

# Anti-Judge Abimelech

## Judges 9

We're halfway through the book of Judges. Today we come to a story without a "judge." Instead we have the opposite, what we might call an "anti-judge." Chapter 9 follows the tragic legacy of Gideon, man God once called mighty. As we have seen in chapters 6-8, Gideon started so well and ends so poorly. Gideon responded to The Lord's call, talked with God, faithfully tore down altars, obeyed God in reducing his army to just a handful of men, battled the Midianites, and won the victory. Gideon rightly refused to be named king, saying in Judges 8:23, **"I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you."** But Gideon says one thing and does another. He goes out and acts like a king multiplying wives and taking gold for himself. He makes an EPHOD, centering worship around his family in Ophrah—not in the invisible God dwelling in the tabernacle at Shiloh.

Gideon doesn't live to see the full impact of his dark legacy—it plays out in the next generation. Look at the last three verses of chapter 8:

**33 So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god.**

**34 Thus the children of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side;**

**35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.**

Immediately following his death, a new cycle of sin is launched. This time they adopt a hybrid of Baalism/Judaism called Baal-berith, meaning, "Lord of the Covenant". This was a religion using biblical language mixed with the pagan god Baal.

At this point in the book of Judges, based on earlier cycles, we would expect another nation to begin oppressing Israel. Instead, we get a report concerning Gideon's son, Abimelech. The threat in this case comes not from without but from within.

### Abimelech's rise to power (9:1–6).

**1 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."**

**3 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.**

**5 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.**

Gideon had a lot of kids. He maintained a harem of wives in his hometown of Ophrah. He also kept a concubine in the city of Shechem. She gave birth to a son whom she named Abimelech, "My Father is King." After Gideon dies, Abimelech appeals to his relatives to make him king. They encourage him in his sin and appeal to the leaders of Shechem. Like a polished politician-wolf, Abimelech's argument is simple, "**Which is better for you?**": Is it better to be ruled by a family of 70 Baal-fighters from another city, or one baal-worshipping hometown boy like myself?

They agree to finance his anti-God campaign to destroy Gideon's family. The funds come from the cultic temple—70 shekels of silver to kill 70 men. Abimelech hires slimy mercenaries, travels to Ophrah, where he slaughters 69 of his 70 half-brothers on one stone. Just as Gideon restored relationship with Yahweh through sacrifice, his son now restores worship to Baal through human sacrifice. Those who want to be great for their own glory often begin by destroying their own family.

Abimelech's "coronation" was a farce, an empty ritual that was never accepted or blessed by the Lord. The new "king" not only blasphemes God by the promises he made, but he defiles a place sacred in Jewish history. The coronation took place by the "oak of the pillar which was in Shechem" (9:6). 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 is degraded and dishonored by the selfish acts of one godless man.

### **Jotham's courageous fable (9:7–21).**

Gideon's youngest son Jotham survives the massacre; his name means "The Lord has integrity."—He does what he says. Jotham inherited all that was right with Gideon. Like his Dad he is weak and small. Like his Dad he stands up when it is unpopular and dangerous. And like his Dad, he is a tool for God's judgment. As they are celebrating the coronation of Abimelech, Jotham stands atop Mount Gerizim where Joshua had renewed the covenant.

**7 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!'**
- 16 "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.**

In a nation of passive and frightened men, Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's sons, steps up in a big way. In speaking out against Abimelech he risks his life because he loves his people. He knows he can't do anything about Abimelech's reign, yet he speaks a prophetic word that is eventually fulfilled. Praise God for courageous men and women who will not back down from anyone or anything. Edmund Burke said, "All that is essential for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." May you and I not sit by while evil occurs; may we be courageous like Jotham.

He calls out the men of Shechem with a parable about trees and thornbushes. The point of the fable is its climax (9:14–15). The focus is on the stupidity of the trees (9:14) and the uselessness of the bramble (9:15). For a bramble to invite the other trees to trust in its shadow is laughable! A bramble is a useless nuisance in the land, good only for fuel for the fire.

Israel has chosen to support a worthless, unqualified, big talking-bramble-king. And Jotham tells them he will be a thorn to Israel—they will consume and be consumed by one another...with fire. Unqualified leadership and unfaithful decision-making always leads to destruction.

## **The Rebellion Against Abimelech (9:22-41)**

In time, Jotham's curse comes true by the hand of the invisible God.

- 22 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.**

- 26 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!"**
- 30 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."**

After three years, God sends division between Abimelech and those who made him king—division is always the first sign of self-destruction. Wanting to separate themselves from what he did to Gideon's family, they go on a mission to make his administration look bad. They set up ambushes in the mountains to rob anyone who passed by.

Then Gaal moves to town., a new guy who looks like a good replacement so the men of Shechem can still be great. So, they throw a wild party in the temple of Baal. Gaal gets drunk and then he gets mouthy. And he begins to make the same argument that Abimelech had about birthright. Wolves breed wolves and eventually wolves attack wolves and eventually wolves eat wolves. There can be only one alpha dog.

- 34 So Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies.**
- 35 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."**
- 39 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.**

### **The Abimelech's Revenge (9:42-49)**

Abimelech does more than just silence the challenger. Abimelech lets this victory go to his head and he settles a score with the citizens of Shechem who had cursed him (9:27). He ensures there will be no one left to challenge him again. Lord avenges the blood of Gideon's sons. Just as Jotham prophesied the fire did **"come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon."**

**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.**

**46 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, 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.**

Jotham's curse, God's judgment, is half-fulfilled. Abimelech's thirst for greatness is what brings the complete fulfillment of God's wrath.

### **Death of Abimelech (9:50-54).**

Abimelech kills his challenger. Then he kills his supporters. Then he kills their supporters.

**50 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 makes the mistake of getting too close to the tower, and a woman drops an upper millstone on his head and kills him. Abimelech experiences a triple disgrace: (1) He is killed, but not really in a battle; (2) he is killed by a woman, which is a disgrace to a soldier; and (3) he is killed with a millstone, not a sword. The fact that his armor-bearer finishes the job with a sword didn't change anything; for centuries later, Abimelech's shameful death is remembered as being accomplished by a woman (2 Sam 11:21).

What can we learn from such a dark story? Several things:

**1. Our sins often have lasting consequences.**

Men and fathers, our failure to lead in our homes, in our churches, and in our communities will have a generational impact—much of which we may never see. We need someone to save us from ourselves.

**2. Evil is judged by God.**

And all men are bad; all men fall short of the glory of God no matter how much "good" you think you have done—you will not be the one to beat that verse. God makes good on his promises to bless and his promises to punish, if not now then in eternity. In other words, God is a God of integrity, he is who he says he is Exodus 34.6: **"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."** We need someone to save us from God's wrath.

**3. Beware of a thirst for power and greatness.**

We should ask ourselves how much we are like Abimelech. We all want to be great, whether we admit it or not. Much like greed, this sin is hard to see, so very few of us will ever admit it.

Jesus own disciples struggled with wanting to be great. Here is what he told them. Matthew 20.25-26 **25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.** If you want to be great, strive to be a servant not a ruler.

Finally a lesson from the thorn:

**4. A lesson from the thorn.**

In the Bible, the thorn and bramble are first mentioned in Genesis 3:17-18 as a curse of our transgression, it's a sign of our sin that the earth is cursed, and it will produce the thorn and the bramble. It is a sign of the curse of God upon human sin.

People turn their backs upon the tree of life and worship at the shrine of the thorn.

The thorn then, this emblem of our sin, was placed on Jesus. “**And on His brow, they placed a crown of thorns**” [Matthew 27:29]. The curse of our sin was placed on Jesus.

He died in our place so that in Christ the thorn and the bramble are taken away, and we have access opened wide to the tree of life. The curse of sin has been broken at the cross.

Why would anyone choose to be ruled by the thorns? Come and dwell in the shade of the tree that grows by the side of the river of heaven, in the very center of the Kingdom of Jesus. God has given us a way of escape. No longer in the shadow and shade of the bramble and the brier and the thorn, but dwelling underneath the shade of the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations [Revelation 22:1-4]. Oh, bless His name that bore the crown of thorns for us!