

LESSON 11: Abimelech

JUDGES 9

MATERIALS FOR THIS LESSON:

Participant Guide
 Powerpoint slides
 Map – Abimelech-Tola-Jair

Scenario: God raises up a man for a particular mission and gives him a particular vision. The man embraces the mission and God blesses him in his ministry to the point where people begin to view him as a great leader and mighty man of faith. He draws great crowds, donors give much money to his ministry, and he does much good for the Kingdom.

As the man grows older, he is expected to pass his ministry on to someone—his sons. But they have neither the vision or mission from God, and so the ministry flags.

When the man dies, he is mourned briefly, and then comes the question over how to divide his kingdom. A fight ensues over who will step into his shoes and take over his ministry, sometimes within the family, sometimes by those outside the family.

1. Why is there a fight? What are they really fighting over?

They fight, not because they have been given the mission by God, but because the ministry carries a reputation and honor that they themselves have not had to earn or been able to earn by their own merit. Enter Abimelech.

“For three things the earth is perturbed, Yes, for four it cannot bear up: For a servant when he reigns, . . .” Proverbs 30:21-22

In the wake of Gideon’s death, the Judges narrative shifts away from the national scene to focus on an oppression within a city and a family.

The narrative structure:

- Judges 9:1-6 The opening coup
- Judges 9:7-21 Jotham’s parable/interpretation
- Judges 9:22-57 Abimelech’s downfall

Formulaic Structure: There is a 3 and 4 structure to the narrative, both in the parable and in Abimelech’s downfall. The first 3 elements are of like kind. The 4th is set up as a climactic contrast.

Motifs: Trees and fire

ABIMELECH’S COUP **Read Judges 9:1-6.**

1. When does this take place? In the wake of Gideon’s death, after 40 years of rest
2. What do we know about Shechem (see map)?

Shechem: located roughly in the saddle of land between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

“These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when you have crossed over the Jordan: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin; and these shall stand on Mount Ebal to curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.” - Deuteronomy 27:12-13 NKJV

The word, *shechem*, means back or shoulder, the place where a burden is carried. It can also refer a seat of power (as in the government shall be upon His shoulder) or a place where a man is beaten for punishment.

Shechem was the place where God had told Abram: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis 12:6-7)

Shechem was originally the hometown of Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, who was killed by Simeon and Levi for raping their sister, Dinah (Genesis 34)

The Covenant at Shechem (Joshua 24): *"And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. . . . So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. . . . And Joshua said to all the people, 'Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God.'" - Joshua 24:15-16, 25, 27*

3. What do we know about Abimelech? What does his name mean?

Abimelech, son of Jerubbaal's concubine.

His name means "My father is king" (emphasis on the father's reputation)

He is a man with two natures at war in him. He is identified with the father, but he gives himself over to his Canaanite side.

Abimelech wants to be king. He covets a place and power and glory that are not rightly his. He may not get to be king of Israel, but he will rule over whatever he can, if only his home town of Shechem.

Abimelech is a type of rebel who seeks to rule a lesser kingdom when the greater kingdom is denied him. He is patterned after Korah (Num. 16) and Satan in this respect.

Seven Steps to Ascend a Throne

Step 1: Identify and appeal to your support base (v1)

Abimelech goes to his mother's side to generate support for his campaign against his father's (Israel) side. **Create division – us vs. them – in the family/community/congregation.**

Step 2: Use a skewed argument to create a fight where there is no fight, an enemy where there is no enemy. (v2)

4. How does Abimelech skew the truth to make his argument? (v2)

Remember: Gideon said neither he nor his sons would rule Israel, but God would. There is only one king – God (Judges 8:23) Gideon's sons are not pursuing kingship, but Abimelech makes people think they are.

Abimelech argues that it would be better to be under the rule of one instead of seventy. That is a true statement – but who is the one? Abimelech places himself in the role of king as replacement for God.

Purpose: Get people to identify themselves as victims and with you as their savior.

Step 3: Let others promote you. “. . . *He is our brother.*” (v3)

His family then wins the support on his behalf among the men of Shechem

Step 4: Generate funding. “*So they gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith*” (v4a)

Step 5: Build a military. “. . . *with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.*” (v4b)

5. How does Abimelech's army compare with Gideon's army? (v4)

Gideon's power base was made up of volunteers hand-picked by God; Abimelech hires his army.

Worthless: Heb. **Req** (pronounced rake) meaning empty, vain, wicked – ethically empty men. Empty like Gideon's pitchers but without the light inside them.

Reckless: Heb. **Pachaz** meaning to bubble and boil, to be light as froth (they dissipate as quickly as they bubble up and are of little substance or importance)

Step 6: Slaughter the opposition. “*Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. . .*” (v5a)

6. How does Abimelech deal with his brothers?

He didn't slaughter them in the field or in battle. He ambushed them in their own home and killed them, execution style, on a rock. The execution was the act of contempt by a superior toward an inferior. (Abimelech is, after all, the son of Jerubbaal, the hero.)

7. What happened to Jether? Why didn't the son of Jerubbaal fight back?

Step 7: Assume the throne: “. . . *they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem.*” (v6b) Note: That is the pillar Joshua set up beside oak when the children of Israel swore to follow the LORD alone and put away the idols from among them. This is were Joshua once charged Israel: choose this day who you will serve.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE: RISE OF A TYRANT

The picture: The battle begins within a man of a divided persona. He is a new man, and yet he has this other carnal side of him that seeks to dominate him. His carnal Canaanite side (the Enemy) will rise up to take over the man.

Step 1: The Enemy will separate the new man from his identity with God and Christ and make him identify with his “flesh and bone” the Canaanite side.

Step 2: The Enemy will present a skewed argument to sway the new man:

- Create a desire in him for something that appeals to his carnal side. (covet)

- Create enmity between him and God where no enmity exists. The new man will begin to see God or God's appointed leaders as taskmasters who enslave him.
- Create a fight where no fight exists. He will seek to instill in the new man a victim mentality and a desire to fight the master who is keeping him from achieving the thing he covets. (strife)

Step 3: The Enemy will let others promote him (via social networking, news media, advertising, and various communications forms) until the new man is swayed.

Step 4: The Enemy will be well financed by the Baals he serves (Though he seeks to be king of a lesser kingdom, he is a slave himself).

Step 5: The Enemy will bolster himself with support from reckless and worthless people— vain, wicked, ethically empty people who bubble, boil, and froth at the mouth. They may take the form of verbal or physical attacker.

Step 6: When the Enemy makes the final push with a show of force, the new man succumbs without a fight.

Step 7: The Enemy assumes the throne.

JOTHAM'S RESPONSE: PARABLE OF THE TREES and INTERPRETATION **Read Judges 9:7-21.**

8. What do we know about Jotham?

Jotham, son of Jerubbaal's wife. His name means "God is perfect" (emphasis on God's nobility of character and judgment) He is the youngest and only surviving son of Jerubbaal.

9. Why does Jotham go to Mount Gerizim? How does he identify with Gerizim? (Consider the meaning of the name.)

Jotham's family has been cut off, and he himself is left a remnant. The surviving son of the great hero is homeless and dispossessed. Jotham leaves Ophrah and seeks Mount Gerizim or the mount of "cuttings off."

Mount Gerizim was where Jotham's Manassite ancestors once stood to deliver the blessing. (Deut 27:12) The place of blessing is now delivered over to curse and judgment, as Jotham demands a reckoning for the sin done to his family.

From where he stands, it is doubtful that the men of Shechem heard him, so the cry is more to God than with the hope of being heard by men. Victims' cries are like that. But God hears them when no one else does.

10. There is a formulaic 3 and 4 structure in the parable of the trees. Three elements are of like kind, and the fourth is set up as a climactic contrast. What are the three and one?

Three leafy, fruitful plants compared to a bramble bush

Three refusals compared to one agreement

11. The "trees" seek a king (v8). What are the three and what do they do?

- The **olive tree** must cease giving its oil which honors God and man (v9)
- The **fig tree** must cease giving its sweetness and good fruit (v11)
- The **grapevine** must cease giving its wine that cheers God and man (v13)

12. **The three refuse the kingship. What does their refusal imply about how they value their roles compared to the kingship?** They obviously value their current roles as being greater than the potential role of king. They don't want to stop what they are doing to pursue a greater reward. There is a bit of a skewed value system. One of the stumbling blocks in oppression is losing sight of the kingdom and clinging to the transient, feel-good pursuits in life. Isn't a kingship better? Isn't kingship an honor and a reward?
13. **After the three refusals, the trees offer kingship to the bramble. What are the characteristics of the bramble by contrast? (v15)**
- Has no honor nor gives honor.
 - Produces no fruit, sweetness, or cheer
 - Exalts himself as if he were a big leafy tree, offering much shade when in fact he has no shade to offer.
 - The agreement is extortionate – if they do not king him, then his fire will burn down the great trees who exalted themselves.

By crowning the bramble as king, the people have chosen for themselves a **crown of thorns** and bring upon themselves the judgment and the curse.

14. **What is Jotham's curse?** “. . . *let fire come from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and Beth Millo; and let fire come from the men of Shechem and from Beth Millo and devour Abimelech!*”
15. **Abimelech and the men of Shechem have reached the point of incurring the curse of being burned with fire. Read Hebrews 6:4-8. How do they model this New Testament truth for us?**

Once wickedness assumes power and there is nothing left to restrain it, by its very nature it will rage until it has consumed itself.

There can come a point in a believer's where their Canaanite side – the thorns and briars – can completely overrun their new man. They become so entrenched and hardened to the sin in their life that repentance – turning around and returning to God – is not going to happen. It is at this point that God often allows a devastation to happen their life. It is often accomplished by letting the Canaanite side rage uncontrolled until it has burnt itself out.

In Abimelech's narrative, the flash point will happen when Canaanite side meets Canaanite side.

16. **What happened to Jotham (v21)?** He flees to Beer—the “well”—and dwells there. It doesn't say which well.
17. **How long did it take God to respond (v22)?** Three years.

Questions for Reflection:

- Have you ever gone to someone with a serious, legitimate grievance about how they have treated you? What response did you get?
- What if the shoe was on the other foot: If someone with whom you had dealt wrongly asked you to judge yourself, how would you respond?
- What should you do when you discover you have made a wrong judgment?

KINGSHIP AND REWARDS:

The book of Judges began with a judgment against those who refused to pursue the full inheritance – the reward. What is the reward for us and how does it tie into this idea of kingship?

Our understanding of the inheritance or reward includes earning crowns and being rulers and co-heirs with Christ in the Kingdom. The picture begins in the Old Testament . . .

- Begins with **Adam and Eve being given dominion in Eden** (Genesis 1) This was lost because Adam gave his kingship to the Enemy (Satan). When Adam should have reigned as king over the garden of fruitful trees, he becomes the bramble king given over to the curse. The kingship is lost, but there is a promise of its restoration in a Kingdom to come.
- **Provision for a future king.** *“You shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses . . . you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.”* - Deut 17:15
- **Inheritance of the land by Israel** – they are called to rule over the land and subdue it (echo of Adam and Eve) – Joshua and Judges.

Here in the book of Judges, we have the parable of the trees who seek a king from among their own but none will step up to take the kingship. The book of Judges ends with the statement *“In those days there was no king . . .”* meant to imply that a king is the only solution to bring Israel out of her condition.

- **Pictures of the future King in the Psalms** (2, 8, 110) and **Isaiah 53:12**: *“Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death . . .”*

The picture continues in the New Testament . . .

- **Theology of the book of Hebrews** concerning what it means to be partners (*metachoi*) with Christ
- **Theology of crowns:** The incorruptible crown (1 Cor 9:25); Crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8); Crown of rejoicing (1 Thes. 2:19); Crown of life (Jam. 1:12, Rev 2:10); Crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4)
- **2 Timothy 2:11-13** *“This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”*
- **Romans 8:17** *“and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”*
- **Theology of Glorification**

Questions for Reflection:

- How do you feel about being a ruler in the Kingdom?
- Is that a reward worth pursuing?
- Would you fight the Enemy for this reward?

ABIMELECH'S DOWNFALL Read Judges 9:22-57.

The men of Shechem set up an ambush for Abimelech (v25). The curse begins to play out on these mountains where Jotham delivered his curse. Highwaymen infest the mountains, and the highways become unsafe to travel. These men don't just rob Abimelech, but rob everyone. They victimize their own people.

18. **The playing out of the curse begin with an act of treachery and robbery. How does it fit Abimelech's own crime?** Abimelech plotted against his own kin. He ambushed them and took what was theirs by force. Now Abimelech is facing the same thing—those who he had called brothers now plot to take what is his.
19. **What do we know about Gaal?** Gaal, son of Ebed. His name means "loathing", son of "a slave". He is a foreigner. He is arrogant, a drunkard, and a rebel. He is not from Shechem, yet the men of Shechem put their confidence in him (v26). Gaal gets drunk and makes a challenge against Abimelech (v28-29). Abimelech has made a claim to the throne based on his lineage to Shechem, son of Hamor, the founder of the city (Genesis 34).
20. **What do we know about Zebul?** Zebul, ruler of the city (head magistrate). His name means "exalted" in the sense of having a lofty dwelling place (but lifted up by whom?)
21. **What is his role in the conflict between Abimelech and the men of Shechem?** He is a "sender of messages"—a provocateur who incites and enflames the men against each other.
22. **What is Zebul's plan for dealing with Gaal?** Gaal is lodged in Shechem. Abimelech is to lie in wait in the fields and ambush Gaal and his men when they come out.

THE BATTLES

Literary 3-4 structure (like the parable of the trees)

Stage 1: Fight against Gaal and his confederates (v34-41)	}	Abimelech takes down Shechem
Stage 2: Fight against the fields/city of Shechem (v42-45)		
Stage 3: Fight against the tower of Shechem (v46-49)		
Stage 4: Fight against Thebez (v50-55)		Take-down of Abimelech

Stage 1: Fight against Gaal and his confederates (v34-41)

- **What is Abimelech's strategy?** Divide his men into four groups to surround the city and ambush his enemy.

Gaal and his men wake the next morning with a hangover to find himself in a fight the minute they step out to the gate of the city. Zebul stands at his shoulder, needling him into battle.

Gaal sees one company coming down out of the mountains, and Zebul tells him he is seeing things. Gaal sees another company advancing from the middle and a third spring up out of nowhere like magic from the Diviner's Terebinth Tree.

When at last Gaal recognizes that the threat is real, he goes out to fight. The men of Shechem go with him, only to find themselves ambushed and on the run.

- **What is the conclusion of Stage #1 (v40-41)?** The battle is a victory for Abimelech. Abimelech fights the battle outside; Zebul drives Gaal and his brothers out of the city and clangs the gate behind them (exiles them so they can't reenter the city).
- **Where does Abimelech go to live after the battle?** Arumah, meaning "I shall be exalted." Why doesn't he return to Shechem, if he is the king of Shechem? There is a growing distance between Abimelech and the men of Shechem, and Abimelech is now on the outside.

Stage 2: Fight against the fields/city of Shechem (v42-45)

- **What starts the next stage of the battle? (v42)** The Shechemites come out of the gate and some unnamed person tells Abimelech. There is no reason given for continued war. Abimelech is just a fire raging out of control.
- **What is Abimelech's strategy?** He divides his company into three and lays in ambush for the Shechemites to come out of the city, then attacks them. Abimelech and one company take the city while the other two companies take those in the field.
- **What did he do to the city?** Demolishes it and sows it with salt so that the city would be barren and not rebuilt (although it is rebuilt in the days of kings)

Stage 3: Fight against the tower of Shechem (v46-49)

Apparently the tower or fortifications of Shechem and the Temple of Baal-Berith were a separate complex from the city. The men of Shechem who were in the stronghold. Again, there is no reason given for continuing the battle.

- **What starts the next stage of the battle (v47)** *"It was told to Abimelech . . ."* Some unnamed party informs Abimelech.
- **What is Abimelech's strategy?** Abimelech hears that men of Shechem are gathered in the tower, and he immediately heads for a nearby wooded hill called Mount Zalmon.

Zalmon means "shady" or "shadowy" in the sense of a shadow casting a likeness of something on the ground. What Abimelech does here is a likeness of his father, Jerubbaal, but in a very dark way. How are Abimelech's actions a resemblance of his father?

Abimelech becomes the hewer who takes down the might *pe'orah*, the leafy branches that exalt themselves. He takes an axe, and cuts down the boughs of the trees and calls his men to do the same. Then he stacks the branches against the stronghold and sets them on fire. The fire imagery strengthens here. He brings the tower down on the heads of those that had exalted themselves against him and kills everyone, just like his father did at Peniel.

- **What do you think happened to Zebul?**

Stage 4: Fight against Thebez (v50-55)

- **What was Abimelech's grievance with Thebez?** He had no grievance. He was just a fire raging out of control.
- **In terms of structure, how does stage 4 differ from stages 1-3? What is the grand resolution?** In Thebez, there is a replay of the tower scene. But this time, before Abimelech can set it on fire, an unnamed woman drops a millstone on his head and mortally wounds

him. To keep from being dishonored at the hand of a woman, Abimelech demands that his armorbearer—a youth—kill him (shades of Gideon and Jether).

How the punishment fit the crime: How does God mete out some eye-for-an-eye justice against Abimelech? List some of the parallels between what Abimelech did to his brothers and what was done to Abimelech.

- **Abimelech**, the son of a servant, sets himself up as rival to God; **God** sets up Gaal, the son of a slave, as Abimelech's rival.
- **Abimelech** scorned his brothers and conspired against them. **The men of Shechem** scorned Abimelech, their "brother," and conspired against him.
- **The men of Shechem side with Abimelech** to kill the sons of Jerubbaal. **The men of Shechem side with Gaal** to kill Abimelech, the son of Jerubbaal.
- **The sons of Jerubbaal** were killed on one stone by the son of a servant. **Abimelech** was killed by a stone dropped on him by an unnamed woman.

Questions for Reflection:

- When God doesn't answer a victim's cry immediately, why does it seem like an injustice?
Because we are judging God's actions by what is right in our own eyes instead of according to His purpose. We don't always see the whole picture of what God is doing through a victim's experience.
- There is a repeated behavior found in verses 31, 42, 47. What starts Abimelech's fire and keeps the fire raging?
- What does James 3:5-6 say about the tongue?