



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 9:1-57

To learn about the negative effects of Gideon's poor choices.

What Comes Around Goes Around

I spent a lot of my early adult years in the city of Dallas, Texas. I learned to play drums when I was a young teen and developed a skillset that got me a lot of gigs by the time I was out of high school. One band that dominated the Dallas music scene in those formative years for me was a group called *Doosu*. Their breakthrough album, *Aqua Vita*, came out in 1999, but it was their follow-up album *Feng Shui* in 2002 that really made an impact on the Dallas music community. One of the best songs on that album was called "Four Steps," and the chorus reflects a sentiment that I think resonates with most people if they are being honest: "What comes around goes around."

Perhaps it strikes at the importance of the, "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth," mentality that is carved out in the Old Testament, or perhaps it's purely the result of our fallen nature that we just want to see people suffer for wrongs that they have committed. Vengeance is more often celebrated than warned against. Maybe, the reason it's such an acceptable concept is because deep down humanity knows that the world is broken, that unfair things happen, and so we long for justice (as long as we ourselves aren't on the receiving end of it). Either way, what we find in Judges chapter 9 is a story that unfolds as a result of Gideon's reckless lifestyle. His offspring from a concubine rises up to lead, and makes some very unjust decisions along the way, and ultimately he experiences full force of that chorus by *Doosu*: "What comes around goes around."

The Context

Chapter 9 begins following the death of Gideon. Abimelech, the son of Gideon through a concubine, is brought back into the picture after a brief introduction in Judges 8:30 with a plan to ascend as king over the people of Shechem. He enlists his mother and, “the whole clan of his mother’s family” (Jg. 9:1) to go to the people of Shechem and ask this question: “Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?” (Jg. 9:2) While it may seem like a strange question, Abimelech is essentially engaging in politics, and it appears he is quite effective at it: “Their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech” (Jg. 9:3). This sets in motion the main events of this chapter.

Abimelech’s Betrayal

After successfully winning the support of the people of Shechem, Abimelech begins his campaign. Below is a brief breakdown of some key terms and people.

BAAL-BERITH

In a show of support to Gideon, the people of Shechem pay Gideon, “seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith” (Jg. 9:4). Baal-berith translates to, “Baal, lord of the covenant.” Recall in Judges 8:33, immediately following the death of Gideon, “the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god.” The house of Baal-berith would have been a temple where tributes and sacrifices would have been kept. This confirms that the people of God have again returned to full-blown idolatry, and that idolatry is not perpetuating an evil scheme.

JOTHAM ESCAPES

With the money, Abimelech hires some hitmen to go with him and brutally murder 69 of his brothers. This seems a bit shocking, but we need to understand that this was his plan all along, and the people of Shechem knew that and financed it. After the murders, the people, “immediately when and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar Shechem” (Jg. 9:6). The one brother that escaped was, “Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal” (Jg. 9:5), and when he heard that Abimelech was crowned king, “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” (Jg. 9:7). Thus he begins to share a fable of sorts that serves to predict what will come of the people of Shechem because of their partnership with Abimelech.

THE FABLE

The fable that Jotham tells has been the source of theological discussion for a long time. Is this a known fable that Jotham is adapting and slightly changing to fit his context? Is this a more spontaneous fable with prophetic undertones? It’s unclear. What is clear is that it serves a purpose to predict what will come of the people of Shechem as a result of their wickedness in supporting and anointing Abimelech. In the fable, the trees decide they need a king, and they ask a range of “people” to become their king.

1. The Olive Tree: The olive tree is asked first, but the olive tree declines on account that it would require it to leave its abundance (Jg. 9:9).
2. The Fig Tree: The fig tree is asked second, and it also declines on account that it would have to leave its, “sweetness and good fruit” (Jg. 9:11).
3. The Vine: The vine is asked third, and it also declines on account that it would have to leave the wine that brings the cheers of God and men (Jg. 9:13).
4. The Bramble: The bramble is an unlikely and unworthy candidate, but the trees ask it next to be king nonetheless.

The fable acts a parable. Each of the objects in the fable correspond to something in real life. The trees are the people of Shechem, and Jotham means to serve them warning. The first three trees in the fable all contribute something positive to humanity. The olive tree produces olive oil, one of the most valuable agricultural products in the ancient world. The fig tree produced fruit that could be eaten fresh, and also could be made into cakes, fig win, or used a sweetener. The vine was the source of wine. The bramble, unlike the first three, had nothing positive to offer. Thus, the connection to Abimelech signifies the wickedness of Abimelech.

Jotham's prophetic fable is a judgment of sorts. If the people made him king in good faith and with integrity, then no one has anything to fear, and all can rejoice (Jg. 9:19). However, if they did not act in good faith, and if they did not deal well with Jerubbaal, "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." We already know how this story will end, although the details of how precisely it will happen are not yet clear. We learned in chapter 8 that the people of Israel violated the standards that Jotham has set (Jg. 8:34-35).

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNES

The working relationship between Abimelech and the men of Shechem quickly deteriorates because of God's involvement: "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem" (Jg. 9:23). This is the first time in the Abimelech narrative that we have seen God actively at work. The Hebrew for "evil" is more nuanced than the translation is able to express. It can hold two very distinct and different meanings. It can mean either something with regard to, "moral failure," but it can also mean something like, "experiential misfortune, or calamitous." This is the better understanding of the word. This passage does not suggest that God is crossing a moral line by acting with evil intention, but rather this spirit he is sending is meant to create and experience of misfortune. If you notice carefully, the spirit is not the one acting with impropriety. He simply stirs up the men and the men act of their own volition. Neither the men of Shechem nor Abimelech are good, and this calamitous spirit highlights that reality.

JOTHAM'S PROPHECY COMES TO PASS

A few other characters are introduced into this narrative. Gaal, "the son of Ebed," (Jg. 9:26), and Zebul (Jg. 9:28) are both brought into the store to heighten the drama. In the end, Abimelech murders many others (Jg. 9:42-45), and burns the leaders of Shechem the Tower of Shechem (Jg. 9:46-49), fulfilling at least one part of Jotham's prophetic fable. Just when you might expect Abimelech to light a second tower on fire (the Tower of Thebez), an unnamed woman drops a millstone from the tower and crushes Abimelech's head (Jg. 9:53). He retained consciousness long enough apparently to request his armor-bearer to stab him and put him out of his misery. Jotham's curse fully came to pass.

What About Now?

One big takeaway from this story about Abimelech is the problem of generational sin. Gideon's lavish and hedonistic lifestyle led to these events. Abimelech was not a legitimate son of Gideon, but the son of a concubine. Gideon's choices with women contributed to this issue, as well as his propensity towards idolatry. Whenever a community of people move away from the word of God, they will inevitably drift away from the ways of God and move in opposition to God's will. The story of Abimelech is a picture to some degree of what the world looks like in a purely secular and political context.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 9:1-6. Who is introduced in this as the main character? What does he Abimelech do? How do his mother’s relative receive what he says? What do they do for him in support of his leadership? What does he use the money for?

2. Read Judges 9:7-15. How did Jotham respond to Abimelech’s attack? In your own words, summarize the fable.

Day Two

1. Read Judges 9:16-21. How does Jotham tie the fable to his context? In other words, what does the fable mean? What are the conditions of it, and what are the possible results?

2. Read Judges 9:22-29. What disrupts Abimelech’s relationship with the men of Shechem? What does, “evil spirit,” probably actually mean according to the notes? Who is Gaal, and what does he do?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 9:30-33. How does Zebul respond to Gaal’s comments? What does he do as a result?

2. Read Judges 9:34-41. In your own words, describe what happens in this passage.

Day Four

1. Read Judges 9:42-49. What did Abimelech do to the people of the city? Where did the leaders of Shechem go to hide? What did Abimelech do to the Tower of Shechem while the leaders were hiding in there?

2. Read Judges 9:50-57. Where did Abimelech go next? What did he attempt to do there? Who stopped him? What did he ask his armor-bearer to do? How do verses 56 and 57 summarize his story?

Week 7 Discussion: Justice

It is hard to find hardly any redemptive qualities in Abimelech's story. He begins with a plot for power, politics his way into power, murders any of his potential competition who incidentally are his brothers, and then rules over his people brutally. If not for the Lord's intervention between Abimelech and the people of Shechem (Jg. 9:23), it's not clear how Abimelech and the people would have gotten along, but knowing what we know about Abimelech's character, it's not hard to guess. One point worthy of discussion in this story, however, is the desire to justice done by Jotham, the sole surviving son of Gideon. In a nearly prophetic act (although it's never explicitly called that), Jotham unveils the need for justice if in fact the people of Shechem acted with impropriety. Of course, the people were dishonest in their behavior, and the results of Jotham's declaration became true, which resulted in not only their deaths but also Abimelech's. Talk as a group about your desire to see justice come to those who harm you, and also how much we dislike justice when it's oriented towards us.

1. Icebreaker: Are you more justice oriented or mercy oriented? Why?
2. Would other people describe you as more justice oriented, or more mercy oriented? Why?
3. Does it bother you when people get away with bad choices they've made? Why or why not?
4. Does it bother you when you don't get away with bad choices you've made? Why or why not?
5. Read Matthew 5:38-48. Does Jesus teach that we should seek justice for ourselves? Why do you think this is?
6. How can the church help people let go of their need to seek justice for themselves?

Takeaways:

1. Through politics, Abimelech gains power and murders his brothers (except Jotham) in order to lead.
2. Jotham prophetically warns the people of Shechem what will happen to them if they had not acted in good faith, they would be destroyed by Abimelech for their treachery.
3. Abimelech kills the people of Shechem by fire, exactly as Jotham warned, and then died by the hands of the people of Thebez, fulfilling the words of Jotham.

PRAYER REQUESTS: