

# Judges 9 • Gideon's Legacy (The downfall of Abimelech)

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier  
Life Bible Ministry

The stories in the Old Testament are given to you and I as examples that we might learn from them, that we might understand and grow from them. And that's what we're trying to do in the Book of Judges. Although it offers mostly negative examples, quite unfortunately, they are examples nonetheless and things that we need to be careful to take heed to.

And that is really largely what this story in the chapter looking at tonight is about. It's about the inability of this individual to heed the word of the Lord, and not just the individual we're dealing with, but the one who came before him, who is Gideon. We've been talking about Gideon for the last few weeks.

Gideon was a man who was raised up to be one of the judges of Israel to deliver them from the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon had his day in the sun, and he was a good guy, at least initially. And then things just unraveled as things went on. We learned that in the last couple of weeks that once the battle was over, once the Midianites had basically been defeated, the people came to Gideon and said, we want you to rule over us as king. And he said, I'm not. I don't want to. I'm not going to rule over you, nor are my children going to rule over you.

And yet we find him then acting like a king, living like a king. He asked for money from the people. He collected certain royal jewelry and clothing that made him look kingly. He took on many, many wives. It says he had 70 sons. Now that's the lifestyle that a king would lead. And then, probably in one of the things that was the most telling about Gideon, of all of his wives, he married this pagan woman from the city of Shechem, there in Canaan, and had a child with her and named that child Abimelech, which means, my father is king.

And so that is rather telling. Gideon didn't want the title, but he wanted the lifestyle. He wanted to live like a king, and he basically did. But we see his life unraveling, and we see the lives of his family members unraveling because of largely the decisions that Gideon made.

And you'll remember that Gideon was also known by the pagan name, a name of Jerubbaal. And it's interesting that as we talk about Gideon, now that he's gone and he's since passed away, and now we're looking at his family, they

never ever refer to him from this point on as Gideon anymore. It's always Jerubbaal, which is essentially that pagan name that the people gave him originally. So gone is the underpinnings of who he is in the Lord and so forth.

This chapter begins by dealing with one of the sons of Gideon, the one we talked about that was born to a concubine, the woman in the city of Shechem. Do you guys remember the city of Shechem? Way back in Genesis, do you remember? There was a ruler of Shechem whose son fell in love with one of Jacob's daughters, Diana. And he loved her and he wanted her. He wanted to marry her, and he said, why don't you, why don't we just intermarry? And we'll give you our daughters for your sons, and you give your daughters for... and we'll trade and we'll... this will be a good thing.

And you'll remember that two of Jacob's sons convinced the town that they were going to go in on the deal. But they said, well, but if you're going to take our daughter in marriage, you have to all be circumcised. And so the men of the city talked about it and decided that was worth it. And yeah. And then—I think I'd have said no. I'd have voted no on that one, thank you very much—as a grown-up dealing with that sort of deal.

But it says that while the men were still healing, these two brothers, these two sons of Jacob, went in and literally slaughtered all of the men of the town. And that's some of the history that we've already seen with the city of Shechem, but now it comes back into play here.

And it says, *“Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal (and that, of course, is Gideon) went to Shechem to his mother’s relatives...” (ESV)*

In other words, he's talking to the people who are on his mom's side, and those would be residents of the city of Shechem, and they would be Canaanites. So we're not talking about Jews specifically here. He goes to talk to his Canaanite relatives, and he says,

*“<sup>2</sup> “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.””*

In other words, I'm family. So he goes to them, and he basically plants an idea in their minds to say that now that Gideon is dead, that all of his sons are going to clamor for a place of rulership in the area of Canaan.

Well, there's no evidence at all that any of the sons of Gideon wanted that role of leadership or that power. None whatsoever. Abimelech is completely alone in this. He singularly wants to be leader. He singularly wants power. So he goes to Shechem to talk to his mom's side of the family.

Again, they're all pagans. He says, now, who would you rather have rule over you, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal or the one son of Jerubbaal—me—who's of your own flesh and blood? Well, what that's going to do.

Verse 3, it says, *"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, (Yeah, he's one of us) 'He is our brother.'"*

And furthermore, it says they dipped into the treasury of their pagan god: *"<sup>4</sup> 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."*

Don't you love that description? Worthless and reckless. Tell us what you really think of these guys. There's always people like that, aren't there? You can find a crowd. You can find a crowd to do what you want. And not only are these guys considered worthless and reckless, we could go on to say that they're murderers. Because that's exactly what they're going to do.

Look what it goes on to say. It says, *"<sup>5</sup> And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone..."*

And presumably, we're talking here about a mass execution. They just got in there with all these guys and just put them all to death. Now, the reason Abimelech murdered his brothers was to eliminate any possibility of competition for the role of power and leadership that he wanted to have. Again, his brothers have given us no evidence that they had any desire to rule. None whatsoever.

Gideon didn't really want to rule; he just wanted to live like a ruler. And his sons—not a word out of any of them since their father's death. But he goes to kill them all, and we see that the men of Shechem supported his plan by giving him the finances to hire these murderers to go and do this. Not because—and they did it, why? Why did they do it?

Why did they support Abimelech? Because he was one of them. Because he was one of theirs. They didn't do it because it was morally right or anything like that. They did it because it was going to be good for them.

Middle of verse 5: *"...But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself."* So he apparently saw or knew this was going on or happening, and he hid. And he was successful, and his life was spared.

*"<sup>6</sup> 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."*

It's interesting—this oak is spoken of elsewhere in Scripture. And ironically, Abimelech's coronation takes place by the very same tree where Joshua had solemnly placed a copy of the law for the Jews to remember the Word of God. He placed that copy of the law right there by that tree and said, basically, when you pass this tree, you'll see this law and it will be a reminder and so forth. And look how far we've come. (Joshua 24:26-27)

So they crown him king in this weird coronation. Now, technically speaking, Abimelech is considered the first king in Israel, even though the kings of Israel haven't even begun. We call Saul the first king of Israel. Technically speaking, Abimelech is the first one, although it's doubtful that his authority extended beyond just the cities of that area around Shechem and that sort of thing.

*“<sup>7</sup> When it was told to Jotham, (remember, that's the one son of Gideon who was spared the slaughter) 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.”*

I want you to take note of the fact that he is on Mount Gerizim. There is a valley at the base of Mount Gerizim, and then there is Mount Ebal on the other side. The other significant thing about this is the exact place where God commanded Moses and Joshua to read the curses and the blessings of the law—the blessings if they kept the law, the curses if they did not on these mountains, and the people were to be in the valley. And there was a natural amphitheater in this area by these mountains.

By the way, still exist today. And you can go and you can see—in fact, if you Google it, you can find pictures of these two side-by-side twin hills—and it creates this natural amphitheater where, if you stand up on a ledge or a rock and shout loud enough, the people down in the valley can all hear you very well. And that's essentially where this area of Shechem is located.

And so he cries out and says, *“...Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem...”* and so forth. And then he goes on to tell a parable. Listen to this interesting parable.

He says, *“<sup>8</sup> The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’<sup>9</sup> 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?’<sup>10</sup> And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’<sup>11</sup> But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’<sup>12</sup> And the trees said to the vine (which means the grapevine), ‘You come and reign over us.’<sup>13</sup> But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’<sup>14</sup> Then all the trees said to the bramble (your Bible may say thorn bush), ‘You*

*come and reign over us.’<sup>15</sup> 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...’*

Which is crazy. Have you ever stood under the shade of a thorn bush? You can't. It's an ironic statement that he's making. It's because a puny thorn bush isn't going to even currently cast a shadow, and yet let alone the trees be in the shade of a thorn bush. So you can tell what this parable is tending toward.

And he says, “... *‘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.’*”

By the way, in the area of Canaan, a bramble was good for one thing, and that's starting a fire. And that was it. That's what they used them for. They used it as brush to start fires.

In fact, if the weeds got out of control in a particular area, it could really cause a lot of problems for the farmers because if they didn't take care of it and it ignited somehow with lightning or whatever, it could ruin an entire field. And it was something that the farmers considered to be like the scourge of the land. So you can again see how this story is coming about.

And then he says this, Jotham continues, verse 16. “*“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—<sup>17</sup> for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian,<sup>18</sup> 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 (so listen)<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> But if not, (and this is where he speaks his own curse—he says, if not) let fire come out from Abimelech...*”

Remember, he's a bramble bush, he's a thorn bush, and that's all they're good for—creating fire. And he says, fine, if you haven't done this in good faith and with integrity:

*“...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.”*”

Again, fire is all a thorn bush is good for. He's basically saying, you've crowned a thorn bush, and all he's good for is fire. It's all he's good for. So fine, if it's fire you want, then it's fire you'll have.

This chapter is all about sowing and reaping. What we sow. Any rulership, any kingship that begins with the slaughter of family members—it's not going to go well. This isn't going to end well. Just exactly how it ends is always interesting to find out.

But we're told in verse 21 that after “...*Jotham* (spoke these words, he) *ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.*”

Obviously feared for his life, but he was spared. And we're told that all these things didn't happen overnight. I mean, all this bad stuff that we know is going to happen to Abimelech doesn't happen overnight. Three years goes by. Three years. But eventually God says it's time for judgment.

And it tells us: “<sup>22</sup> *Abimelech ruled over Israel three years* (and look at this) <sup>23</sup> *And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,*”

I like how the New King James renders this. It says that God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the leaders of the city. What's this is talking about is just a spirit of jealousy, a spirit of dislike, a spirit of suspicion. This is the life they've lived. This is the seeds they've sown, if you will, and now this is what they're going to reap. So God allows this demonic spirit to begin to cause friction between Abimelech and the leaders of the city.

And then it explains in verse 24 why God is going to do this. Look what it says here: “*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.* (They could have said no, but they didn't) <sup>25</sup> *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.*”

So what they're doing, the men of Shechem are now, they're lying in wait for Abimelech. So, what they're doing is they're setting an ambush out in the area—out in the fields and mountaintops and so forth. But while they're waiting for Abimelech to come along so they can ambush him, he doesn't come. But while they're waiting for him, they're robbing the people. Everybody who passes by.

And Shechem was located in an area where there was a lot of traffic for trade. It was a huge trade route. By robbing the people, they're going to really cause problems for Abimelech. First of all, they're going to drastically cut into his coffers and the taxes that he might otherwise levy on these merchants who are moving through.

And secondly, people are going to stop coming through the area because it's no longer safe. And they're probably going to hold Abimelech for that sort of a thing, as someone who's responsible. So all this is being told to Abimelech.

Meanwhile—here, enter the next bad guy. Verse 26, it says, “*And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, (You’ve got to always have some relatives to boost you up a little bit.) and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him.*” Why? Because he was a big talker.

Well, it says, “<sup>27</sup> *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.*”

This pagan festival, by the way, is one that would take place at the end of grape harvest, sometime in the middle of the summer—end of June, first part of July. And the pagans would go in and basically have a big drunken brawl to their god and to thank him for all their work—wine and so forth. And so while they're doing this, of course, drink always has a way of making people very bold. And they say and do very stupid things.

And this Gaal guy is leading the pack, and he's having a good time just mouthing off, talking about Abimelech, as if he's—yeah, who's this Abimelech anyway? In fact, that's what he goes on to say.

Verse 28: “*And Gaal the son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech, (who is he anyway?) and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? (too) Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? (And officer—he was the governor of the town) Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? <sup>29</sup> Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Increase your army, and come out.’”*

He's just—he's shooting off his mouth. Yeah, come on, tough guy. Get your army together and come on out. That's what I'd tell him. Yeah, that's what he would hear. Yeah, he's nothing.

It's really interesting how people—talk is so cheap, isn't it?—and people love to talk tough and get a following. Oh, if I were a leader around here, I'd get some things done, let me tell you.

Now, “<sup>30</sup> *When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled.* <sup>31</sup> *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.* <sup>32</sup> *Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field.* <sup>33</sup> *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.”*

*“<sup>34</sup> So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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.’ <sup>37</sup> 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.’ <sup>38</sup> Then Zebul said to him, ‘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—so you can see, he’s goading him on to go out and do it—put your muscle where your mouth is.*

*“<sup>39</sup> And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. <sup>40</sup> And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. <sup>41</sup> And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.”*

Now you read this, and initially you're like, this is a little weird. I mean, Abimelech's not the good guy. Well, nobody's the good guy here. Basically, you've got two bad guys. Abimelech murdered all of his brothers, and this Gaal guy—who's really nothing but a big mouth—is opposing Abimelech. And you think to yourself, oh, okay, I think I see how God's done this. God's raising up someone to punish Abimelech.

And even though Gaal isn't a good guy, he's going to be the tool of the Lord, if you will, to punish Abimelech. Well, then Abimelech punishes him! And he's the bad guy! And you're like, what's going on with this? Well, that's where you've got to keep reading.

He defeats Gaal and his followers: *“On the following day, (verse 42) the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told.”*

So the people just go out. They figure the battle's all over. The people of the city—the rest of the people of Shechem—they're like, well, that's it. Had a little squabble here between Abimelech and Gaal, but it's all over now. So let's just go out and work, new day.



So he was told, and it says in verse 43, *“He took his people and divided them into three companies (this time) and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. (They’re just coming out to work in the fields.) So he rose against them and killed them.”*<sup>44</sup> *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.”*<sup>45</sup> *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 (meaning that he burned it to the ground) and (then he) sowed it with salt.”*

Which was a way of—what you and I would consider like a sterilant. It’s a way of putting salt over something is to say, may you not be fruitful anymore, and so forth. So he completely destroyed the city.

In fact, Shechem was not rebuilt for two centuries. It was not until the days of the kings—Jeroboam I, during his days. Two centuries later, Shechem was eventually rebuilt.

Verse 46: *“When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith.”*<sup>47</sup> *Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together.”*<sup>48</sup> *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 (look at this) 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.”*<sup>49</sup> *So every one of the people cut down (the bundle or) his bundle (rather) 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.”* The curse of Jotham comes to pass: May fire destroy you and so forth.

<sup>50</sup> *Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. (Obviously, these are cities that probably went in with Gaal)*<sup>51</sup> *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.”*<sup>52</sup> *And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire.”*

But it says here that, <sup>53</sup> *“...a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull.”*<sup>54</sup> *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.’”* (That was his big concern) *And his young man thrust him through, and he died. (And look at his, verse 55) And when the*

*men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his (own) home."*

And then, we're told in these last two verses of the chapter. *"<sup>56</sup> Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. <sup>57</sup> 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."*

So the important things to see here, you'll notice here again in verse 55, it says, *"And when the men of Israel..."* It sounds earlier as we read the chapter that we're dealing with Shechemites, who are pagans, who are not Jews, they are not of Israel, they are their Canaanites living in the land and it sounds like this whole issue is between Canaanites.

But then we get toward the end of this chapter, and in verse 55 it says, *"And (then) when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead..."* They're just like, well, for that, let's go home. And you ask yourself the question, where did these Israelites come from?

And this is what tells you and I, about how badly things had gone for Israel. They had begun to just intermingle with the Canaanites to the point where you couldn't tell where the Canaanites started and the Israelites ended. They were merging with these people. They were joining forces with them. And some of them were fighting with Abimelech. They had accepted him as king. Even though he had murdered his brothers.

Well, this story is both tragic and foolish, when you look at it in summary. Abimelech, what did he gain from his wickedness, from his plan to kill his brothers? He had this very short-lived rule of a tiny district in Israelite territory, populated mostly by Canaanites, but as we saw, some of the Jews fell into this thing as well. And he also invited an early death for himself for this thing.

And we look at this and we say how meaningless is that ambition for power and wealth and status that we find among men. But if nothing else, this story shows that there is a very real and a very terrible price that is paid when people reject the warnings of God's Word. And we see that is the case with the Israelites who joined forces in this situation.

What's the lesson for you and I? Well, I think it's pretty obvious. Even as believers, we have to be very careful. Somebody can come along and give a convincing argument for why we should throw our lot in with them and why we should join with them and so forth.

And sometimes when we look at life and we see that if we make a certain decision, it's going to benefit us, we can tend to throw the moral implications of those decisions out the window, just as the men of Shechem did. But what we also see from this passage is what is reminded us here in the last two verses of this chapter.

And again, verse 56 says, *“Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech...”* He sent it back on his own head, literally. And then in 57: *“And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads (as well), and upon them came that curse of Jotham...”*

The bottom line is this. What a man sows, so also shall he reap. We talk to our kids when we're raising children. We tell them, we just want you to make good choices. But we often don't explain why. And the why is what a man sows, so also shall he reap. The word says God will not be mocked about that thing. (Galatians 6:7) There is a spiritual principle that is in play and many of us in this room have sown all kinds of things in our lives that we regret.

Things that we've done, places we've gone, people we've connected with, sins that we've committed, words that we've said. We regret them over and over. And we have seen the result of this sowing and reaping in our own lives. Had we been able to see at the time what this could produce in our lives, we may have, who knows, we may have heeded the warning and just said, I guess I'm not going to go there. Maybe we might have, who knows.

But this chapter in the Bible is this reminder for you and I. We've got to be careful. Our lives are likened to a garden that is being planted, and you and I have the freedom to put in it, pretty much anything we want. We can plant good stuff in there.

The law of sowing and reaping is just as much a good law that can be used for good purposes as it is something that can bear out bad stuff. You can sow and reap good things—faithfulness, honesty, trustworthiness, love, mercy, grace, tenderheartedness. We can sow those things and then reap those as well.

Or we can do like the men in this story, we can be out, live for selfish ambition and just to please ourselves. And there's always going to be somebody then waiting around the next corner to please himself and to do it at our expense.