

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 8

JUDGES 9

INTRODUCTION

This chapter could be said to give us a picture of Gideon's legacy. Though Gideon's judgeship could be considered long since he lived to a good old age before he died, he did not leave behind an impressive and lasting legacy. In the evening years of his life he had backslidden in his relations with God. The ephod which he made was a grave mistake. It became an object of superstitious worship by the children of Israel. In Shechem his son Abimelech by his Canaanite concubine began to have great ambitions. He aspired to be king of Israel when his father died, and in his attempt to secure the position, he committed the foulest atrocities. When the people chose a bad leader the spiritual and religious life of the nation took a downward slide. It is important that much thought and care should be exercised in electing a leader of the church.

This chapter also features several people whose characters and activities provide a source of warning to us of behaviours which God does not approve. Paul declares in his epistle to the Romans (15:4): *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.* Intertwined with these valuable

lessons, is the teaching of the truth of divine retribution or of God's just punishment against the wicked. Israel had been privileged to be God's chosen people and be given the Word of God which was given to her so that she could live well on earth and be the instrument to carry out God's will. But if Israel turned her back on the grace of God, who is a consuming fire, she could expect to be burned by God's holiness and righteousness.

The following outline helps in the study of the chapter:

1. Abimelech makes his move to become the king of Israel (vv.1-6),
2. Jotham's parable predicts the judgment upon Abimelech and the Shechemites (vv.7-21),
3. God avenges the murder of the seventy sons of Gideon (vv.22-29).
4. Abimelech defeats Gaal and his mercenaries (30-45),
5. Abimelech meets his death (vv. 46-55),
6. God's retribution and judgment (vv. 56-57).

STUDY THE WORD

Abimelech Makes His Move to Become the King of Israel

After the death of Gideon, Abimelech, his son by the Shechemite concubine, aspired to succeed his father and rule Israel as king. His father, when he rejected the people's proposition to rule over them, said that the LORD should rule them and be their King. Abimelech's desire to be king was not in line with his father's wish. This showed abundantly clear

that Abimelech had an insatiable craving for power. He realized that he had a problem. He had seventy other Israelite brothers and any one of them could vie for the same position. He needed to act in order to ensure that he would be the sole successor to his father.

Abimelech went to Shechem and spoke to his uncles and to all the members of his mother's family. He told them to speak to all the men in Shechem whether it was better for them to be ruled by the seventy sons of Jerubbaal or that one to rule over them, and subtly to imply that it would be better that he should rule over them since he was bone and flesh akin with them. Abimelech was very cunning in using the name of his father "Jerubbaal" instead of the name of "Gideon." The use of the name "Jerubbaal" would remind the Shechemites of what Gideon did to the altar of Baal and how he pulled it down and desecrated their god (6:28). The Shechemites worshipped Baal and they even had a temple in his name, "Baal-berith." As he expected, he won the hearts of the men of Shechem, and they resolved to support him. Whether he did discuss with his uncles or the men of Shechem of his evil plan it is not recorded. Anyway, the men of Shechem gave him seventy pieces of silver (quite a sum then) which they drew from the temple of Baal-berith treasury.

The number of silver pieces which were given to Abimelech to fund his bid to be king was no coincidence—one silver piece for each of the seventy sons of Gideon. He took the money to hire men of questionable

character as his mercenaries. His intention was crystal clear. He went to his father Gideon's house in Ophrah where he murdered his brothers, all seventy of them except one, Jotham, who managed to escape. Having ruthlessly removed any possible contender for the throne of Israel, all the men of Shechem staged a coronation to make Abimelech king. He was ceremonially installed by the Shechemites.

Jotham's Parable

Jotham, whose name means "Jehovah is perfect," was the youngest son of Gideon. He managed to escape and save himself. When he was informed that the Shechemites had crowned his step-brother Abimelech king, he stood on the slopes of Mount Gerizim and called on the Shechemites to hear him.¹

He told them a parable. The trees wanted to anoint a king over them. So they went to the olive tree to reign over them. But the olive tree replied that it should not leave and stop producing the "fatness" of its fruit which honoured both God and man and "go to be promoted over trees" (v.9). The verb, "promoted" literally means "to rattle or sway" over all the other trees. Since the olive tree declined the proposition, the trees went to the fig tree. The fig tree also gave the same reply. The trees then went to the vine and made the same offer. The vine also gave them the same reply—"should I leave my wine which cheereth God and man" and to go and

¹ Mount Gerizim was the place where Joshua in time past had led the Israelites to renew the covenant which the LORD had made with them through Moses (Joshua 8:30-35).

“rattle or sway” above the other trees! This does not mean that God drinks wine like man does. But it pleased God to accept His people’s pouring out wine in His honour at sacrifices.² Now the desperate trees went to the bramble, which is a thorny shrub, and presented the same proposition. The bramble was too pleased to accept the offer. It said to the trees: If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow (or shade): and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon” (v.15). The bramble is a lowly shrub and it does not have any shadow. If one lies under it, it would scratch and not shade him. The presumptuous bramble also threatened the trees that if their offer was not truthful, then fire would come out of the bramble (a shrub which could easily catch fire and cause a bush fire) and would destroy even towering cedar trees of Lebanon.³

Jotham proceeded to give the import of his parable. He questioned whether the Shechemites had acted “truly and sincerely” in crowning Abimelech king. Gideon his father had fought and risked his life in saving them from the oppression of the Midianites. But they had unfairly gone against him and his family by slaughtering his seventy sons “upon

one stone.”⁴ They had made Abimelech, the son of his father’s concubine king because he was simply their brother. Had they dealt fairly and rightly with Gideon and his family, then they should rejoice with Abimelech and let Abimelech rejoice with them. Jotham continued that if they had not acted justly, he pronounced a curse upon them: “let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech” (v. 20). In short, Jotham charged them for showing ingratitude towards Gideon by crowning Abimelech, the very man who was guilty of the cruel act of ingratitude; and he pronounced a curse on them. After saying that, Jotham ran away and fled to Beer for fear of Abimelech.⁵

God Avenges the Murder of the Seventy Sons of Gideon

The rest of the chapter teaches the doctrine of retribution. God is not mocked for what a man sows that shall he reap.⁶ Abimelech reigned over Israel for three years. He did not reside in Shechem but he lived in Arumah making that city his official residence. Arumah was only about

⁴ This “stone” could be a reference to the altar on which Gideon offered the second bullock to the LORD (Judges 6:26-28)

⁵ Numbers 21:16 And from thence *they went* to Beer: that *is* the well whereof the LORD spake unto Moses, Gather the people together, and I will give them water.

⁶ Galatians 6:7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. 8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

² Leviticus 23:13 And the meat offering thereof *shall be* two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the LORD *for* a sweet savour: and the drink offering thereof *shall be* of wine, the fourth *part* of an hin.

³ This is the first parable ever recorded in the Bible.

eight kilometers southeast of Shechem where his uncles and his mother's family lived and who supported and made him king. But in Shechem, he appointed a man named Zebul to administer the city and report to him.

In sending "an evil spirit" between Abimelech and the Shechemites, God acted judiciously, and the men of Shechem "dealt treacherously with Abimelech." (v.23).⁷ The men of Shechem seemed to have a dislike for Abimelech for he did not show any interest in them. The Shechemites hid men in the mountains to lay wait on and rob travellers coming from Arumah to Shechem. Abimelech was told about these incidents. In this crucial time, Shechem had a gallant visitor by the name of Gaal, the son of Ebed. He came with his brothers or fellow fighters. The men of Shechem had a liking for Gaal and turned to him as a friend and confidante. They hosted a merry-making feast and went into the house of their god, eating and drinking, and cursing Abimelech (v.27). Gaal seized the opportunity to challenge the people to revolt against Abimelech. He incited them to open rebellion and proposed himself as a better ruler and he would then remove Abimelech. He despised Abimelech and defied him to

⁷ Abimelech and the Shechemites had been idolatrous by worshipping Baal and had committed murder by slaughtering Gideon's sons. God gave them over to their evil thoughts and deeds. This is the judgment of a sovereign and righteous God who will render a man what he deserves. Romans 1:24 *Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:*

even increase his army and to come out to fight against him.

Abimelech Defeats Gaal and His Mercenaries

Zebul, Abimelech's administrator in Shechem was very angry when he heard all the words of Gaal to the Shechemites. He secretly sent messengers to Abimelech and reported that Gaal, the son of Ebed and his brothers had fortified the city in rebellion against him. Zebul advised that Abimelech should spring a surprise attack on Shechem. That very night he should lead his men to lay wait in the fields near Shechem. And in the first light of the next day he should attack the city, and when Gaal and his brothers would come out to fight, he could ambush and destroy them.

Abimelech took the advice of Zebul and marched on to Shechem without delay. In the morning, Gaal who was at the gate of Shechem noticed that there were people coming down from the mountains. He told Zebul, who was with him, about his observation. But Zebul said to Gaal that what he saw was the shadow of the mountains as if they were men. Zebul pretended and lied for he knew that what Gaal saw were actually Abimelech's men. Gaal again said that they were people coming down by the middle of the land and another company of men were coming by the plain. This time Zebul taunted Gaal for all his boast against Abimelech and provoked him to attack Abimelech and his men. Gaal went out and fought Abimelech in the sight of the Shechemites. Abimelech defeated

Gaal and many of his men were wounded.

Abimelech returned to his residence in Arumah probably to plan for a total destruction of the city of Shechem. Zebul remained and retained his office. He banned the defeated Gaal and his brothers from living in Shechem. The next day the men of Shechem went into the field. Abimelech was informed. He quickly marshalled three companies of his men to lie in ambush in the field where the Shechemites would come. When the Shechemites came out, Abimelech and his men set upon them. Abimelech led his company of men to block the gate of the city so that no one could return and escape. The two companies of men set upon the Shechemites and massacred them. The bramble-king Abimelech entered the city, massacred the inhabitants, and “sowed it with salt.” This last phrase is an expression symbolizing the curse on the city that it would not be inhabited again.

When some of the men of Shechem sought refuge in the temple of Baal-berith, the temple from which the men of Shechem had drawn from its treasury seventy-pieces of silver to finance Abimelech’s enthronement, the bramble-king determined to kill all of them. He led his men to the forest of Zalmon where each of his men cut branches of the trees. Abimelech carried the branches on his shoulder and told his men to do likewise. They then followed Abimelech to the tower of the temple and set it on fire. The bramble-king Abimelech burned all the men hiding in the tower. There were about one thousand men and women

who were burned to death. Once the tide of evil builds nothing can contain it in the end.

Abimelech Meets His Death

Abimelech had greater ambitions. He wanted to expand his domain. With the city of Shechem destroyed, he then moved against a neighbouring city. The city of Thebez was about ten kilometers northeast of Shechem. There was a strong tower in the city, and the people had fled to it for protection and safety. Abimelech led his men against the tower probably using the same tactic as he did in Shechem. He tried to break the wooden hard door of the tower with fire. He stood close enough to the wall of the tower that a woman threw a “piece of millstone” on his head, and it fractured his skull. He did not die instantly. He could call on of his armour bearer to thrust his sword into him to end his life so that posterity would not say that he was slain by a woman. The young amour bearer did and fled. However, Abimelech died a humiliating death. Having seen the death of Abimelech, all his men stopped attacking the city.

God’s Retribution and Judgment

God justly repaid Abimelech’s wickedness which he did to his father’s family by slaying his seventy sons. For the men of Shechem justice was meted to them for being a partaker of the evil deed of Abimelech. The bramble-king came to a horrible end in his life in a most humiliating way, and Shechem and her inhabitants were burned by the bramble-king. Thus Jotham’s predictive curse was fulfilled. It is clear that God spoke through

Jotham in uttering the curse, and God had now seen to it that it was carried out in accordance with His judgment. The LORD God was still intimately involved in the national life of His covenant people Israel. The children of Israel might turn their back on Him, but God did not and will not reciprocate in a similar way. He remained faithful to His covenant.

PRACTICAL VALUE

When a person sins, he should confess his sin and repent, and ask for forgiveness from the person whom he had wronged against and from God through the Lord Jesus Christ. If the person, whether he is a Christian or not, refuses to do that, God has said that He will not be mocked or be deceived or be misled. God says (6:7-8) *Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.* This is a universal principle which all people experience daily in their lives. And if we think that there are people who seem to get away with it, God will eventually mete out His justice and punishment. Abimelech and the men of Shechem are examples of God's sovereign justice and condemnation. There is no escape. Be sure our sin will find us out (Numbers 32:23).

Many people are mentioned in this chapter than any other chapters: Abimelech, Jotham, the men of Shechem, Gaal, Zebul, and the men of Thebez. A study of these people should warn us of the kind of character and conduct which are not approved of

God. For example, Gaal was an opportunist. He took advantage of the unhappiness of the Shechemites and the situation in that city, boasted of himself as a better person than Abimelech. He underestimated the power of Abimelech and was soundly defeated and shamefully thrown out of the city. Another example is Jotham. He was the youngest of his seventy brothers. He had the presence of mind to hide and save himself. God helped him but he had his own responsibility. The important thing is that he bravely spoke in a parable to indict the men of Shechem. Sometimes there is a need to speak up for what is right and true, and we should do so, and not be inhibited by our own shortcomings.

There is a lesson to be learned about choosing a leader. The choosing of Abimelech as a king by the Shechemites provides some valuable insights. They chose Abimelech on the grounds that he was their blood relation. This blinded them from seeing the flaws of his character. A leader should be chosen on his merits and not on the fact that he is somebody's son or brother. Abimelech had serious flaws in his character. He was ungrateful to his father Gideon, who probably loved him above the others and gave him the name of "Abimelech." His aspiration to be king of Israel was so consuming that he would go to the extent of murdering his brothers instead of doing it in a legitimate way. He was ambitious for himself, in other words, he was self-seeking to promote himself above all others. That should not be a quality of a leader, who should be an instrument for the betterment of the

community. God has spelt out the qualities for choosing overseers for His church. Paul listed the qualities in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:7-9. A careful examination of these two passages reveals one very important quality that a leader must have, that is, he must have a strong moral character, one who is faithful to the LORD God.
AMEN