

Judges

Lesson 19

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.

(ii) Jotham and the Trees Who Wanted a King

With reasoning, Jotham told a story. We hear next from Jotham about the trees who wanted a king. Chapter 9, verse 8. *"Once the trees 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, 'Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored, and go to wave over the trees?'¹⁰ Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come, reign over us!'"¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?'¹² Then the trees said to the vine, 'You come, reign over us!'"¹³ But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my new wine, which cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?'¹⁴ Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!'"¹⁵ The bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'" (9:8-15)*

Jotham's story speaks of the trees that are so desperate for a king that they will take anything that will agree to be king as its king. They looked to the olive tree first. The best of all trees, one honored by God and men. The olive tree did not need the praise of another tree, so the olive declined the offer. Then the trees made the same offer to the fig, not a sturdy or regal tree by any means, but still a tree of sorts. But the fig knew of its sweet fruit for the those who sought such a sweet fruit. Being king over a tree was not something as sweet and desirable. The trees then sought the vine to be its king. Not really a tree at all. Not stable. Not strong. But it had its best quality too. It brought cheer to many. Being the king of the trees was not an acceptable offer. It declined. The trees then sought a king in the bramble, a prickly shrub filled with thorns. Notice that Jotham says, *"Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!'"* Of all the trees who spoke, not one of them was willing to stand to be the king over the rest. Rather, they all sought a king that is a thorn. A fitting image of Abimelech, a thorn in the flesh of Gideon's children. A prickly briar. A bramble. The most unacceptable king for any people.

(b) Second by Jotham's Rationale

(i) To Challenge the Kingship of Abimelech

Second, Jotham attempts to challenge Abimelech's kingship by his rationale. Verse 16. *"Now therefore, if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved—¹⁷ for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian;¹⁸ but you have risen against my father's house today and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your relative—¹⁹ if then you have dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.'" (9:16-19)*

With the story over, Jotham delivers to the men of Shechem and Beth-millo the stark and bitter reality. The bottom line in this first part of the challenge is Jotham's question of how the men treated Gideon and his sons. Were you fair with Gideon and his sons?

(ii) To Conclude the Kingship of Abimelech

Then Jotham rationally challenges the men to conclude the kingship of Abimelech. Verse 20. *"But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech."*²¹ Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer and remained there because of Abimelech his brother." (9:20)

Jotham called on fire to consume both Abimelech and the city's men to stop Abimelech from being king. In other words, if Abimelech was happy being the king, and the men were happy with Abimelech as king, then may they both be doomed by way of mutual destruction.

How Jotham was able to escape from his half-brother and the men of the two cities, we are not told. Yet, he did. He ran to Beer. We are not certain of the location of Beer.

(v) Abimelech Controlled

Verse 22 says, *"Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years."* (9:22)

Jotham was unsuccessful in his challenge. Evidently, Abimelech was happy being king, and the men were happy with him being king. His kingship lasted only three years.

(vi) Abimelech Confronted

(a) Indignation Against Abimelech

But near the end of the three years, Jotham's call for fire between the two began to come true. The writer continued. Abimelech will be confronted. We see the indignation against Abimelech by the men of the city begin at God's bidding. Verse 23. *"Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,"*²⁴ *so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood might be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers."*²⁵ *The men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who might pass by them along the road; and it was told to Abimelech."* (9:23-25)

In their indignation, the men set a trap for Abimelech. To lure Abimelech near, the men had to do evil to the common people on the road. May we say this again as we have already said in the story of Abimelech, *doing evil can never be rewarded with God's goodness.*

What does it mean when the writer says, *"Then God sent an evil spirit?"* The Hebrew word used here for the word *evil* means *ill-willed*. *Ill willed*. The Hebrew word for *spirit* means *wind* in this context. Before we bring the two thoughts together, may we look at the word *God*. It is the Hebrew word *Elohim*, not the word *Jehovah* which is translated *LORD* in the English versions. Being the word *Elohim*, the writer is telling us that the whole of the divine deity of God sent the *wind of ill will* between Abimelech and the men. Why did God do this? Three years was long enough. Deuteronomy 32:35 was delivered to Israel for such cases as this. *"Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them."* Yes, God will send a spirit of ill will in order for calamity to come upon the thorns of disobedience.

(b) Insurrection Against Abimelech

(i) Against the Men of Shechem

From the indignation against Abimelech, we come to the insurrection against Abimelech and against the men of Shechem by a marauder. Verse 26. *"Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his relatives, and crossed over into Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their trust in him."*²⁷ *They went out into the field and gathered the grapes of their vineyards and trod them, and held a festival; 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 Zebul not his lieutenant? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? ²⁹ *Would, therefore, that this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech.*” And he said to Abimelech, “Increase your army and come out.” (9:26-29)

We do not know whether Gaal is an Israelite or a Canaanite. He, with his relatives, seem to be marauders, being one that seems to move from place to place, making attacks and raids in search of plunder. Gaal and his family came from the east side of the Jordan River to arrive in Shechem. Most likely, the men of Shechem put their trust in Gaal because of his ruthless reputation and their desire to rid themselves of the king they crowned. He was the son of *Ebed*, as the Scripture states. That means nothing to us and gives no clue as to who he was. *Ebed* is translated elsewhere as *Obed* in the Bible. Neither were related to each other.

It was time for the vintage feast to the god Baal. The grapes were harvested and made into wine. At the feast, during the merriment, curses were wages toward Abimelech. At the festival, Gaal asserts his desire to take Abimelech’s place. Gaal has no desire to serve Abimelech, or his lieutenant, the ruler of Shechem, Zebul, or the people of Shechem. So, Gaal, in his drunken state, escalates the insurrection by taunting Abimelech to show himself.

(ii) Against the Ruler of Shechem

• Prepared Abimelech

Because Gaal spoke words of insurrection against Abimelech, Zebul, the ruler of Shechem under Abimelech, was angered. Zebul prepared Abimelech. Verse 30. *“When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger burned.* ³¹ *He sent messengers to Abimelech deceitfully, saying, “Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem; and behold, they are stirring up the city against you.* ³² *Now therefore, arise by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field.* ³³ *In the morning, as soon as the sun is up, you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and behold, when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you shall do to them whatever you can. So Abimelech and all the people who were with him arose by night and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies.”* (9:30-34)

The messenger was sent to Abimelech in the middle of the night, urging Abimelech and his army to hide in the field outside Shechem until daylight. Abimelech took the news seriously. He divided his army into four sections and placed them at different locations around Shechem.

• Preoccupied Gaal

• Gaal Seeing Shadows

Meanwhile, back in Shechem, Zebul preoccupied Gaal, for Gaal was seeing shadows in the distance. Verse 35. *“Now Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the city gate; and Abimelech and the people who were with him arose from the ambush.* ³⁶ *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 are seeing the shadow of the mountains as if they were men.”* (9:35-36)

Abimelech and his men were stationed in four locations around Shechem. That morning, Gaal went to the entrance to the city and saw some of Abimelech’s men coming down from Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. It scared Gaal. But Zebul dismissed Gaal and preoccupied him with the statement, *“You are seeing the shadow of the mountains as if they were men.”*

• Gaal Seeing Soldiers

But Gaal did not accept Zebul’s comment. He still thought he saw soldiers coming down the mountains. Verse 37. *“Gaal spoke again and said, “Behold, people are coming down from the highest part of the land, and one company comes by the way of the diviners’ oak.”* ³⁸ *Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your boasting now with which you said, ‘Who is Abimelech that we should serve him?’ Is this not the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them!”* (9:37-38)

That morning, after the drunken feast the night before, Gaal was not sure of himself as he was when he was drunk. Zebul challenged him on his bravery. He challenged him to fight Abimelech.

- Gaal Seeing Suffering

Gaal took the challenge from Zebul and struck up a battle with Abimelech. Verse 39. *“So Gaal went out before the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. ⁴⁰ Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him; and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. ⁴¹ Then Abimelech remained at Arumah, but Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives so that they could not remain in Shechem.”* (9:39-41)

The text is plain. Gaal was not strong enough to take Abimelech and his army. That day, Abimelech stayed at a place called *Arumah*. The name means *height*. It tells us that during the battle, Abimelech stayed on the height of either Mount Ebal or Mount Gerizim to watch the conflict. While Abimelech was up on the mountain, Zebul was working inside the city of Shechem, driving out Gaal and all his relatives. We will never hear of Gaal and his relatives again after this verse.

(iii) With the City of Shechem

- In the Field

The day ended; the night passed. The next day came. But Abimelech was not through with the town of Shechem. Verse 42. *“Now it came about the next day, that the people went out to the field, and it was told to Abimelech. ⁴³ So he took his people and divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the field; when he looked and saw the people coming out from the city, he arose against them and slew them. Then Abimelech and the company who was with him dashed forward and stood in the entrance of the city gate; the other two companies then dashed against all who were in the field and slew them.”* (9:42-44)

From four companies of soldiers, Abimelech organized his men into three companies of soldiers. There in the field outside Shechem, Abimelech and his men waited for the people of Shechem to come out as he knew they would. Little did they know that Abimelech was angry with them, angry enough to kill them all. That is what he did.

- In the City

From the slaughter in the field, Abimelech moved to the slaughter in the city. Verse 45. *“Abimelech fought against the city all that day, and he captured the city and killed the people who were in it; then he razed the city and sowed it with salt.”* (9:45)

Dead. All the people of Shechem were dead. The city was destroyed to the ground. The city was sown with salt. All in one day. Why? What was the purpose of the salt? Salt destroys vegetation. The city would be barren from then on. Notice that it does not say that Abimelech salted the fields. If he wanted to destroy the site totally, he would have sown salt in the fields too.

- In the Temple

But not all the people of Shechem were in Shechem at the time of Abimelech's raid. The leaders, who were in the tower of Shechem, ran to the temple of El-berith for safety. Abimelech followed them. Verse 46. *“When all the leaders of the tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the inner chamber of the temple of El-berith. ⁴⁷ It was told Abimelech that all the leaders of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸ So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him; and Abimelech took an axe in his hand and cut down a branch from the trees, and lifted it and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the people who were with him, ‘What you have seen me do, hurry and do likewise.’ ⁴⁹ All the people also cut down each one his branch and followed Abimelech, and put them on the inner chamber and set the inner chamber on fire over those inside, so that all the men of the tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women.”* (9:46-49)

The temple of El-berith was the structure where Baal-Berith was worshiped in the Shechem area. *El* means *god*. *Berith* means *covenant*. El-berith was the place where the worshipers of Baal made a covenant with Baal. Back in Judges 9:4, this same place was called *the house of Baal-berith*. It was

where the godless, idolatress Baal worshipers of Shechem and Milo sought refuge, putting their trust in the temple and its idol and Asherah hoping to be protected by Baal.

Abimelech kindled a fire with tree branches and burned the temple with a thousand men and women to the ground. It is a fulfillment of the curse placed on Shechem by Jotham.

“The bramble said to the trees, ‘If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.’ (9:15)

“But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech.” (9:20)

For those who think as I do, we asked the question, “How did Abimelech use freshly cut tree branches to burn down the tower?” The answer is in the Hebrew words used here. It is the word *so-w-koh*, and it means *brushwood* or *deadwood*. The men followed Abimelech’s lead and cut dead branches from the trees to use for the fire.