

Judges

Lesson 18

The writer interjects the introduction of Abimelech at this time, Gideon's son born to Gideon's only concubine. Verse 29. *"Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. ³⁰ Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. ³¹ His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. ³² And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites."* (8:29-32)

Gideon lived in Ophrah, but in this passage, we learn that he had a concubine who lived in Shechem. The son by this concubine was named *Abimelech*, which means *my father is king*. We would normally miss this point because, as English-speaking people, we rarely grasp the meaning of the word pictures behind Hebrew names. Gideon, living in Ophrah, was not the king of Israel, but from this passage, it seems clear that the rest of the nation thought of Gideon as their king. The writer told us in verse 23 that Gideon turned down that offer, but Gideon had not stopped the thought from being in the people's minds.

Furthermore, as the son of Gideon's concubine, living in Shechem rather than in Ophrah, the son's name told the people of Israel who he was. He was *the son of the king* – Gideon. That is what his Hebrew name means. Because he was not Gideon's firstborn who was still a youth at the time of Gideon's victory, it can be assumed rightly that Abimelech was born years after the campaign when Gideon was living in Ophrah. How Gideon came to have a concubine in Shechem, we do not know. But he did, Abimelech was his name, and his name told the nation that Gideon was his father.

But we must pause here because the name of *Abimelech*, in the context of the Bible, is not a given name; it is a throne name. In this first pass of this part of this story, the writer is introducing us to *Abimelech*. In the next pass through the story in chapter 9, we will see *Abimelech* assert himself as the rightful ruler of Israel after the death of Gideon. Thus, bolstering the thought that Gideon was the assumed king by the people of the Nation of Israel. It fills in the picture of what the Israelite people thought about Gideon even in his retired life in Ophrah.

Here we also see the awful sin of Gideon's polygamy. Seventy sons were his by many wives, with one son by a concubine. These were all his biological sons. Not one of them was a stepson or adopted son. Nevertheless, at the end of forty years, the fourth cycle ended with the death of Gideon. On to the fifth cycle.

5. Cycle Five – The Philistine Ammonite Takeover

(a) The Insurrection of Israel

With the death of Gideon, cycle five, the Philistine Ammonite takeover begins with the insurrection of Israel. The writer begins by recording that insurrection. Chapter 8, verse 33. *"Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. ³⁴ Thus the sons 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 household of Jerubbaal (~~that is,~~ Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel."* (8:33-35)

Notice that the writer says, *"as soon as Gideon was dead,"* the insurrection started by disobeying the LORD by breaking His covenant and commandments. Israel returned to making Baal their god. Surely, as Gideon was aging, the people had the thoughts of turning their allegiance to Baal was already occurring. With Gideon's death, the people felt free to openly practice what they had longed for in their hearts. After all, a new generation of children had become adults while Gideon was aging. The new generation had not seen firsthand the mighty works of the LORD. Therefore, they did not have firsthand experience with the LORD. Because of that, the LORD did just as He

promised from the beginning. He allowed the surrounding nations to begin to encroach on Israel to oppress the people. Furthermore, the writer tells us that the people of Israel did not *“show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (~~that is, Gideon~~) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.”* Most adults have lived long enough, even as they would think back on their teenage years, to realize that people who have not lived through certain events in life are oblivious to the effects of those events on the hearts and minds of people. Thus, because events are cyclical, each time the event occurs, the same mistakes are made. But more than that, people who do not go through certain things tend to be insensitive to those who did go through it. In another thought, those whose ancestors were blessed beyond imagination are often ungrateful to those who gave the blessings. It is the same with our relationship with the LORD. The *Pulpit Commentary* states it this way concerning verse 35.

“Forgetfulness of God is often the parent of ingratitude to men. The heart of stone which is not touched by the love of Christ is also insensible to the kindness of man.” How true! And so, with time, the people of Israel forgot the goodness of the LORD expressed through the work of Gideon, and Gideon’s descendants were not held in the esteem that they should have been.

Chapter 9

(i) Abimelech Chosen

In an interesting turn, the writer changes his style with Israel’s insurrection in this fifth cycle. In the previous four insurrections, the writer just told us that Israel sinned against the LORD with the worship of Baal. He did that with this fifth cycle in the previous verse. But now, the writer enters a detailed record about what happened in Israel during that insurrection leading up to the oppression by the Philistines and Ammonites. He tells us of the works of the following three judges, Abimelech, Tola, and Jair. As a preview, we will learn that Abimelech will have an evil rule for three years, Tola will judge for twenty-three years, and Jair will judge for twenty-two years. In all, the waning and flowing of Israel’s insurrection will last forty-seven years before the Philistines and Ammonites take hold and oppress Israel. Abimelech will take the first position by way of privilege. Tola and Jair will hold their positions by way of politics. None of the three were raised by the LORD to deliver Israel. Neither did Israel cry to the LORD for help during those forty-seven years. We begin with the story of Abimelech in Chapter 9, verse 1. *“And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother’s relatives, and spoke to them and to the whole clan of the household of his mother’s father, saying, ² ‘Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?’ Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh.” ³ And his mother’s relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, ‘He is our relative.’ (9:1-3)*

In chapter 8, the writer introduced Abimelech to us to identify his relatives in this passage. Abimelech was the only son of Gideon out of wedlock. All the rest of Gideon’s sons were born to women who were properly married to Gideon; Abimelech’s mother was a concubine. As we discovered in the previous chapter, all of Gideon’s wives and family lived in Ophrah; however, Abimelech and his mother lived in Shechem. Because Abimelech lived in Shechem with his mother, he did not have the same access to Gideon as his seventy half-brothers. With the death of his father, Abimelech garnered the support of his mother’s family in Shechem. Why? Out of a sense of privilege. He was the son of a concubine. Because of that, he did not have the privilege afforded his brothers born to mothers in legal wedlock to Gideon.

Nevertheless, Abimelech sought to bolster that privilege for himself by garnering the support of his mother’s relatives. Would they instead be ruled by Gideon’s sons who were not directly related by blood through his mother, or would they rather be ruled by their direct blood relationship in

Abimelech? One of the things we miss in the century we live in is the importance of family and blood relationships. Think of the old story we have heard about the Hatfields and the McCoys. They were two families that were bitter enemies of each other. However, in the stories of both families, we learned that within each family, there were bitter enemies among the brothers and sisters of the Hatfields and among the brothers and sisters of the McCoys. They would beat each other to the pulp and even kill their kin at times. But, when someone outside of the family attacked a family member, all the hatred in the family was laid to the side, and the brothers and sisters stood in unity against the outside enemy. As soon as the outside enemy was handled, the sibling fighting took up right where it left off. So, too, was probably the case with Abimelech and his blood kin. They would rather have blood ruling them than a person of none-blood. Abimelech was successful. His kin chose him.

(ii) Abimelech Compensated

But Abimelech could not proceed as the entitled judge; he needed funds. How would he be compensated, and what would he do with the money. Verse 4. *"They gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him."* (9:4)

Abimelech's compensation came from the offerings that were designated to the false god, *Baal-berith*. Evidently, Abimelech's relatives in Shechem had built a house or temple to *Baal-berith* where offerings were stored. Here we see that offerings to the false gods were more than animals and produce; it was also in money through silver and gold.

What did Abimelech do with the money taken from the treasury of *Baal-berith*? The writer tells us that he *"hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him."*

(a) Brothers of Abimelech Killed

We can only wonder if Abimelech hired seventy worthless men with one piece of silver per man to accompany him in the deed he had in mind. Why? We will see next. The brothers of Abimelech were killed. Verse 5a. *"Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone."* (9:5a)

So much for being a half-blood brother. Abimelech wanted all his half-brothers dead, and that he did on one day, on one stone, with one exception. Please do not think that this is a one-time kind of event in Israel. We will see it with the whole house of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 15:29, the whole house of Baashan in 1 Kings 16:11-12, the seventy sons of Ahab in 2 Kings 10:7, the royal seed of Judah in 2 Kings 11:1, all under evil pretenses. So, too, it was with Abimelech. His intentions were evil. We might point out at this junction in the Scripture that nothing is done with evil intentions ever turns out good for the doer. Remember this; you cannot do something evil in an attempt to do something good. The LORD will not bless it ever. The LORD did not call Abimelech to be the deliverer of Israel, and He will surely not allow Abimelech to survive long.

(b) Brother of Abimelech Kept

One brother of Abimelech was kept alive, not by Abimelech's choice, but by the brother's choice. Verse 5b. *"But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself."* (9:5b)

Why was Jotham able to escape? Most likely, it was because he was fortunate to have time to do so. He was the seventieth in line to the inheritance of Gideon. In the minds of the people, the firstborn, Jether, was the most important. They knew where he lived and headed to him first. Then the second born, then the third, etc., until the focus would be on the last, Jotham. But we might rightly surmise that the word was spreading fast as the brothers were being rounded, and Jotham had time and opportunity to hide from the unscrupulous men.

(iii) Abimelech Crowned

More than forty years before, the people wanted Gideon to be king, but as we said, Gideon declined for himself and all his heirs (8:23). Now, with all the sons of Gideon dead except two, we

find Abimelech crowned as the first official but the unofficial king of Israel. Verse 6. *“All the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem.”* (9:6)

Where was Abimelech crowned king? The writer tells us. It was *by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem*. Have we heard about this oak before? Yes. Here it is.

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷ Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.” ²⁸ Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance. (Joshua 24:25-28)

How dare Abimelech and the men do such a thing at such an important place? In Joshua’s setting of the stone as a pillar under the oak, with the words of the law written on that stone, there where the blessings and the curses were spoken on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, the godless men crowned a king, funded with the money offered to Baal. Wrong never brings the right result. The very act at that place would ultimately be a witness against Abimelech as prophesied by Joshua. The LORD will never bless such evil and disobedience against him.

(iv) Abimelech Challenged

(a) First by Jotham’s Reasoning

(i) Jotham and the Men Who Wanted a King

Abimelech was already at the foot of Mount Gerizim. But when Jotham heard the word of Abimelech’s doings, he moved to Mount Gerizim. Gerizim stands eight hundred feet above the floor of the valley where Shechem rests. There we see Abimelech challenged. First, by Jotham’s reasoning. Jotham speaks to the men who wanted a king. Verse 7. *“Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and called out. Thus he said to them, “Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you.”* (9:7)

Hear the plea of Jotham. Sin was in control of Abimelech, and by connection, sin was with the men of Shechem, the relatives of Abimelech. Jotham cried out to the men of Shechem in an attempt to persuade them to listen to him so God would listen to them.