

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
3-6-24

Judges 9

Abimelech Forces His Brothers To Submit To Him – Verses 1-3

9 Abimelek son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother's clan, ² "Ask all the citizens of Shechem, 'Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal's sons rule over you, or just one man?' Remember, I am your flesh and blood." ³ When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelek, for they said, "He is related to us."

9:1-3 With Gideon dead, Abimelek wanted to take his father's place. To set his plan in motion he went to the city of Shechem, his mother's hometown, to drum up support. There he felt kinship with the residents. These relatives were Canaanites and would be glad to unite against Israel. Shechem was an important city, a crossroads for trade routes and a natural link between the coastal plain and the Jordan Valley. Whoever controlled Shechem would dominate the countryside.

9:3 Politics played a major part in pagan religions such as the worship of Baal-Berith. Governments often went so far as to hire temple prostitutes to bring in additional money. In many cases a religious system was set up and supported by the government so the offerings could fund community projects. Religion became a profit-making business. In Israel's religion, this was strictly forbidden. God's system of religion was designed to come from an attitude of the heart, not from calculated plans and business opportunities. It was also designed to serve people and help those in need, not to oppress the needy. Is your faith genuine and sincere, or is it based on convenience, comfort, and availability?

Abimelech Murders His Brothers – Verses 4-6

⁴ They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelek used it to hire reckless scoundrels, who became his followers. ⁵ He went to his father's home in Ophrah and on one stone murdered his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerub-Baal, escaped by hiding. ⁶ Then all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelek king.

9:4 Israel's king was to be the Lord and not a man. But Abimelek wanted to usurp the position reserved for God alone. In his selfish quest, he killed all but one of his 70 half brothers. People with selfish desires often seek to fulfill them in ruthless ways. Examine your ambitions to see if they are self-centered or God-centered. Be sure you always fulfill your desires in ways that God would approve.

9:6 Abimelek was declared ruler of Israel at Shechem, the site of other key Bible events. It was one of Abraham's first stops upon arriving in Canaan (Genesis 12: 6-7). When Jacob lived there, two of his sons killed all the men in Shechem because the prince's son raped their sister (Genesis 34). Joseph's bones were buried in Shechem (Joshua 24: 32); Israel renewed its covenant with God there (Joshua 24); and the kingdom of Israel would split apart at this same city (1 Kings 12).

The Parable Of The Trees – Verses 7-15

⁷When Jotham was told about this, he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, “Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. ⁸One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’ ⁹“But the olive tree answered, ‘Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?’ ¹⁰“Next, the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Come and be our king.’ ¹¹“But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’ ¹²“Then the trees said to the vine, ‘Come and be our king.’ ¹³“But the vine answered, ‘Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?’ ¹⁴“Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘Come and be our king.’ ¹⁵“The thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’

9:7-15 In Jotham’s parable, the trees represented Gideon’s 70 sons, and the thornbush represented Abimelek. Jotham’s point was this: A productive person would be too busy doing good to want to bother with power politics. A worthless person, on the other hand, would be glad to accept the honor— but he would destroy the people he ruled. Abimelek, like a thornbush, could offer Israel no real protection or security. Jotham’s parable came true when Abimelek destroyed the city of Shechem (9: 45), burned “the tower of Shechem” (the city of Beth-millo, 9:46-49), and was finally killed at Thebez (9:53-54).

Jotham Applies The Parable: The City Of Shechem Will Be Repaid For Choosing Such A Worthless Man – Verses 16-21

¹⁶“Have you acted honorably and in good faith by making Abimelek king? Have you been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family? Have you treated him as he deserves? ¹⁷Remember that my father fought for you and risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian. ¹⁸But today you have revolted against my father’s family. You have murdered his seventy sons on a single stone and have made Abimelek, the son of his female slave, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is related to you. ¹⁹So have you acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today? If you have, may Abimelek be your joy, and may you be his, too! ²⁰But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelek and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelek!” ²¹Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and he lived there because he was afraid of his brother Abimelek.

9:16 Jotham told the story about the trees in order to help the people set good priorities. He did not want them to appoint a leader of low character. As we serve in leadership positions, we should examine our motives. Do we just want praise, prestige, or power? In the parable, the good trees chose to be productive and to provide benefits to people. Make sure these are your priorities as you aspire to leadership.

A Spirit Of Ill Will Between Abimelech And Shechem – Verses 22-25

²²After Abimelek had governed Israel three years, ²³God stirred up animosity between Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelek. ²⁴God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal’s seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelek and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers. ²⁵In opposition to him these citizens of Shechem set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob everyone who passed by, and this was reported to Abimelek.

9:22-23 Abimelek was the opposite of what God wanted in a judge, but it was three years before God moved against him, fulfilling Jotham's parable. Those three years must have seemed like forever to Jotham. Why wasn't Abimelek punished sooner for his evil ways? We are not alone when we wonder why evil seems to prevail (Job 10:3; 21:1-18; Jeremiah 12:1; Habakkuk 1:2-4, 12-17). God promises to deal with sin, but in his time, not ours. Actually it is good news that God doesn't punish us immediately because we all have sinned and deserve God's punishment. God, in his mercy, often spares us from immediate punishment and allows us time to turn from our sins and turn to him in repentance. Trusting God for justice means (1) we must first recognize our own sins and repent, and (2) we may face a difficult time of waiting for the wicked to be punished. But in God's time, all evil will be destroyed.

9:24 This animosity was likely not just an attitude of strife; it was probably a demon. It was not Satan himself, but one of the fallen angels under Satan's influence. God used this evil spirit to bring about judgment on Shechem. First Samuel 16:14 records how God judged Saul in a similar way.

The Men Of Shechem Choose A New Leader – Verses 26-29

26 Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his clan into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him. **27** After they had gone out into the fields and gathered the grapes and trodden them, they held a festival in the temple of their god. While they were eating and drinking, they cursed Abimelek. **28** Then Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelek, and why should we Shechemites be subject to him? Isn't he Jerub-Baal's son, and isn't Zebul his deputy? Serve the family of Hamor, Shechem's father! Why should we serve Abimelek? **29** If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelek, 'Call out your whole army!'"

9:26-29 The men of Shechem put their confidence in him: The men of Shechem lost their confidence in Abimelech, so they chose a new leader named Gaal, the son of Ebed. They went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech: The men of Shechem were so confident that their new leader Gaal could protect them against Abimelech that they started throwing drunken parties and openly cursing Abimelech and challenging him to a fight ("Increase your army and come out!").

The Role Of Zebul, The Ruler Of The City – Verses 30-33

30 When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry. **31** Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelek, saying, "Gaal son of Ebed and his clan have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you. **32** Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields. **33** In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, seize the opportunity to attack them."

9:30-33 When Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was aroused: Zebul, the "city manager" on behalf of Abimelech, told Abimelech all about Gaal and this rebellion. Zebul advised Abimelech to organize a surprise attack against the rebels of Shechem and come attack the city.

Abimelech Defeats The Rebellion Of The Men Of Shechem, Organized By Gaal – Verses 34-41

³⁴ So Abimelek and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies. ³⁵ Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance of the city gate just as Abimelek and his troops came out from their hiding place. ³⁶ When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!” Zebul replied, “You mistake the shadows of the mountains for men.” ³⁷ But Gaal spoke up again: “Look, people are coming down from the central hill, and a company is coming from the direction of the diviners’ tree.” ³⁸ Then Zebul said to him, “Where is your big talk now, you who said, ‘Who is Abimelek that we should be subject to him?’ Aren’t these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!” ³⁹ So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelek. ⁴⁰ Abimelek chased him all the way to the entrance of the gate, and many were killed as they fled. ⁴¹ Then Abimelek stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his clan out of Shechem.

9:34-41 So Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait: Abimelech agreed with and followed the plan suggested by Zebul. Zebul said to him, “You see the shadows of the mountains as if they were men”: Zebul deceived Gaal, allowing Abimelech’s troops to take position. With the advantage of their superior position, Abimelech and his soldiers drove out Gaal and his men.

9:38 Where indeed is your mouth now: When Zebul knew that Gaal was at a disadvantage, he could not resist rebuking him for his proud, arrogant words against Abimelech, an enemy he could not defeat. “Gaal probably was not prepared for a siege; so he had little choice but to leave the city walls behind and confront Abimelech out in the open.”

Abimelech Attacks The Citizens Of Shechem And Conquers The City – Verses 42-45

⁴² The next day the people of Shechem went out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelek. ⁴³ So he took his men, divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose to attack them. ⁴⁴ Abimelek and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance of the city gate. Then two companies attacked those in the fields and struck them down. ⁴⁵ All that day Abimelek pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it.

9:42-44 It came about on the next day: With the resistance of Gaal defeated, Abimelech would find it easy to establish his control over the city of Shechem again. Both outside and inside the city, they effectively attacked and killed the people of Shechem (even those not directly involved in the rebellion). “The people, apparently confident that the matter was concluded, went out into the fields as usual to engage in their daily occupations.”

9:45 To scatter salt over a conquered city was a ritual to symbolize the perpetual desolation of the city. It would not be rebuilt for 150 years.

The Massacre At The Tower Of Shechem – Verses 46-49

⁴⁶ On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. ⁴⁷ When Abimelek heard that they had assembled there, ⁴⁸ he and all his men went up Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and cut off some branches, which he lifted to his shoulders. He ordered the men with him, “Quick! Do what you have seen me do!” ⁴⁹ So all the

men cut branches and followed Abimelek. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire with the people still inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.

9:46-48 Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bough...“What you have seen me do, make haste and do as I have done”: Though Abimelech was an ungodly and violent man, he did understand some basic principles of leadership. He understood the importance of leading through the example of one’s own actions. He could tell his troops to do as I have done, and they did.

9:49 All the people of the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women: With this, Abimelech massacred the last survivors of the city of Shechem, killing about a thousand men and women. This graphically fulfilled the warning of Jotham earlier in the chapter (Judges 9:19-20). For the people of Shechem, even a secure tower could not protect them. Yet there is a more secure tower than the tower of Shechem. The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe (Proverbs 18:10). For You have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy. (Psalm 61:3).

God’s Judgment On Abimelech – Verses 50-55

⁵⁰ Next Abimelek went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. ⁵¹ Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—had fled. They had locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. ⁵² Abimelek went to the tower and attacked it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, ⁵³ a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull. ⁵⁴ Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can’t say, ‘A woman killed him.’” So his servant ran him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ When the Israelites saw that Abimelek was dead, they went home.

9:50-53 In times of battle, women were sometimes asked to join the men at the city wall to drop heavy objects on the soldiers below. A millstone would have been an ideal object for this purpose. It was a round stone about 18 inches in diameter with a hole in the center. Millstones were used to grind grain into flour. The grain was placed between two millstones. The top millstone was turned, crushing the grain.

9:54-55 Abimelek’s death was especially humiliating: He was killed by a woman, not by fighting; and he was killed by a farm implement instead of a weapon. Abimelek, therefore, asked his armor-bearer to stab him with his sword before he died from the blow of the millstone.

The Certainty Of God’s Judgments – Verses 56-57

⁵⁶ Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷ God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.

9:56-57 Gideon, Abimelek’s father, succeeded in military battles, but sometimes failed in his personal struggles. Gideon was not condemned for taking a concubine (8:31), but the family problems that resulted from this relationship are made very clear. In the end, Abimelek killed 69 of his 70 half brothers, tore apart a nation, and then was killed himself. From Gideon’s life we learn that no matter how much good we do for God’s kingdom, sin in our lives will still produce powerful, damaging consequences. Jotham’s curse is found in 9:16-20.