

## Week 10 - Abominable Abimelech - Judges 8:33-9:57

### Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:1, 14-28

#### Introduction

As we pick up our study of the book of Judges after two weeks away, let's begin with a bit of a review

When we were last together, we completed our two-week look at Gideon, who proved to be a bit of a mixed bag of doubt and bravery - a mixture of faithlessness and obedience

What we saw in the Gideon narrative is that God's most significant obstacle to working in his people is often the faithlessness of his people, but that God is patient and longsuffering in carrying out his plans

And we saw how no enemy is invincible - no matter how lopsided the odds appear from a human perspective - and God is able to defeat formidable forces with a laughably small contingent using a ridiculous strategy

So once more, we concluded that God is the true hero of the Gideon narrative and that God is the cause of all the good that happens to his people

Sadly, we also saw what so often happens when God gives the victory as Gideon fell prey to the temptation to exchange his own agenda for God's and began to act as if he alone had achieved the victory over Midian

And at the end of the Gideon account, we saw how his post-war actions led Israel back into idolatry as all Israel whored after the ephod he created from the spoils taken from the Midianites, and it became a snare

We might well be tempted to get down on Gideon for his flaws - I have to admit that the admiration of Gideon has long puzzled me, given his nature

But we also read that Israel had rest for forty years in the days of Gideon, so he must have done something right as he reigned over his people

And we need to recognize that God never chastises Gideon - so perhaps we should cut him the same amount of slack that God does

After all, who among us doesn't suffer a crisis of faith from time to time - especially when called to do what we think might well be impossible

Today we pick up the narrative with Gideon's son, Abimelech, whose name means "my father is king."

Abimelech was the son of one of Gideon's concubines, who we are told lived in Shechem

Shechem was an important city in the Old Testament

It was at Shechem where Abram received God's promise of the land, and it was at Shechem where Joseph's remains were buried

Shechem also was a city of refuge and served as the capital of the northern kingdom for a time

And, as we heard in our Scripture reading this morning, Shechem was where the people of Israel pledged their allegiance to God after being reminded of God's goodness toward them, and they unanimously ratified their covenant with God

That proves to be somewhat ironic as we read today how as soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals, and we are introduced to a new name - Baal-berith - which means Baal of the covenant

Once again, we see the totality of Israel's compromise and the complete Canaanization of Israel as they forsake their covenant with God and enter into a covenantal relationship with Baal

**[Judges 8:34-35]** *And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.*

As we dig into the account of Abimelech, we are going to see how it could have been pulled from today's headlines  
 Modern-day politicians have nothing on Abimelech as he schemes his way into power and ruthlessly wields his authority against any and all who would oppose him

Tribalism and "buyer's remorse" are on full display in the verses before us, just as they are today, and yet we see that God is still on his throne; that God is still in complete control of the events that impact and shape the lives of his people

We will begin our study by looking at Abimelech's shameless rise to power in **Judges 9:1-6**

## **I. Abimelech's ascension**

Abimelech appears to have wasted no time after his father died in putting his plan into action

And he was quite shrewd as he went to his mother's people to plead his case and seek their support

Just like in modern-day politics, he enlisted people he trusted to carry out a whisper campaign that would reach the ears of the power-brokers of his day to start them thinking that maybe this Abimelech fellow would make a good king

He instructed his family members to make a two-pronged argument that would appeal to those elites

**First**, he suggested that being ruled by one man would certainly be preferable to being ruled by 70 men

**Second**, they were to suggest that being ruled by a relative would be preferable to being ruled by outsiders, and Abimelech encouraged them to emphasize the fact that he was a blood relative

Naturally, his relatives take on the task of being his spokesmen and relay his message to the city fathers just as he requested, and the arguments have their desired effect as the sympathies of the powerful turn toward Abimelech

Then they make their support tangible as they go to the treasury of Baal-berith to finance Abimelech's campaign with 70 pieces of silver which he uses to hire ruffians who will function as hitmen

As readers, we can't help but note that the amount they give Abimelech amounts to one piece of silver for each life the assassins are hired to take

In verse 5, we see Abimelech, with his thugs in tow, travel the 30 miles from Shechem to Ophrah, Gideon's former base of operations, where he found his half-brothers

And when he got there, he and his men killed them "*on one stone*" [**Judges 9:5**]

Looking at **1Samuel 14:34-35** we see a parallel that gives us insight into how Abimelech dealt with his half brothers

In that passage, King Saul and his men had defeated the Amalekites and taken animals as spoils, and Saul ordered his men to bring a large stone that would act as a place to slaughter the animals so that it would be done properly

Given that insight, we can only deduce that the 70 sons of Gideon were brutally killed serially, one after the other, in a brutal act of cold-blooded murder - akin to animals in a slaughterhouse

And in verse 6 [**Judges 9:6**], we see that Abimelech achieved his goal and was officially proclaimed king by the powerful men of Shechem

Thus Abimelech's plan seems to have worked beautifully, as he got just what he wanted

But he made a huge mistake in leaving one of his half-brothers alive -

Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, had successfully hidden and escaped the fate of his brothers and that led to a serious complication in Abimelech's plot

And in verses 7-21, we read about Jotham's reaction to his brothers' murders and Abimelech's coronation as he climbs to the top of Mount Gerizim and calls out to the people below

## II. Jotham's accusation

As a side note, Jotham's name stands in stark contrast to Abimelech's as it means "the Lord is perfect or honest," and Jotham is portrayed positively as a person of integrity rather than a person of ambition, as his brother is

Jotham, though, is relatively powerless in the face of Abimelech

I mean, Abimelech and his merry band have just serially murdered all of Jotham's brothers, so he can't simply march into Shechem to make his case

He has to resort to calling down from the top of Mount Gerizim and then running away to hide again when he finishes his message

And he chooses a unique way of making his point - he tells a fable about the trees choosing a king

Jotham isn't making a statement here about the worthlessness of kingship - he's making a statement about the worthlessness of Abimelech

In his fable, we see the trees determine they need a king, so they first go to the olive tree and ask it to reign over them

In response, the olive tree refused to give up its valuable service of providing oil by which "*gods and men are honored*"

Olive oil was arguably the most valuable agricultural product in the ancient world

It was used in cooking, medicine, as a lubricant, it was a leather softener and laxative, it was used as fuel in lamps and as an ingredient in perfumes, and it was employed in sacred rituals and anointing ceremonies

The olive tree would rather honor others than have its ego stroked by being anointed with its own oil

So the trees turned next to the fig tree

The fig likewise declined the offer of kingship, determining instead to continue to provide sweetness to those who enjoyed its fruit

So the trees looked to the grapevine, and the vine also turned down the offer opting instead to continue to provide the wine that cheers God and man

Note that the first three offers of kingship went to the three top "trees" and, finding no taker, the trees resort to their fourth candidate - the bramble or thornbush

Unlike the first three candidates, the bramble has nothing positive to offer but, ironically, it's the bramble that accepts the offer of kingship

But the bramble was concerned that perhaps the trees were playing a joke on him, so, in accepting, he repeated their words back to them and invited them to prove their sincerity by taking refuge in his shade

The image of the trees taking shelter under a thornbush is absurd - not just because of the size differential - but also because a thornbush really doesn't offer shade or cover - they are spindly little things with sharp thorns

And just to be sure that they meant actually to make him their king, the bramble invoked a curse upon the trees should they be fooling with him

The bramble's ego is on full display as he makes himself the source of consuming fire and declares his supremacy over the largest and most majestic trees in the region - the cedars of Lebanon - what hubris

Again, Jotham wasn't disparaging kingship itself but Abimelech

And, to make his point perfectly clear, Jotham states in verses 16-20 that he is talking about fairness and integrity

In verse 16 [**Judges 9:16**], we see him declare, "*If you have acted in good faith and integrity*" in making Abimelech king and have "*done to him as his deeds deserved*"

Jotham begins his argument objectively, but then we see Jotham's personal feelings get in the way as he breaks into a eulogy of his father that reveals the pain he is feeling at the Shechemites' treatment of his father in verses 17-18

But he quickly gets back on track and restates that if their motives were pure, then they should rejoice

But if not, both Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem should be destroyed by their alliance

Then, having pronounced his curse, Jotham fled for his life to Beer, where he likely stayed until after Abimelech's death

Abimelech was a bad guy, and we, as readers of the account, know that the alliance he entered into with the leading men of Shechem was an unholy one

Still, Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years before God personally intervened to avenge the violence committed by Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem against Gideon's family

And in verse 23 [**Judges 9:23**], we read that God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem that caused the leaders of Shechem to deal treacherously with Abimelech leading to an attempt to assassinate him

### **III. Shechem's animosity**

First, we see the leaders of Shechem put bandits in the hills to ambush passers-by

It seems they intended to cause upheaval in the region by disrupting the peace that Abimelech had promised, forcing him to retaliate - of course their idea was that the bandits would kill him

And eventually, word of the robberies did reach the ears of Abimelech

At first, it seems curious that we aren't told what Abimelech's response was - or, indeed, that he responded at all

But as we reflect on the matter, we understand that the plan couldn't work because to fulfill the curse of Jotham, not only must Abimelech die, but the leaders of Shechem must also die - mutual destruction was called for

Typical of the book of Judges, a twist is delivered in verse 26 as we see a newcomer arrive on the scene - a man named Gaal, the son of Ebed

As it turns out, Gaal also has ties to Shechem

In fact, he claims descent from Hamor, the founder of the city, making him a true son of Shechem

Remember, Abimelech had argued that he was the better man to rule because of his ties to Shechem that Gideon's other sons didn't have, but now we have a battle between him and Gaal as to whose roots go deeper

Again, this is so like modern politics, where battles of words are waged over who has the best bona fides and who is a Johnny Come Lately or a mere pretender

And, as it turns out, it's the time of the grape harvest, so the wine is flowing freely, and the men of Shechem, presumably well-lubricated, begin to curse Abimelech

Not to be outdone, Gaal also begins to shoot his mouth off about all that he would do to Abimelech should he show his face in those parts

In my younger days, we referred to that as "beer muscle," and beer muscle often leads to bold claims and results in trouble

However, the fickle leaders of Shechem quickly rush to support Gaal as their new champion

All that is except Abimelech's lieutenant, Zebul, who, upon hearing what was being said, sent word to Abimelech detailing Gaal's big talk and encouraging Abimelech to act swiftly to put down the usurper to his throne

Naturally, Abimelech takes full advantage of Zebul's warning, and he also takes his advice dividing his men into four squads and positioning them around Shechem by night to be ready to attack at first light

We have to enjoy the humor of the scene as the author describes it

Picture Zebul and Gaal standing together, yawning and stretching a bit as they get ready to greet the people as they pass through the city gate as the important men of a city were prone to do in those days

Then all of a sudden, Gaal looks out over the mountains and thinks he sees a company of men on the move, only to have Zebul tease him a bit about his eyesight and say he is mistaking a shadow for troops

Then Gaal looked to the plain and saw more men moving toward the city, and this time he was certain because as he continued to scan the area, he saw yet another company coming from a different direction

It's not hard to envision the sly smile that would have been on Zebul's face as he looked at Gaal and delivered the line he had been waiting for "Where is your mouth now? Go get 'em, big boy."

I paraphrased that last part, but that's the gist of Zebul's message

So Gaal rallied his men quickly and went out to engage with Abimelech's men, only to be run off of the battlefield by Abimelech and out of town by Zebul

For all of his big talk, Gaal and his relatives are last seen disappearing over the hills with their tails between their legs

Sadly, that's the end of the humor in our passage, as Abimelech wasn't finished with his revenge

#### **IV. Abimelech's atrocities**

The next day, the townsfolk, who likely had nothing to do with elevating Gaal, went to work in the fields as they would on any day, only to be massacred by Abimelech's troops, who were lying in wait for them

Still not satisfied, verse 45 [Judges 9:45] tells us that Abimelech and his men fought against the city all day, ultimately taking it and, after killing all the people inside the city walls, they razed the city and sowed the ground with salt

But Abimelech still wasn't done, and when he discovered that the leaders of Shechem had secured themselves in the city tower, he ordered the stronghold be burned, killing about 1,000 men and women

We aren't told what Abimelech had against the city of Thebez - maybe the people there had revolted against him too

We are only told that he moved on to Thebez and found the people had also secured themselves in their tower, so he set out to burn them just as he had done to the people of Shechem

But as he approached to put his bundle of brush against the base of the tower as he had done in Shechem, an unnamed woman dropped an upper millstone on him, cracking his skull

Abimelech was mortally wounded but still able to call out to a young soldier who he ordered to kill him with his sword so that it couldn't be said he was killed by a woman [Judges 9:54]

The young soldier did as he was told, and when the rest of the company saw Abimelech was dead; their reason for fighting was gone, so they went home

It's a great story, and the action and details of it are enough to make us forget what actually occurred here

#### **This was the execution of divine judgment**

Remember, this all began when God [Judges 9:22] sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem

Now look with me at the last two verses of the chapter [Judges 9:56-57], which bookend this account

*Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.*

God worked things out just as Jotham said in his curse

Abimelech destroyed the men of Shechem even as he was destroyed by them - it was mutual destruction orchestrated by God

And it shouldn't surprise us when God uses evil men to destroy one another, whether it happens at the personal or the national level - God is in control, and God operates on the basis of righteousness, and he will not let evil continue forever

## Conclusion

I began this morning by saying how closely this account parallels modern-day politics

Sadly, it's still true that the people who seek power and leadership are often the ones who are least suited for leadership

Just like Abimelech, far too many such people lust mainly to satisfy their own selfish egos and self-interests

How often have we gone to the polls with the sad knowledge that we can only choose between the lesser of two evils?

There simply aren't too many, if any, who seek to serve selflessly for the benefit of their fellow citizens

And Jotham's fable serves as a warning to people who are foolish enough to select worthless men to be their leaders

I'm sure you've heard the adage that people tend to get the leaders they deserve

We've seen that it was certainly true in the case of Israel and Abimelech - in fact, both sides of that equation got what they deserved

And, while I hesitate ever to chalk up anything that happens today to God's judgment since I'm not privy to what God is doing short of him revealing it

Still, we have to understand that there are times when God brings about chastisement with the government he gives his people just as he did in the case of Abimelech - and whereas God had used foreigners to judge Israel now the judgment comes from within

And, just so no one can accuse me of preaching a political agenda here, I want to point out that there are "bramble-bush" people on both sides of the political aisle - this problem isn't limited to one side of the political spectrum

As Christ-followers, we can't help but lament the current state of affairs as our government at all levels, from local to state to federal, seems to be racing away from the morality of God - there is no doubt that our government is a mess

Therein lies a lesson for us from this passage

We cannot look to government to save us, and, sadly, even sincere Christ-followers can tend to believe that if we would only elect this person or if that party was in control, then all of our problems would be solved

We must remember that this is a fallen, sin-stained world, and no person or party or political persuasion is the answer to the problems that plague it

Yes, God instituted government and God puts the people he wants into those positions - Scripture is clear about that

And it's also true that the people in government can make our lives here more or less pleasant

But they are not who make the ultimate difference in this world - that's Jesus' job

And our world will only truly change for the better as more people determine to follow Christ

Yes, we need to support the best people possible, we need to vote according to God's principles, and, when possible, we need to step up to serve in governmental positions

But our number one job is to lead people to our Savior and train them in righteousness

While recognizing that things still will not be perfect on this earth until Jesus returns again to reign

Next week, we will be taking on all the minor judges in one sermon so our reading will be a bit scattered

We will be spending a good deal of our time looking at 10:1-16 but also 3:31 and 12:8-15

Let's pray