

Judges 9 • War Within the House of God

Introduction

Not every situation within the church is exactly the same. We have to learn how to deal with the world in ways that are different than internally within the church. There's a difference between a civil war and war with an outside enemy. And so there's a difference when Christians are being persecuted and attacked by the world versus when the church itself becomes divided and corrupt against itself. We have to recognize what is going on, what are the biblically acceptable responses on our part, and how to remain faithful when all others around us are falling away.

¹And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives, and spoke to them and to the whole clan of the household of his mother's father, saying, ²"Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh."

³And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our relative."

⁴They gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him. ⁵Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. ⁶All the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem.

[Read v.1-6]

Q: Who exactly is Jerubbaal?

A: "Jerubbaal" is an alternative name given to Gideon, who previously judged Israel and rescued them from the Midianites.

Q: What is the difference between Gideon's seventy sons mentioned collectively and his son Abimelech?

A: The seventy sons are referred to as Gideon's "direct descendants" (Judges 8:30) from his "many wives", whereas Abimelech was Gideon's son through a concubine. (Judges 8:31) Gideon's legitimate heirs lived and ruled from Shechem whereas this other son was raised apart from them in Ophrah where Gideon had retired to.

Point: Abimelech represents someone who, on the surface, appears to have a legitimate pedigree and qualifications, but in reality does not. He's a representation of a false believer come among the true to establish himself over them.

Q: What might be significant about the seventy being raised and living in Shechem versus Abimelech being raised and living in Ophrah?

A: Shechem was the last, legitimate center of spiritual and government authority established by Gideon's conquering of the Midianites and establishing his sons to continue after him. Ophrah was the place to which Gideon retired and where, tragically, false worship developed around Gideon's ephod.

Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

Judges 8:27

Point: Abimelech was raised in an environment of false worship where the exploits of his father disintegrated from being a great spiritual accomplishment to a cult of personality. Abimelech wanted to be the legend associated with a man rather than an authentic man of God.

Q: How does Abimelech's deception begin?

A: He first approached the principal leaders, not the common population.

Point: One of the most common ways apostasy and deception gains entrance into the church is through leadership who fails to address the issue at the earliest stages. Corrupt the leaders and usually the people will soon follow.

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Q: Why do you suppose it might appeal to the leaders to have only one of Gideon's descendants rule instead of having it shared by the seventy?

A: They had originally desired Gideon to be sole ruler over them, but Gideon had refused, (Judges 8:22-23) instead implementing a shared model through his seventy sons. Having a single ruler is what they wanted in the first place, and this being the direct descendant of Gideon, there was an air of legitimacy.

Q: Where did Abimelech's primary support come from? What might be significant about this fact?

A: According to v.3 from "his mother's relatives". If Abimelech, the son of a concubine, could replace all the sons of Gideon's wives, a family with no legitimate claim would be able to rise and take their place as the new royal family.

Q: Why is the source of the silver given to Abimelech important?

A: It comes from "the house of Baal-berith", a temple dedicated to a Philistine god. They provided Abimelech with money originally offered to a false god, an indication that there was something very spiritually wrong with these people to begin with.

Q: How did Abimelech overcome the seventy?

A: By bringing in outside help which had no allegiance politically or spiritually to Israel, God's people.

Q: What might be significant about the way he killed his brothers "on one stone"?

A: It parallels serving them upon an altar, not just merely killing them but sacrificing them to Baal, a false god.

Q: What might be significant about the manner and place chosen to make Abimelech king?

A: It was performed by a single city without the consent of the whole of Israel nor by asking the counsel of God. It violated everything in God's Word concerning the appointment of kings. Shechem was the place where Joshua had placed a stone (pillar) under an oak as a testimony between God and His people, so they were using the things of God to give them the appearance of legitimacy when in fact they were doing it all in the name of a false god.

Application: *This is not the world attacking the church from without, but from within by those who no longer hold to the truth of God's Word. They bring in people who look legitimate, use the things of God to provide the appearance of legitimacy, but in reality are committed to worship practices and doctrine not adhering to what is right and true. You see this today with people who try to bring into the church practices from other religions such as yoga, mysticism, meditation, etc. Their goal is to replace the legitimate with an imitation they can control.*

⁷Now 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. ⁸Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’ ⁹But 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?’ ¹⁰Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come, reign over us!’ ¹¹But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?’ ¹²Then the trees said to the vine, ‘You come, reign over us!’ ¹³But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my new wine, which cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?’ ¹⁴Finally all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come, reign over us!’ ¹⁵The 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.’

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— ¹⁷for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; ¹⁸but 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— ¹⁹if 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. ²⁰But 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.” ²¹Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer and remained there because of Abimelech his brother.

[Read v.7-21]

Q: What might seem familiar about calling out from Mount Gerizim?

A: This is the place where Joshua had half of Israel stand to pronounce the blessings from God’s Word. The other half stood on Mount Ebal across the valley from Mount Gerizim to pronounce the curses. It’s a very symbolic place associated with personal commitment to God’s Word.

Q: What is Jotham appealing to them to do?

A: “Listen to me...that God may listen to you”. (v.7) It is a call to God’s Word and ways.

Q: What does the olive tree represent?

A: It is associated with someone having the best virtues and qualifications. Although Scripture associates David with the olive tree (Ps. 52:8), it’s most likely that the people of this time would associate it with Gideon, a righteous man to whom kingship was offered and refused. The “fatness” referred to is the oil pressed out of the fruit by which the lamps in the tabernacle burned and was used in the sacrifices. It’s a reference to a greater desire to be used by God than by men.

Q: What does the fig tree represent?

A: Also a useful and fruit-bearing tree, it also sometimes refers to good men who would not quite attain the stature of those associated with the olive tree. In this case, it most likely represented Gideon’s seventy sons who were appointed to judge rather than rule as kings.

Q: What does the vine represent?

A: It is the last symbol of good and useful men, and most likely refers to the intended legacy through Gideon’s sons that their sons would not take up a kingly throne but instead serve as God originally intended. In other words, the sons of Gideon were most likely training their descendants to continue in right service to God according to His Word.

Q: What does the bramble represent?

A: This reference to a plant that does not produce fruit or usefulness of any kind refers to Abimelech and those with him who desire to rise up and take over in their own right. They are spiritually barren.

Q: What is significant about what the bramble offers?

A: Having no fruit, it offers “take refuge in my shade”. (v.15) But this is actually a false inducement as in order to get any kind of shade out of such underbrush, one is harmed by having to come into such close contact with it as to be scratched and torn. It’s actually an invitation to self-destruction. It’s propensity to catch fire easily brings down even the sturdiest of trees such as “the cedars of Lebanon”. (v.15)

Q: What does Jotham seem to actually be questioning beginning in v.16?

A: Whether or not they are pursuing these things consciously and from the heart. He is amazed that they should reject proven, God-given leadership for a false one so easily.

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Q: How does this all conclude for Jotham personally?

A: He is essentially wishing his enemies well, conceding that they have serious issues of the heart. But recognizing he is outnumbered and that they are given over to a false belief system, he separates himself from them.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

2 Corinthians 6:14

Application: A point comes where corruption and deception are so entrenched that the remnant of true believers must cease fellowship and association with the rest. You cannot save people from their own choices, you can only save yourself by making the right choice personally.

Q: What “curse” is called down upon them?

A: That they would be consumed by their own choices; that what they chose to replace the true things and practices of God would in turn destroy them completely from within.

[Read v.22-25]

²²Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, ²⁴so 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. ²⁵The 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.

Q: What is the means God uses in this situation?

A: Both groups came together with a common goal, but both are rooted in their own false religion. God allows their own choices of another god in place of Him to become the source of conflict between them.

Q: What is a typical character trait displayed by false believers here?

A: They attack the source of income. Greed is always at the root of all false worship, and they choose to enrich themselves at the same time they deprive their rivals.

Q: What mountains are probably being referred to in v.21?

A: Most likely Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal near Shechem. It's their further use of the things and places associated with the One True God in order to provide the appearance of authority and legitimacy of their own false actions.

Q: Why do you suppose God allowed things to go on for three whole years instead of acting right away?

A: God always provides an opportunity for repentance.

Application: Ultimately false believers and false organizations are given over to the inevitable end to which their choices lead.

[Read v.26-45]

²⁶Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his relatives, and crossed over into Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their trust in him. ²⁷They 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. ²⁸Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he

Q: What is basically wrong with the men of Shechem?

A: Having already pursued a false god and false leader they do it again with another.

Point: This is one of the most common behaviors among false believers – they go from one bad movement to another, one bad leader to another. Instead of getting better they go from bad to worse and allow themselves to get deeper and deeper into apostasy.

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? ²⁹Would, therefore, that this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech.” And he said to Abimelech, “Increase your army and come out.”

³⁰When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger burned. ³¹He 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. ³²Now therefore, arise by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field. ³³In 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.”

³⁴So Abimelech and all the people who were with him arose by night and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies.

³⁵Now 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. ³⁶When 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.”

³⁷Gaal 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.”

³⁸Then 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!”

³⁹So Gaal went out before the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech.

⁴⁰Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him; and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. ⁴¹Then Abimelech remained at Arumah, but Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives so that they could not remain in Shechem.

⁴²Now it came about the next day, that the people went out to the field, and it was told to Abimelech. ⁴³So he took his people and divided them into three

Q: What is the greater spiritual issue represented by gathering grapes and holding a festival?

A: Getting drunk is a representation throughout Scripture of being spiritually deceived and out of control. It’s the opposite of being “filled with the Spirit”. This is further evidenced by the fact they do this in the temple as worship of their false god.

Q: What is Gaal’s ultimate goal?

A: According to v.28-29 to establish total authority over the people and, in the process, completely embrace the worship of the false gods of the Canaanites which Israel had originally been ordered by God to destroy. It was a complete and final separation from all things associated with the One True God in order to be exclusively dedicated to a false god.

Q: What does Zebul arrange in order to deal with Gaal?

A: An ambush.

Point: *False believers don’t deal openly and honestly with anyone, especially with those perceived as rivals. Their tactic is always to employ deception and deceit on every level.*

Q: When Gaal first became aware of people arising against the city, what did Zebul attempt to do?

A: According to v.36 Zebul attempted to deceive and mislead Gaal both by standing with him in the gate as a false ally, and then claiming that it was not men Gaal saw but “*the shadow of the mountains as if they were men*”.

Q: What does the fact that the attackers came from “the highest part of the land” and “by way of the diviners’ oak” imply?

A: The high places were the favorite spots throughout Israel where false worship took place. These places symbolized the greater truth that those attacking were deceivers intent on deceiving, people ultimately attacking from their perceived spiritual position of strength.

Q: First Zebul acts in secret against Gaal, then he tries to deceive him. What does he do next?

A: In v.38 he uses Gaal’s words and pride against him to goad him into engaging a numerically superior force.

Point: *This is the pattern of behavior when associating with false believers. They are never truly on your side, first working against you in secret, then actively trying to deceive you, and ultimately manipulating you to engage in activities leading to your self-destruction.*

Q: In v.39-41 Gaal and his supporters tried to make it to the safety of the gates of Shechem, but what happened instead?

A: Zebul the false supporter was waiting to drive them out. In the end, false brethren show themselves for who they truly are.

Q: What happened to the people who had been following Gaal?

A: They thought the battle was just between the leaders Gaal and Abimelech. When Gaal was defeated, they made the mistake of thinking everything would return to normal and tried to return to work.

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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. ⁴⁴Then 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. ⁴⁵Abimelech 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.

⁴⁶When all the leaders of the tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the inner chamber of the temple of El-berith. ⁴⁷It was told Abimelech that all the leaders of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸So 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." ⁴⁹All 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.

⁵⁰Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he camped against Thebez and captured it. ⁵¹But there was a strong tower in the center of the city, and all the men and women with all the leaders of the city fled there and shut themselves in; and they went up on the roof of the tower. ⁵²So Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it, and approached the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull. ⁵⁴Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that it will not be said of me, 'A woman slew him.'" So the young man pierced him through, and he died.

⁵⁵When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, each departed to his home. ⁵⁶Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his

Q: Why should they have not been surprised that Abimelech was waiting for them?

A: Because the **REAL** battle was for power and influence. Because the city had supported Gaal, Abimelech took it personally. Abimelech needed to make an example of them in order to retain control over everyone else.

Application: *Individuals and groups will sometimes initially unite over a common issue such as "You're against abortion and we're against abortion so let's be against abortion together". But because they each ultimately serve their own interests and pursue their own brand of false religion, sooner or later they end up turning on each other and liquidating any temporary alliance.*

[Read v.46-49]

Q: Whereas the people of Shechem remained in the city and were destroyed, where did the leaders go?

A: They escaped to a fortified place known as "the tower of Shechem". It was both a physical place of strength and a spiritual place of strength in that it was also the stronghold of their false god.

Q: What is ironic about the method Abimelech employed to destroy them?

A: It was a literal fulfillment of what Jotham called God to do in v.20, "let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem". It was both a literal and figurative curse which came about.

Q: Who also became casualties besides the leaders who had gathered there?

A: All the rest of the population who had allowed them entrance both physically and spiritually into their lives.

Application: *False believers are never ultimately safe as they rush from one false leader to another. Ultimately God's final judgment is rendered in His own time.*

[Read v.50-57]

Q: What is ultimately ironic about Abimelech's death?

A: Just as he rose to power by slaying his seventy brothers on a single stone, so a single stone becomes the means of his own death.

Q: How do we know that Abimelech's death by the millstone was seen as stupendous error on his part?

A: Nearly 200 years from now King David will recall this event (2 Sam. 11:21) in warning not to get too close to the wall of a city being besieged by his own troops.

Q: What do stones often represent throughout Scripture? How might this indicate something about how we're supposed to deal with the enemy in our day and age?

A: Stones often represent the Word of God. We don't literally stone people to death any more, but rather assault them using the Word of God as our primary weapon.

father in killing his seventy brothers.
⁵⁷Also God returned all the wickedness of the men of Shechem on their heads, and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came upon them.

[Overall Application]

Jotham, representing the remnant of true believers, had to separate himself from the false and seek to put a safe distance between himself and his enemies. However, it didn't stop him from speaking the truth about Abimelech and those who followed him. There are lessons to be learned here about when a church, organization, or movement becomes entirely corrupt and not only how they operate and treat others, but how the faithful remnant is to operate and treat them in return. One of the hardest lessons for the faithful is allowing God to work things out according to His own will and timing that all parties have the maximum opportunity to repent and return to Him before ultimately undergoing Final Judgment.