



Abimelech's Rise and Downfall Judges 9

Introduction

Gideon was a brave hero and a good judge, a bright and shining light in a dark and dismal age. He was also a product of that age. His environment impacted him as ours impacts us. Some of the things he did were influenced by his times. Other things were in godly contrast to his times. May we do as well in view of the greater light we have and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

One common practice of Israel's neighboring pagan nations was polygamy. By indulging in this practice Gideon brought strife into his home and nation. *Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech* (Judges 8:30-31). Abimelech means "my father is king". This illegitimate son would cost the lives of Gideon's seventy sons. Often, a heavy price is paid for following the world's ways rather than God's ways.

Outline of Judges Chapter 9

- I. Abimelech's Ambition - Judges 9:1-21
- II. Abimelech's Attainment - Judges 9:22-49
- III. Abimelech's End - Judges 9:50-57

I. Abimelech's Ambition - Judges 9:1-21

A. Abimelech's Campaign - Judges 9:1-6

1. Beginning in Shechem

Abimelech's mother, the concubine of his father Gideon, lived in Shechem with her father and brothers. Abimelech appealed to them and asked them to wage his campaign with the Shechemites to be ruler over them. The choice, as he put it, was to be ruled by one of their own or by seventy outsiders. Another choice, of course, was to be ruled by neither, but he failed to mention that.

Shechem was an important city, situated between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. It had been seized by Jacob's sons before the tribes went to Egypt. Although Joshua did not fight there, he established it as a religious center after the conquest, designating it a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7). He had gathered all Israel at Shechem before his death. Centuries later the Samaritans made it their holy city. It is the modern-day Nablus where a Samaritan community survives to this day.

Flaunting his father's modest refusal to be king when asked, Abimelech sought the title for himself even though Israel had never had a king. Abimelech sought to imitate the pagan city-states around him which had petty kings. Having a king would give Shechem the status of a city-state.

2. Supporters and followers

Abimelech's relatives convinced the shallow Shechemites to back their own *flesh and bone* (9:2). His campaign accelerated when they gave him seventy pieces of silver from their pagan temple. With it he hired rabble, *worthless and reckless men*, to follow him (9:4). This type of person has always been in plentiful supply. Demagogues have no difficulty gathering crowds of people to tout unworthy causes. (See 2 Chronicles 13:7 and Acts 17:5.) Having followers may mean that you are a leader but it is certainly no gauge of the quality of your leadership

3. Elimination of potential opposition

It did not take courage for Abimelech to lead his band of ruffians to his father's house in Ophrah and slay all of his seventy half-brothers except one. Jotham, the youngest, hid and survived the slaughter.

4. Proclaimed king of Shechem

The men of Shechem proclaimed Abimelech king at a prominent place in the city, *beside the terebinth tree at the pillar* (9:6). *All of Beth Millo* refers to the upper class people of the city. A "millo" was generally an area of the city which had been elevated by bringing in fill dirt. It was usually the temple precinct where the religious leaders and wealthy lived. In addition, mention of *the terebinth tree* may denote that this was a place of pagan worship. The Canaanite people often carried out their worship in "holy groves" or near trees with thick green foliage.

B. Jotham's Protest - Judges 9:7-21

Jotham came out of hiding and from the top of Mt. Gerizim, above Shechem, he told a parable of various kinds of trees who were asked to be king of the trees but refused because they were useful in better ways.

1. The parable - Judges 9:7-15

The olive tree's response was, *Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway*

over trees? It was a rhetorical question with an obvious answer. How does swaying over the trees compare to giving oil for all?

The fig tree, able to give good fruit for sweetness, also asked if swaying over the trees was better.

The vine, though not as impressive as a tree, produces wine, is enjoyed by man, and is an offering to God. Was that not better than swaying over trees?

The bramble, having no useful purpose other than kindling for cooking fires, was nothing but a thornbush found growing at the foot of the trees. It scarcely cast a shadow but was delighted at the thought of swaying over the trees. The bramble made pompous threats if not chosen to do so.

2. The point of the parable

Jotham's point seems to be that it is worthless people who ambitiously seek to lord it over others. Worthy people are too busy performing useful work and do not have the time or inclination to seek positions of power.

3. Application of the parable

Jotham challenged the men of Shechem to consider whether their choice of a king was good, sincere and honoring to his father Gideon who risked his life for them, or whether it was abortive, manipulative, and mean, the result of killing Gideon's sons. He then pronounced a curse of fire on them, and fled in fear of Abimelech.

C. Abimelech's Lust for Position

Abimelech presents a contrast to the true leaders who went before him and who would come after him. "Abimelech, who tried to set himself up like a Canaanite city-state king with the help of Baal (9:4), stands in sharp contrast to his father Gideon....In every respect, he was the antithesis of the Lord's appointed Judges" (NIV Study Bible). Abimelech, illegitimate and removed from his seventy legitimate brothers, felt he had a right to rule. He felt cheated by his father's refusal of a dynasty, even though he was far down the line from being king. As he dwelt upon what might have been, the position became his burning ambition. It was the route to being somebody, and getting even with his father and brothers.

Ambition can consume a person as much as any other lust. Psychologists have identified a will to power. It is a drive and a motivator, which can become all-consuming, if not under God's control. Joseph said to his brothers

who sold him into slavery, that it was God who raised him up to power. *It was not you that sent me here but God. He has made me...ruler throughout all the land...* (Genesis 45:8). Hannah rejoiced over answered prayer for a son by saying, *The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up* (1 Samuel 2:7). *Exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. God is the judge; He puts down one and exalts another* (Psalm 75:7). (See also Daniel 4:25.)

Are you driven by the desire to be "something" or "someone"? This is not the same as wanting your life to count for something, or making the most of your life. The Bible says you are not your own, *you are bought with a price* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Your real life is *hidden with Christ in God* (Colossians 3:3). Paul said we are to die to self so that we may live for God (Romans 6:11). In Christ each of us is a new creation. Old motivations no longer need to have power over us because *All things have become new* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Are you willing to present your ambitions to God and trust Him to make you what He created you to be?

II. Abimelech's Attainment - Judges 9:22-49

A. Abimelech's Reign - Three Years of Peace - Judges 9:22-25

After three years of peace, God *sent a spirit of ill will* between the Shechemites and their king. The atmosphere changed from peace and cooperation to strife and animosity. This happens in families, businesses, and churches as well as in cities and countries. We are told to guard our spirits. One negative, complaining person can turn a happy place into a place of tension. A spirit of jealousy can ruin relationships. Is the devil able to invade your atmosphere because of your attitude?

Abimelech's ambition was only to rule, not to rule well. He cared no more for Shechem than he had for his half-brothers whom he killed.

The evil that Abimelech had done began to return upon him. The Shechemites, perhaps realizing they had been duped and used, plotted against him. According to verse 24, they deserved each other, *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*. The blood of innocents cries out to God for retribution. He hears their cry (Genesis 4:10).

The Shechemites weakened Abimelech's rule and enriched themselves by ambushing and robbing travelers and by interfering with the tolls paid by caravans.

B. Gaal's Challenge - Judges 9:26-41

1. A Rival for the kingship - Judges 9:26-40

Gaal, an outsider, mingled with the Shechemites by celebrating a feast with them. After they were influenced by wine and cursing Abimelech, Gaal stood up and appealed to their roots in their forebear Hamor (Genesis 34:2). Then he offered himself as a replacement for Abimelech. The Shechemites were willing to give him a chance to overthrow Abimelech.

2. Zebul's clever maneuver - Judges 9:36-41

Zebul, an appointee of Abimelech, warned his chief of the treason and outlined a plan. Abimelech followed it and with Zebul's help, defeated Gaal.

C. Abimelech's Atrocities - Judges 9:42-49

After destroying the people and demolishing a nearby city, Abimelech personally led the torching of Shechem's tower where a thousand men and women hid. He had become like a mad dog on a rampage.

Editor's note: The ruins of the tower of Shechem were discovered by German archaeologist, Herman Thiersh, in 2003. The foundations of the tower were seventeen feet thick and supported a multistoried superstructure of mud bricks and timber (Bible and Spade, Spring, 2005).

III. Abimelech's End - Judges 9:50-57

A. A Costly Victory At Thebez - Judges 9:50-55

For no discernable reason, Abimelech attacked Thebez and took it. All the people, men and women, sought refuge in their town's tower. Abimelech, reckless with overconfidence, came close to the tower to lead in burning it. A *certain woman* is credited with dropping a millstone on Abimelech's head and crushing his skull. Death was not instantaneous, however. He had time to consider his epitaph and asked his armor-bearer to kill him with his sword so that men could not say, a woman killed him. He did not get his wish.

B. God's Final Word - Judges 9:56-57

1. Judgment on Abimelech

Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers.

2. Judgment on Shechem

And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads.

3. Jotham's curse complete

And on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

The apostle Paul said, *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7).

Our Lord Jesus said, *All who take the sword will perish by the sword* (Matthew 26:52). History says "Amen"! Most dictators and oppressors have died violent deaths. Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Nicolae Ceausescu, and Saddam Hussein are a few examples from our own time.

C. Ambition for Self versus Availability to God

Our Lord Jesus Christ was *tempted in all points like as we are yet without sin* (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). The devil tempted Him with ambition when he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Satan offered them to Him for just one little concession, that Jesus Christ bow down and worship him (Matthew 4:8-9). Our Lord could have governed those kingdoms perfectly, with no injustice or inequality, for just a nod in Satan's direction. However, He would not take that which was rightfully His ahead of God's time and God's plan. He took only God's hand. He answered, *Away with you, Satan, for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve* (Matthew 4:10). Some day the Lord Jesus will take His place publicly as King of kings and Lord of lords to rule this world as it was meant to be ruled. On that day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). Do you bow willingly to Him now?

Applications

1. Will you examine your motives and methods in pursuing your career, education, or position in the family or community? Will you be honest with yourself and seek God's guidance?
2. Will you confess to God any seeking of position for personal power or prestige? Then will you turn your plans over to Him and humbly allow Him to lead you?
3. Will you ask God what He created you to do, and how He wants you to use your gifts for His glory? What step will you take today to submit to His plans instead of your own?
4. Will you yield yourself to God afresh and trust that you will not lose but find a satisfaction and fulfillment you had never dreamed possible? How far are you willing to trust God?