

Lesson 8

Abimelech: The Anti-Judge

Judges 9

Introduction

As Judges 9 begins, the nation of Israel has moved deeper into its spiritual descent. Things have now deteriorated to a critical level of depredation. Here, the oppressions become more ruthless, the deliverances less dramatic, and the deliverers less noble. Perhaps most notable of all, the nation no longer enjoyed decades of rest between oppression and servitude.

Despite humble origins, Abimelech coveted the kingship his father, Gideon, refused. Unlike Gideon, Abimelech was no judge but an oppressor, leading to internal strife and bloodshed in Israel because of their unfaithfulness. Judges 9 highlights the political repercussions of Baal worship and the decline after Gideon's death. It demonstrates God's pattern of using internal discord to bring down the wicked and signifies another stage in Israel's decline, socially, morally, and spiritually.

9:1-6 – Abimelech Appoints Himself as Leader

Abimelech, anticipating sole rule over Israel after Gideon's death, sought support from his relatives in Shechem. Despite no evidence that Gideon's sons planned to rule collectively, Abimelech manipulated the situation, leveraging his familial ties to scare the leaders into recognizing him as their ruler. The leaders, swayed by kinship and greed, aided him with silver from their temple. Abimelech then orchestrated the massacre of his brothers, save one, to eliminate potential challengers. Returning to Shechem, he orchestrated his coronation by the oak pillar, marking a dark turn in Israel's leadership and fidelity to God.

9:7-21 – Jotham Exposes Abimelech's Ambitions

Abimelech's surviving brother, Jotham, climbed Mount Gerizim to address the Shechemites during Abimelech's coronation. He shared a fable illustrating the folly of choosing a ruthless leader like Abimelech, comparing him to a worthless bramble seeking kingship. Jotham then reminded them of Gideon's valor in saving them from Midian and questioned the integrity of their allegiance to Abimelech, warning of inevitable destruction if based on ambition and betrayal. Fleeing for safety after his speech, Jotham sought refuge in Beer (this location is unknown today) due to the danger posed by Abimelech.

9:22-29 – Abimelech's Ambitions Resisted

Abimelech claimed to rule all of Israel, but his authority was really confined to the Shechem area. His governance began to falter after three years when God allowed discord between him and the Shechemites, fulfilling Jotham's prophecy. This discord led to mutual treachery and escalated as the Shechemites, to undermine Abimelech's rule, set up ambushes to rob merchants, creating chaos and discrediting his ability to maintain order.

Additionally, the murderous past involving Gideon's seventy sons caught up with Abimelech, signaling retribution for him and the Shechemites who had abetted the crime. Amidst this turmoil, Gaal, a new ambitious figure, arrived in Shechem and quickly earned the locals' trust, positioning himself as a protector against Abimelech. This led to a drunken festival where Gaal openly challenged Abimelech, setting the stage for a confrontation.

9:30-55 – Abimelech Punished

God's punishment for Abimelech's ambition and the wickedness of the Shechemites and their leader Gaal unfolded in four stages:

Judgment on Gaal: Abimelech, tipped off by Zebul, the mayor of Shechem, launched a surprise attack on Gaal and his men, who were caught off guard and largely killed. Gaal fled, and Zebul expelled his family from the city.

Judgment on Shechem: The following day, when the Shechemites left their city to work in the fields, thinking they were safe, Abimelech attacked again. He seized the city gates and killed many laborers in the fields, eventually destroying the entire city and salting the ruins as a symbol of desolation.

Destruction of the temple fortress: Some of Shechem's leaders took refuge in a temple fortress, hiding in an underground chamber. Abimelech and his men blocked the entrance with burning branches, killing all inside either by fire or forcing them out to be slain by the sword.

Attack on Thebez: Abimelech then attacked Thebez, a nearby city. Although he captured the city, his attempt to storm the central fortress tower ended when a woman fatally wounded him with a millstone. To avoid the disgrace of dying by a woman's hand, he had his armorbearer kill him, ending his violent reign. After his death, his followers dispersed.

9:56-57 – A Spiritual Explanation

The long account of Abimelech ends with a solemn appraisal of what has just been told. In the conflict between Abimelech and Shechem God was at work. Abimelech was being punished for the murder of his brothers. The Shechemites were being punished for "*all their wickedness*" which included blatant idolatry, violence, and support for the ruthless Abimelech. The curse of Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, came upon these rebels (9:56–57).

What's In This for Us?

The Dangers of Ambitious Leadership: Abimelech's ruthless ambition led to chaos and bloodshed, highlighting the risks of following leaders who prioritize personal gain over the welfare of their people. Motivations and integrity of those in leadership positions matter – especially in the church.

Consequences of Compromising Ethical Standards: Despite his unethical methods, the Shechemites' support for Abimelech led to their downfall. This illustrates the long-term dangers of compromising

moral values for short-term gains. One's integrity may be sacrificed for immediate benefits, demonstrating the importance of moral and spiritual steadfastness.

The Role of Divine Justice: Here, we learn that ultimate justice comes from God, who can use internal discord to correct the course of an individual, family, local church, or nation. We must maintain our faith in justice and moral order, even when everything seems to fail, promoting a worldview where accountability and ethical behavior are expected.

The Power of Speaking Truth to Power: Despite the personal risk, Jotham's courageous stand against Abimelech is a testament to the impact of speaking out against tyranny and corruption. It encourages us to stand firm in truth and righteousness, even against overwhelming odds, and to be voices for justice and integrity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Abimelech in Judges 9 shows us the pitfalls of unbridled ambition, the importance of ethical leadership, and the enduring principles of divine justice and moral courage. By examining the consequences of Abimelech and the Shechemites, we must see the vital need to uphold integrity and righteousness in all areas of life. This biblical account encourages a reflective approach to leadership and personal conduct, urging us to consider the long-term impacts of our choices and advocate for truth and justice everywhere in life.

For Discussion

1. How does the story of Abimelech in Judges 9 reflect the dangers of unchecked ambition in leadership roles today?
2. In what ways do modern leaders sometimes mirror Abimelech's tactics of manipulation and coercion? Can you provide contemporary examples?
3. Discuss the role of ethical leadership and its importance based on the outcome seen with Abimelech and the Shechemites. How can ethical leadership be cultivated in today's world?
4. The story highlights the concept of divine justice. How do you see this principle playing out in current events or personal experiences?
5. Jotham's parable of the trees warns against choosing poor leaders. What criteria should be used today to determine a good leader?
6. The destruction of Shechem involved both human scheming and divine intervention. Discuss the interplay between human free will and divine providence in this story. How does this relationship apply to modern societal issues?
7. What lessons can be learned from the consequences that both Abimelech and the Shechemites faced due to their actions? How can these lessons be applied to personal accountability today?
8. Jotham's act of speaking truth to power is a significant moment. Discuss the importance and impact of whistleblowing in contemporary society.
9. Abimelech's death at the hands of a woman delivers a twist in the narrative. What does this event suggest about unexpected outcomes and the role of individuals in shaping history?
10. How does Judges 9 demonstrate the impact of leadership on church stability and morale?