

“You Have Risen Up Against my Father's House ”

The one hundredth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 9:1-57; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17

Like the rest of Israel’s judges, Gideon was a mixed bag. When we first met Gideon, he was a timid man, hiding his grain in a winepress. Although double-minded, and constantly seeking signs from God to confirm his call, Gideon was given God’s Spirit, and then led his band of three hundred men to a stunning victory over a huge Midianite army. Since Gideon appears in Hebrews 11:32 (the “hall of faith”), along with several key figures from this period of Israel’s history, we can assume that he is a believer in the promise. But there is another side to Gideon. After chasing the fleeing Midianites across the Jordan, and wiping them out, Gideon then took revenge upon the men of two Israelite cities who refused to help him during the chase. Gideon personally killed the two Midianite kings (Zebah and Zalmuna) who had killed his own brothers, but only after the two kings insulted Gideon to his face. Although Gideon vehemently refused to become king over Israel, nevertheless, he functioned as a king, established a royal dynasty, and even named his son by a Canaanite concubine, Abimelech, which means “my father is a king.” Finally, Gideon took the gold his men had taken as the spoil of battle, melted it down, and created an “ephod” (a garment worn only by the high priest). We learn that the people of Israel worshiped it, and then turned on Gideon’s family—his seventy sons by a number of wives. Yes, Gideon is a mixed bag. But his son Abimelech isn’t. This man is among the most despicable characters in all the Bible, and serves as an Antichrist figure, seeking to thwart God’s redemptive purposes by wiping out Gideon’s “royal” descendants, and then ruling as a Canaanite, over much of Israel.

We return to our series on Judges, as we take up the story of Abimelech in Judges chapter 9. Although Gideon secured forty years of peace for Israel, and the Midianites had been completely eliminated as a threat to Israel, Gideon also established a royal dynasty with his many wives and seventy sons in his home town of Ophrah, where the people of Israel came to worship the ephod he had made. Sadly, this had become a snare to Gideon’s family, as well as to all of Israel. Chapter nine of Judges describes this rather deplorable state of affairs, depicting an era of violence, deceit and paganism, that one commentator describes as reading “like a page out of a Canaanite history book.”¹ Throughout this series so far, we have been speaking of the Canaanization of Israel, with the account of Abimelech, we’ll see exactly what that means. The people of Israel forgot about YHWH, and all that he had done for Israel. Sadly, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

As we turn, then, to Judges 9, the single longest episode recounted in Judges, we meet Abimelech, one of the most conniving and deceitful men in all the Bible.

As long as Gideon was alive, political life in much of Israel centered around him, and his seventy sons—his personal dynasty in Ophrah. Denying that he was a king, nevertheless Gideon had set-up what amounted to a royal dynasty in his own home town. But God will sovereignly eliminate Gideon’s kingdom, and YHWH will yet again chasten his disobedient and unbelieving people. In fact, just as soon as Gideon died, Abimelech, his son by a Canaanite concubine, sees his opportunity to gain power throughout Israel. An unbelievably ambitious and brutal man, we learn in verses 1-6 of Judges 9, (the first part of the story), “*Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives*

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 308-309.

and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, 'Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.'" Apparently, leaving the city of Ophrah and returning to the home of his mother's family in Shechem, Abimelech seeks out the support of his mother's family, and her extended clan. With his plan already in place, Abimelech now seeks to gain authority over all Israel. Acting like an aspiring mob boss, Abimelech explains to his mother's clan, "isn't better that one ruler who comes from your own clan, than it would be, to be ruled by the household of Gideon?" Abimelech is willing to do whatever it takes to eliminate his rivals to gain the power he craves. But he needs the backing of the men of Shechem.

His audience is very receptive to his scheme, indicating the Canaanite displeasure under Gideon's rule. "And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, 'He is our brother.' And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him." Not only will the leaders of Shechem support Abimelech's efforts, they even fund it. The money comes from the temple of Baal, and Abimelech used to it hire seventy hit men (literally "reckless men"), one shekel paid out to each man who kills one of Gideon's sons. Not only do we have the support of Abimelech's Canaanite mother's kin (the motive being their hatred of Gideon's sons), the whole plan is funded by the church of Baal. This is God's means of chastening his disobedient people—"you have forgotten me, and wish to worship Baal?" "OK, then Baal you'll get."

With the blessing of his clan and the leaders of Shechem, Abimelech began rounding up his half-brothers back in Ophrah, in order to murder them. As we read in verse 5, "And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone." This indicates that this was not a series of sudden unexpected attacks upon his half-brothers—the work of hidden assassins—but that sixty-nine of Gideon's sons were taken captive, and all of them taken to the same large stone, where they were executed, one after the other. While few details of this are given, this may have been a deliberate attempt to mock Israel's sacrifices to YHWH in the tabernacle. By doing this at Ophrah, on a ceremonial stone of some sort, there is the sense that the man who was responsible for knocking down the temple to Baal (Gideon), has his entire line wiped out as an act of revenge by the worshipers of Baal, at the exact spot where the earlier temple to Baal had stood. This is a sign of the triumph of Abimelech, and the men of Shechem over the people of Israel. But one son of Gideon escapes Abimelech's plot. "But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself."

Meanwhile, Abimelech gets exactly what he wanted. As we read in verse 6, "And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem." The irony of it all. At the same place [Shechem] where the entire nation of Israel had twice participated in covenant renewal ceremonies back in the days of Joshua, the Canaanite nobles from Shechem and Beth-millo, attend the installation service of a pagan king (Abimelech), at the oak of the pillar (a reference to a pagan temple of some sort), in what amounts to a symbolic kingship which is the successor to the sham kingship of Gideon. But as we will soon see, he who lives by the sword, will die at the hands of his enemies, this time in the most unexpected of ways.

In verses 7-21, the focus now switches to the actions of Jotham, Gideon's youngest son.

While it looks like Abimelech had successfully pulled off his plan, his young half-brother Jotham

(whose name means “The Lord is perfect/honest”),² and who had escaped, will oppose the murderous Abimelech. Knowing that he can’t enter Shechem without being killed, instead, Jotham climbs the mountain outside the city, and proclaims a dramatic parable to the leaders of Shechem exposing Abimelech’s scheme for what it is—a shameless grab for power. As recounted in 7, “*when [the news of Abimelech’s coronation] was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, ‘Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you.’*”

As Jotham tells the parable, his point in verses 8-15 is that by agreeing to Abimelech’s plan, the men of Shechem have brought about their own ruination. “*The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us. But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’*” Olive oil was a very precious commodity in the Palestinian world, and in the parable the olive tree would rather serve its purpose than be anointed with its own oil. The parable continues in verses 10-11. “*And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’*” Again, the fig tree knows that its valuable fruit is for others. The same is true with the vines mentioned in verses 12-13. “*And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’*”

In verses 14-15, the parable comes to its dramatic conclusion. “*Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’*” The bramble was a useless bush full of thorns—like a tumbleweed. The bramble is made the same offer as the others—“come and rule over us.” Unlike all the others, the bramble invites all the other trees to take refuge in its shade, which is impossible, since it is a small, useless weed, and filled with thorns. If, after extending the offer to the bramble, the other trees do not accept it, the bramble then invokes a curse upon all the others.³ It is clear to whom Jotham is referring.

In verses 16-20, Jotham explains the meaning of the parable he has just told. “*Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved—for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against my father’s house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative—if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.*” If the people of Shechem acted in good faith, then let everyone celebrate. But if this was based upon treachery, and a sheer desire for power and revenge, then let the two parties (the leaders of Shechem, and Abimelech) consume each other by fire. Jotham has, in effect, pronounced a curse upon those responsible for the death of his brothers. Knowing that he too will be dead if caught by Abimelech, or the men of Shechem, we read in verse 21, that “*Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.*”

² Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 315.

³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 319.

The issue here is not the idea of kingship in general, but with the despicable way in which the kingship of Abimelech came about, and the blood that was shed to secure it. If the Canaanites of Shechem had actually made a deal with the devil (and they did) then they will suffer the consequences. Gideon had saved these people from the Midianites, and yet to restore the worship of Baal, and place one of their own on the throne over much of Israel, the leaders of Shechem had funded and encouraged the slaughter of Gideon's seventy-sons. This is a picture to us of the evils of political intrigue (although the political intrigue is the historical circumstance), and a sign of how bad things had become throughout Israel, where Canaanites have returned in sufficient number to effectively undo almost all of the benefits of the conquest. Many Israelites actually served in Abimelech's army.

The rest of the chapter deals with how the fulfillment of Jotham's curse plays out with the rage, and the unexpected demise of the tyrannical Abimelech.

Once again, we see the sovereign hand of God, as he allows his faithless people (Israel) to suffer at the hands of a cruel master like Abimelech. But there is no way that YHWH will allow Abimelech to overturn his sovereign purpose for Israel. So, YHWH ensures that Abimelech's own evil rage will bring about the demise of the city of Shechem, as well as his own end. In verses 22-25, the author of Judges describes the changing circumstances which led to Abimelech's undoing. *"Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to Abimelech."*

After three years of suffering, YHWH intervenes on behalf of his people by sending an evil spirit of some sort, which created bad blood between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem. The work of this spirit would, in some way, serve to avenge the death of Gideon's sixty-nine sons. Now suspicious and distrusting of Abimelech, the leaders of Shechem began their own campaign of terror against Abimelech, staging a series of ambushes and robberies against Abimelech's men and his interests whenever they passed through the local mountains. Eventually word got back to Abimelech that the men of Shechem were actively working against him. Abimelech will seek revenge against those who gave him his power.

Enter Gaal. While not much is said about him, Gaal and his family (who had descended from Hamor, who had founded the city), appear to be true Shechemites, who had refused to support Abimelech and those who had given him power. As we learn in verses 26-29, *"And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards and trod them and held a festival; and they went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out.'" When Gaal returns to the city, the people are so glad to see him, they throw a huge party in the temple of Baal in Gaal's honor. During the drunken festivities, the people curse Abimelech. Gaal even speaks to the crowd and boasts that he will remove Abimelech. He challenges Abimelech to bring his army. Why should the men of Shechem suffer at the hands of a man who wasn't truly one of their own, and whose father was an Israelite? Although not stated, it is*

clear to the reader that this is first phase of YHWH bringing Jotham's curse upon Abimelech to pass.⁴

In verses 30-33, we learn of Abimelech's response to this burgeoning insurrection. *"When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, 'Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city. And when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may do to them as your hand finds to do.'"* Abimelech's absence and the resentment against him, may mean that Abimelech had been in Ophrah, angering the Shechemites all the more.

Taking Zebul's advice, in verses 34-37, we learn that Abimelech decisively acts to put down the revolt fostered against him by Gaal. *"So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. And Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, and Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from the ambush. And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, 'Look, people are coming down from the mountaintops!' And Zebul said to him, 'You mistake the shadow of the mountains for men.' Gaal spoke again and said, 'Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the Diviners' Oak.'"* Despite Zebul's attempt to lull Gaal into a sense of complacency, Gaal realizes that Abimelech's men have come to put down the rebellion. Abimelech has called Gaal's bluff. Gaal said he wanted a fight. Now he's got one!

We now learn in verses 38-41, that Gaal's boasting was not the same as winning a battle. *"Then Zebul said to [Gaal], 'Where is your mouth now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them.' And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and [Gaal] fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem."* Gaal's men were quickly routed, and many were killed. Gaal himself fled, and after such an immediate and stunning defeat, it was impossible for Gaal's clan to return to Shechem. Meanwhile, Abimelech set up shop in Arumah, about five miles from Shechem. But this is not over, Abimelech will take revenge on all those who have betrayed him.

Realizing that his influence over Shechem was gone, Abimelech turns upon those who put him power. According to verses 42-45, Abimelech acts to destroy the city of Shechem. *"On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. He took his people and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them. Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the field and killed them. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and killed the people who were in it, and he razed the city and sowed it with salt."* The bulk of the city was destroyed and its inhabitants killed, Abimelech sowed the fields nearby with salt, ensuring that the land would not be fertile for some time. Shechem will be left desolate.

But as we learn in verses 47-50, while the city itself had fallen and was destroyed, the walled portion of

⁴ Block, Judges, Ruth, 327.

the city (at the center) remained intact. Abimelech will destroy the citadel as well. *“When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. And 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 bundle of brushwood and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. And he said to the men who were with him, ‘What you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done.’ So every one of the people cut down his bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about 1,000 men and women.”* This is total warfare. Nothing of Shechem would remain. Abimelech’s revenge burns as hot as the fire which consumes the city.

Just as Jotham had predicted, Shechem and Abimelech will destroy each other. As the chapter comes to an end, we learn exactly how that came to pass. *“Then Abimelech went to Thebez [a village nearby which was attached to Shechem] and encamped against Thebez and captured it. But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city fled to it and shut themselves in, and they went up to the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man his armor-bearer and said to him, ‘Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’ And his young man thrust him through, and he died.”* All it took was a millstone to the head, and it was over. The murderous reign of Abimelech had come to an end.

The degree of the Canaanization of Israel, can be seen in verse 55. *“And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.”* From this it is clear, many of Abimelech’s soldiers were Israelites, who now returned to their homes. As the sad saga in Israel’s history comes to an end, we read in verses 56-57, *“thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.”* God will allow his people to be chastened and reap the consequences of their sin. But he will not allow a thug like Abimelech, to thwart his redemptive purposes.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

The story of Abimelech points us in two directions. On the one hand, we see in Abimelech the sovereign hand of God. In order to remove Gideon’s sham dynasty, YHWH allows Abimelech to do in sixty-nine of Gideon’s sons (save one) and then become the leader over much of Israel. The people of Israel have forgotten YHWH, and all of the things he had done for his people. The Israelites were now doing what was right in their own eyes. Many of the men of Israel had even served in Abimelech’s army. For three years, the people of Israel were forced to live under Abimelech’s cruel hand. But Abimelech’s evil will not be allowed to triumph. And so when Jotham pronounces a curse upon both the city of Shechem and its leaders, because of what they had done to Gideon’s sons, YHWH brings the curse to pass. Abimelech destroys Shechem, renders it uninhabitable, and is then unexpectedly killed by a woman who bonks him in the head with a millstone. This tells us that God will not be mocked, that Israel will receive blessing and/or curse depending upon the nation’s obedience, and that Israel needs a king and a messiah, who can deal with the root of the problem, human sin. Throughout this period of redemptive history, Israel is being prepared for a king (David) who, in turn, points Israel to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who alone can deal with sin’s guilt and its power, through his death and resurrection.

In the rage of Abimelech, we also a parallel to those who rise up within the midst of God's household (the church), and who hate God, and who are bent on destroying his kingdom, just as Abimelech has been bent on destroying his father's kingdom to replace it with his own. Such people resent those in the church, and they come to hate whom they once regarded as brothers and sisters. Many times such people do this through heresy and doctrinal error. Other times they become harsh critics of the church, and its institutions, and they delight in exposing the church's sins and hypocrisy. Jotham said to the men of Shechem, "you have risen up against my father's house," and he then pronounces a curse upon them for doing it. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul does a similar thing, reminding us that God protects and preserves his own.

Paul warns us of those who rise up in the church, and who, from all kinds of motives, seek to destroy the work of God. In verses 16-17, Paul reminds all believers in Jesus Christ of this same principle. "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*" While evil men will arise in our midst, God will never allow them to triumph. Even as God comforts believers with the promise that they are God's temple because the Spirit lives in them, at the same time, God warns all those who seek to destroy the Father's house, *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.* Jesus loves his church and promises that the gate of hell cannot prevail against it. He also will protect his own from those like Abimelech who seek to rule in the place of Christ.

And thank God, because Jesus is a tender shepherd who rules in grace and mercy, and not as a cruel tyrant who takes revenge upon those who do him wrong. And so when we look at the life of a man like Abimelech we see not Christ, but his opposite. For Jesus never once spoke a word of rage. He never once hatched a plot that was not his father's will, and he has never once been cruel with his own. And he oppose any and all who rise up against his father's house. Amen.