

Abimelech the Vengeful Destroyer

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 8:33-9:57; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

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Congregation of Christ: Remember the foreboding epilogue to Gideon's life? It says that he had many wives who bore him 70 sons. One of his sons was from a Canaanite concubine in Shechem, whom he named Abimelech. And what does "Abimelech" mean? "My father is king." Although publicly, Gideon declined to be the king of Israel, he acted like it, and considered himself a king (Jgs 8:29-31).

Our text is a long story of this son Abimelech, one of the most wicked men in the Bible, more wicked than many of the wicked kings of Israel. First, he brutally schemed and destroyed his father Gideon's household. Next, he slaughtered rebellious Shechemites, the people of his own mother. But the people struck back against him, so that he met a humiliating end. All of these were prophesied through a parable by Jotham, his youngest half-brother.

But what is this story to us, who live in a different world more than 3,000 years later? The story of Abimelech has implications to us today as individuals, as citizens of our own nations, and as members of God's church. It has also an important place in the history of salvation in the Bible, culminating in the coming of the final Savior and King of the world.

So our theme today is "Abimelech the Vengeful Destroyer," under three headings: first, **He Destroys His Father's House**; second, **He Destroys His Own People**; and third, **He is Destroyed by a Woman**.

He Destroys His Father's House

Chapter 8 of the Book of Judges ends on both positive and negative notes. The Midianite oppressors were completely defeated by Gideon, and Israel had rest for 40 years. But the ephod that Gideon made became a "snare" for his family and for Israel, having contributed to the return to the worship of Baal idol-gods. He also established some sort of dynasty with his 70 sons from his many wives, including Abimelech, who was the son of his Canaanite servant.

So Chapter 9 begins with the story of the rise of Abimelech in Israel. He leaves his father's city of Ophrah and returns to his mother's home in Shechem. His plan was to convince his mother's clan and the whole city to install him as king, since Gideon his father named him the son of a king. They all agreed with him that he would be the best leader, since he's also a Canaanite like them.

Wouldn't one of us as leader of Israel benefit us greatly, so their thinking went. They not only supported Abimelech, they even funded his plan. They gave him 70 shekels of silver, and with these he hired 70 "worthless" and "reckless" hit men. Seventy shekels make 1-3/4 pounds, about \$500 today. So the bounty for each of Gideon's sons was one shekel of silver. They were to gather all 70 sons of Gideon in Ophrah before an altar stone there, and one by one, kill them on the stone. And the whole murderous enterprise was funded by the temple of Baal-berith, which means "Baal of the covenant." Abimelech was obviously mocking the sacrifices of Israel to the covenant Lord Yahweh that the people offered in the tabernacle! Gideon, as you may

recall, hacked down the Baal idol. But Israel had forgotten their covenant Lord, and instead worshiped “Baal of the covenant,” so God gave them Baal, the idol-god of worthless murderers.

After this wicked massacre, the Shechemites proclaimed Abimelech as king. Thus far, well and good for Abimelech, or so he must have thought. But there was one little hitch to his plan. Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's 70 sons, and whose name means “the Lord is perfect / honest,” escaped. He now stood on top of Mount Gerizim and prophesied against Abimelech and the Shechemites through a parable.

Verses 8-21 tells of Jotham's parable. There were trees in the forest who went looking for a king to rule over them. They asked the olive tree, the fig tree, the vine, but each refused the invitation. Lastly, they asked the bramble, or the thornbush, and it accepted. The bramble is a useless bush full of thorns, like tumbleweed. While accepting the offer to be king, 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”* (verse 15). The bramble is brash, dishonest and empty: How can anyone take refuge in its shade, when it's only a tumbleweed? And how can it send out fire to burn the faraway cedars of Lebanon?

At this point in the parable, Jotham gives the interpretation. The trees are the people of Shechem who installed a worthless, wicked bramble named Abimelech as king over them. Then he proceeds to condemn the Shechemites because of their unfaithfulness to Gideon who had delivered them from the Midianites. He also condemns them for their murderous treachery against Gideon's 70 sons. So he tells the Shechemites that if they have acted in good faith with Gideon and his household in making Abimelech king, they should rejoice together. But obviously, the people did not act in good faith, so Jotham prophesies the destruction of both Abimelech and Shechem, *“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”* (verse 20). Beth-millo is another fortress near Shechem.

So beginning in verse 22, we read of the fulfillment of this judgment against them.

He Destroys His Own People

In the chapters we have studied, Israel's enemies had oppressed them for 8, 18, 20 and 7 years. But it only took three years for God to act against the latest oppressor, Abimelech, *“And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech”* (verse 23). The men of Shechem laid in ambush against the men of Abimelech passing through. Abimelech apparently had gone back to Ophrah.

Then came Gaal, a Canaanite from Hamor, the founder of the city, who led an open revolt against Abimelech. But the rebellion was easily put down by Abimelech. He razed the whole city and killed most of its helpless inhabitants in the fields, and sowed it with salt to insure that it would be years before the city could recover. The people then took refuge in the tower of Shechem, but Abimelech burned it down, killing all 1,000 people there.

Jotham's prophecy had been fulfilled. Because the people of Shechem acted treacherously against the house of Gideon, God sent a literal fire against them through Abimelech.

He is Destroyed by a Woman

Next, Abimelech vented his fury against another Shechemite village, Thebez. He conquered it, and was going to burn its tower as well. But as he and his men came near the door of the tower to burn it, an unnamed woman threw a millstone down to him, crushing his head. The proud “king” of Israel had met an ignominious end, not by a sword of a man, but by a stone of a woman. Do you recall a similar story earlier in the book? It was the woman Jael who killed the Canaanite general Sisera by pounding his head through with a tent peg.

The other prophesy of Jotham had come true, *“let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech”* (verse 20).

In the concluding two verses of Chapter 9, we read, *“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”* (Jgs 9:56-57). Vengeance is the LORD's! (Deu 32:35)

Dear Friends: What benefit can we as Christians today learn from this ancient story? First, we can see the tragic extent of the assimilation of Israel into the religion and culture of their pagan neighbors. In verse 55, after Abimelech was killed, we read, *“And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home.”* This means that most of Abimelech's men were Israelites. Even before they entered the Promised Land under Joshua, God had warned them not to be influenced by their pagan neighbors. In fact, they were to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and not to intermarry with them. If they did, they would later worship their neighbors' pagan gods. And this was exactly what happened to them.

Today, we see that many churches have virtually become the world. They worship like the world. The people who go to church, who claim to be Christians, think and behave just like the world does. They don't remember Jesus' warning that the world will hate them. They don't remember the Apostle John's command, *“Do not love the world or the things in the world... the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life”* (1 John 2:14-15). They don't remember Paul's words, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”* (Rom 12:2). Too many churches love to entertain young people with their worldly worship. Too many people go to churches with their itching ears to hear messages of self-esteem, self-help, and “your best life now,” and even diet plans and great sex with your partner. Too many churches go the way of being politically-correct, not wanting to offend anyone with the gospel.

Second, we also see the consequences of choosing a nation's leaders wrongly without discernment. Abimelech, and many of Israel's judges, kings, and even the Pharisees and high priests, ruined Israel, invoking God's wrath against them. And how many nations and empires were destroyed because of their own evil kings, beginning from the Pharaoh of Egypt, and the evil kings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome? Do you recall the evil medieval kings of Europe who were always at war against one another? How about Napoleon Bonaparte, the tsar of Russia, the evil Communists, and the wicked leaders of Middle Eastern and African nations today? And in just over two months, the people of America will choose its leader for the next 4-8 years. Whom do we choose? Do we choose a leader who will come closest to bringing peace, godliness, righteousness and justice, or one who would invoke God's fire of judgment?

What about choosing leaders in churches? In the previous judges we have studied, the oppressors were outside of God's covenant community. Today, we know of the ruin of megachurches such as the Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles and Mars Hill Church in Seattle because of their *own* leaders' greed for money, power and fame. We see all around us churches that have been destroyed by their corrupt, immoral, greedy pastors. We see many big denominations led to unbelief and apostasy by their own leaders. They're not all too different from Abimelech, who was partly an Israelite. They too, like Abimelech, actually hate the church, waging war against the church with their corruption, with the goal of destroying it.

But, as Paul warned, "*If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him*" (1 Cor 3:17). This was a fatal lesson for Abimelech and the Shechemites. It has been a painful lesson for Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. And it will be a hellishly painful lesson for ISIS and radical Muslims, and all those who want to destroy Christians today.

How does our church choose men who will teach and preach when the pastor is unavailable? We choose those who are like-minded, those who uphold the same doctrine, worship and practice as our church. Since we are a mission church of Trinity United Reformed Church in Visalia, we choose a pastor from a URC church, or from another denomination that are ecclesiastically related to the URC, such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. If not a pastor, we choose a seminary student who has been licensed to preach at another URC church. We do not just pick a so-and-so pastor from a so-and-so church whom we know. Why so strict? To protect the church from division or even destruction.

How must our church choose men who will be our elders and deacons? They must meet the Biblical qualifications. They must completely affirm the inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility of Scriptures. They must completely subscribe to our historic creeds and confessions—Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort—which are faithful summaries of Biblical teaching. They must affirm the historic doctrines that have been taught by faithful pastors and theologians for many centuries, the faith entrusted to them by the apostles. Only then will we be able to insure the faithfulness of our church to the Scriptures.

Finally, we again see the hand of God in this story. He initiated the downfall of Abimelech and the Shechemites by sending an evil spirit between them. Everything that happened afterwards was all the work of God, using both good and evil men. God often used wicked people to destroy wicked people. In the end, vengeance rested in the Lord, who exacted his revenge on a vengeful destroyer of Israel, and on his own wicked, rebellious people.

God is not mocked. Israel needed a king, but not a wicked king like Abimelech. God's people needed a Deliverer, but not like Israel's flawed judges like Gideon. Israel unrighteously demanded a king from God because they were jealous of their neighbors' kings. So they were given a wicked king, Saul. After Saul was removed, God anointed David as king of Israel. At the last, Jesus the Son of David came as the Christ who would deliver God's people from their sin through his sacrificial death and resurrection. He is now the King of Righteousness (Heb 1:8-9) who rules over his church on earth, awaiting that day when he would return to receive his eternal, heavenly kingdom.

Make sure you are part of the kingdom of Christ. How? By believing in him as your only Savior from sin and King of your life.