambition, ingratitude, disloyalty, and bloodshed could only have disastrous consequences for both sides” (9:16–20).”²²

So Jotham speaks his mind, calls them to account, then high tails it out of there out of fear that he’ll be next up on the chopping block.

9:22-25 - After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years,²³ God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,²⁴ that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers.²⁵ And the men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech.

Here we see a mutiny happening, all in fulfillment of what Jotham had pronounced.

Now we read something here that can leave us a little puzzled: ***God sent a spirit of ill will...*** The ESV and NIV say that God sent an ***evil spirit...***

- How do we reconcile this with **James 1:13**, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.*”

² C.J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* in “Bible Student’s Commentary” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 361.

² Smith, J. E. (1995). *The Books of History* (p. 167). College Press.

God certainly does not cause people to sin or send them spirits to make them sin. God cannot sin nor is He the author of sin. But He is in control of all and He can allow the natural actions of sinful, fallen creatures (ie. demons) to ultimately carry out His own purposes. He did it with Saul (1 Samuel 16:14) and with Job.

- And it should comfort and encourage us today to realize that Satan cannot do anything unless the Lord allows him to. This is why it's referred to as from the Lord, even though this is satanically inspired. God never initiates evil. But He allows these things to happen for His good and perfect purposes. He has a reason for it all. Whether it's to refine a person or to carry out His righteous judgment.
- In this case, this is the judgment against Abimelech and the men of Shechem for their cruel treatment of the sons of Gideon. A civil war is about to ensue between these groups of people.

It begins by the men of Shechem acting as pirates who loot all those that are travelling through the land. It reflects poorly on the leadership of Abimelech, but also robs him of the money he would otherwise receive to carry out his exploits.

9:26-29 - *Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brothers and went over to Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him. ²⁷ So they went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and made merry. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech. ²⁸ Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? ²⁹ If only this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech."* So he said to Abimelech, "Increase your army and come out!"

Gaal appears on the scene and he's a man just like Abimelech. He's every bit as ambitious and vain and he wins the confidence of the people of Shechem who are tired of Abimelech at this point.

- Yet how sad that they choose another leader that is pretty much cut from the same mold. Instead of making things right, they perpetuate the same problem they are in all because it gets rid of their immediate problem. But it's not going to make anything better because what they need is to come in alignment with God and His leadership and rule.

So Gaal and his brothers come to Shechem and it's during the grape harvest where there is much drinking and celebrating. And Gaal starts popping off against Abimelech and questioning why they're serving him. He puts himself in a favorable position and lets the people know that if he were in charge he would get rid of Abimelech. And then Gaal throws out the challenge to him.

- One of the follies of alcohol is losing control of what you say and do. We're not to be under the influence of anything except the Holy Spirit. Too often people regret the outcomes or behavior from a drunken stupor, but you will never regret the outcome of a Spirit filled life.
- Gaal will come to regret opening his big mouth under the influence of alcohol.

9:30-34 - *When Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was aroused. ³¹ And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, "Take note! Gaal the son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem; and here they are, fortifying the city against you. ³² Now therefore, get up by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field. ³³ And it shall be, as soon as the sun is up in the morning, that you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may then do to them as you find opportunity." ³⁴ So Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies.*

Zebul, who is Abimelech's confidante and ruler of the city, let's Abimelech know what is coming his way. The strategy is laid as to how to handle the incoming forces.

9:35-38 - *When Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance to the city gate, Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from lying in wait. ³⁶ And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" But Zebul said to him, "You see the shadows of the mountains as if they were men."³⁷ So Gaal spoke again and said, "See, people are coming down from the center of the land, and another company is coming from the Diviners' Terebinth Tree."³⁸ Then Zebul said to him, "Where indeed is your mouth now, with which you said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out, if you will, and fight with them now."*

Zebul and Gaal have a discussion at the city gates. Gaal sees in the distance Abimelech and his men coming down the mountain. Zebul buys some time for

the rest of the men to get in position by passing it off as just shadows on the mountain. But then Gaal sees similar movement elsewhere and Zebul knows it's time for Gaal to put his money where his mouth is. These are the men he's challenged and so Zebul calls him to battle.

9:39-45 - *So Gaal went out, leading the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. ⁴⁰ And Abimelech chased him, and he fled from him; and many fell wounded, to the very entrance of the gate. ⁴¹ Then Abimelech dwelt at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers, so that they would not dwell in Shechem. ⁴² And it came about on the next day that the people went out into the field, and they told Abimelech. ⁴³ So he took his people, divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the field. And he looked, and there were the people, coming out of the city; and he rose against them and attacked them. ⁴⁴ Then Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city; and the other two companies rushed upon all who were in the fields and killed them. ⁴⁵ So Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people who were in it; and he demolished the city and sowed it with salt.*

Gaal and his people were routed and defeated. It seems evident that Gaal's boasting of taking down Abimelech was nothing more than puffed up pride aided by intoxication.

As people of Shechem came out of the city, Abimelech strategizes and divides his people into three groups to soundly defeat them and their city.

He then **sowed it with salt**. This was done to sterilize the ground and prevent anything from growing there.

- "But more likely is the suggestion that this was a ritual act invoking an irrevocable curse on the site" (*Judges, Ruth*, 330)."³

9:46-49 - *Now when all the men of the tower of Shechem had heard that, they entered the stronghold of the temple of the god Berith. ⁴⁷ And it was told Abimelech that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸ Then Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it and laid it on his shoulder; then he said to the people who were with him, "What you have seen me do,*

³ Redmond, E. C. (2023). *Exalting Jesus in Judges and Ruth* (D. Platt, D. L. Akin, & T. Merida, Eds.). Holman Reference.

make haste and do as I have done.”⁴⁹ So each of the people likewise cut down his own bough and followed Abimelech, put them against the stronghold, and set the stronghold on fire above them, so that all the people of the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women. This was in fulfillment of Jotham’s parable, “Let fire come from Abimelech and destroy the men of Shechem” (Judges 9:20).

9:50-57 - Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and took it.⁵¹ But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women—all the people of the city—fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower.⁵² So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire.⁵³ But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull.⁵⁴ Then he called quickly to the young man, his armorbearer, and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’” So his young man thrust him through, and he died.⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed, every man to his place.⁵⁶ Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers.⁵⁷ And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.”

Abimelech fought for his reputation, fame and honour right to his last breath. His concern was not over what kind of life he lived, but that he would be known as the man killed by a woman. All through this account there’s a drive of ambition and self-promotion which will always lack a spirit of humility. And God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

- How sad that Abimelech cared more for his temporal fame than for his eternal claim.
- How we need to repent of selfish ambition and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God that He might exalt you in due time (1 Peter 5:6).

Application:

What can we learn from Abimelech?

1. Don’t think too highly of yourself. **Psalm 138:6**, *“Though the Lord is on high, Yet He regards the lowly; But the proud He knows from afar.”*

What does it mean to be humble or lowly? It means that we are to recognize who we really are. We are sinners and we deserve judgment. The only reason we stand today is by the mercy of God. It's Him we boast in.

2. Abimelech had an unbridled ambition that was about him. He wasn't serving and leading for the greater good, but for his own personal fame. When Abimelech died, everyone just went home. There was nothing that they felt worth fighting for because they were all fighting one man's battle. Unhealthy ambition will just leave you with a big headache if not brought under God's rule and will.
3. God will carry out His work despite evil. Abimelech was not a good man. But it was God that brought an end to him. Oh sure, a woman dropped a millstone on his head, but the fact that Abimelech was the one standing under that drop zone was God's providence. Just as we read that God repaid all the evil on the men of Shechem. ***All the evil of the men of Shechem God returned...*** God will deal with the wicked and will carry out His purposes despite them.

Psalm 37:1–4, *"Do not fret because of evildoers, Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. ² For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb. ³ Trust in the Lord, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. ⁴ Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart."*

2. Tola – 7th Judge – 10:1-2

10:1-2 - *After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he dwelt in Shamir in the mountains of Ephraim. ² He judged Israel twenty-three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir.*

Not much is known of these next two judges. Interestingly we read that after Abimelech, Tola was raised up to save Israel. Though Abimelech is in the record of judges, it seems he brought further oppression that Israel needed saving from.

3. Jair – 8th Judge – 10:3-5

10:3-5 - *After him arose Jair, a Gileadite; and he judged Israel twenty-two years. ⁴ Now he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys; they also had thirty towns, which are called "Havoth Jair" to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. ⁵ And Jair died and was buried in Camon.*

Jair was from the Transjordan area known as Gilead. He seems to have come from wealth as 30 of his sons had donkeys and that was something reserved for the wealthy in this day. They each seemed to rule over a town. ***Havoth Jair*** means, town of Jair.

We do not get to know much about them or what they did, but they judged Israel for a combined time of 45 years. It doesn't even seem like there was a period of oppression between their time of ruling.

But how unfortunate it is to see after 45 years of peace and prosperity, they returned back to idolatry and disobedience.

4. Israel's Continued Idolatry – 10:6-18

10:6-8 - Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. ⁷ So the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon. ⁸ From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years—all the children of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead. ⁹ Moreover the people of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also, against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

What a tragic report to see here that after 45 years of peace, they slipped back into a very familiar pattern. The sin cycle once more is repeated.

You wonder how can this be?

Yet it's a danger we too can face when we experience a time of smoothness and safety. We can get very comfortable, complacent or content and we don't seek the Lord like we once were. When that happens we can begin to drift or broaden our path without even realizing the harm. When things are going well it's easy to let our guard down and become enticed by other things.

- Here we see the people forsaking the Lord to entertain a potpourri of idols. Seven different gods are listed.

This is why God allows difficulties or trials in our lives. They keep us grounded and focussed on Him. They keep us in that place of dependency on the Lord and

seeking Him for our help and strength. This is the place we should all be remaining in – through the good and the bad.

Anything else only brings us into bondage and oppression which leads to depression. That's what we read in vs. 9, they were **severely distressed**.

10:10-14 - *And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!"* ¹¹ ***So the Lord said to the children of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the people of Ammon and from the Philistines?"*** ¹² ***Also the Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand.*** ¹³ ***Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more.*** ¹⁴ ***Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."***

This is exactly how I would answer in this situation. Israel's like the little boy who cried wolf. You reach the point where you just don't believe them or trust them anymore.

If they want to serve these other gods so much, then they should look to them for their help.

But we learn something of the persistence of seeking the Lord and walking in humility and obedience to Him.

10:15-16 - *And the children of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray."* ¹⁶ ***So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.***

Israel repented, but it was repentance accompanied with action. True repentance should always be accompanied with action. Notice what Israel did:

1. They confessed their sin. No more excuses. They called it for what it is. That's confession; it's saying the same thing God says about it.
2. They submitted to God. They were willing to receive whatever God deemed necessary.
3. They destroyed their idols. So often we read in Scripture of those who repented, yet never cleansed their lives or the land of the pagan idols or practises. But Israel here put away the things that got them into trouble. Don't leave anything in your life that you know can be an occasion to sin.

4. They turned to the Lord. Don't just clear away the bad, take action in doing the right and good things. Seek after the Lord.

We see the incredible mercy of God as He sees His people crying out to Him and taking action. He can no longer leave them in that place of bearing His judgment. He relents and comes to their aid once again.

- I'm so thankful of the mercy of God. It's never something we should test, but recognize how good and gracious our Heavenly Father is toward us.
- **Psalm 106:44–45**, *"Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, When He heard their cry; ⁴⁵ And for their sake He remembered His covenant, And relented according to the multitude of His mercies."*

10:17-18 - *Then the people of Ammon gathered together and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled together and encamped in Mizpah. ¹⁸ And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, "Who is the man who will begin the fight against the people of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."*