

The Book of Judges, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Abimelech's Bramble Kingship

Judges 9:1–57

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Judges 9 is a sustained study in the difference between authority that God grants and power that human beings seize. Abimelech is not raised up by God the way the judges were; he campaigns, he bribes, he hires reckless men, and he murders his way to a throne. The chapter is unflinching about where that road leads. It is also a careful account of God's righteous justice. Twice the text says God returned the evil of these men upon their own heads (9:56–57), and it frames their mutual destruction as the just repayment of innocent blood. We must teach this without slipping into error. God is righteous in repaying evil, and yet God is not the author of the evil; each man bore the guilt of his own sin (Ezekiel 18:20), and the violence they suffered was the violence they themselves chose. The evil spirit God sent (9:23) is God's just governance handing rebellious men over to the consequences of their own treachery, not God planting sin in an innocent heart.

What is finally at stake is the question of kingship itself. This chapter shows us a self-appointed bramble king who can only scratch and burn, who shelters no one and destroys everyone, and it leaves us aching for a different kind of King. That ache points forward. The kingdom Daniel saw, which God would set up and which shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44), was established when Jesus was raised and seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:30–36). Christ reigns now, over His church, ruling hearts in righteousness. He is the true King who was crowned by God rather than by his own hand, who lays down his life for his people rather than building his throne on their bodies. We must not turn this hope into a future earthly political throne; the King is already enthroned, and the question for every student is whether He reigns in them.

So the lesson aims squarely at the heart. It is easy to read Judges 9 as ancient history and shake our heads at Abimelech. The harder and more fruitful work is to recognize the bramble in our own grasping, our ambition that crowds out conscience, our pride that clings even when it is dying. The aim of this lesson is for the student to feel the folly and ruin of self-rule, to long for the true King, and to surrender some specific piece of self-rule to Christ. We want students to leave not merely informed about Abimelech but dethroned in some corner of their own hearts, glad to live under the reign of the King who rules in righteousness.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Judges 9:1–6, Abimelech persuades the men of Shechem to make him king and murders his seventy brothers on one stone. What does this opening reveal about the difference between authority that God gives and power that human beings seize for themselves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Judges 9 opens in stark contrast to chapter 8. Gideon had refused kingship, saying the Lord would rule over Israel (8:23). Now his son by a Shechemite concubine reaches for exactly what his father declined. Abimelech goes to his mother's relatives and frames a false choice: would you rather seventy men rule you, or one? He appeals to tribal loyalty (I am your bone and your flesh) rather than to any call from God. This is campaigning, not commissioning.

The men of Shechem fund him with seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith, their idol's temple. The detail matters. Abimelech's kingship is financed by idolatry, and idol-money buys idle and reckless men, the kind of followers a violent project requires. From the start this is a kingdom of false worship, hired violence, and human ambition, the opposite of the deliverer-judges God had been raising up.

With that crew Abimelech goes to Ophrah, his father's house, and murders seventy brothers on one stone. The phrase one stone presses the horror together; this is execution, not battle. Only Jotham, the youngest, escapes by hiding. Then the men of Shechem gather by the oak of the pillar and crown Abimelech king. A throne is built on a graveyard.

The opening teaches the central contrast of the chapter. Authority that comes from God is given to a servant for the good of others; power that men seize is taken from others for the good of self. Abimelech models the second in its rawest form, and the text wants us to see clearly which kind of rule it is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God gives authority; He is not pleased when men seize it by violence and bribery (compare Gideon's refusal, 8:23, and the later warning of 1 Samuel 8).
- Idolatry and bloodshed travel together here; false worship funds and fuels the crime.
- The murder of the seventy is named plainly as sin; the Bible records evil without endorsing it.
- Family loyalty is twisted into a weapon; Abimelech uses kinship to manipulate, not to serve.
- God's providence preserves a witness (Jotham) even amid great evil, a recurring pattern in Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Abimelech's appeal to kinship and his use of idol-money expose his real motives from the very first verses?
- Gideon refused a crown; his son murders for one. What does this tell us about how unaddressed desires can grow across a single generation?

- Where do we see the false choice (one strong ruler over many) used today to justify grasping for control?

Question 2

Student Question:

Abimelech leveraged his family connection (I am your bone and your flesh, 9:2) to gain a following. Where are you tempted to use relationships, loyalties, or your position to get what you want rather than to serve others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Abimelech's whole campaign rests on a relational claim: I am your bone and your flesh (9:2). He does not argue that he is qualified, righteous, or called. He argues that he is one of them. The bond of kinship, which God designed for love and loyalty, becomes the lever he pulls to gain power. This is a sobering reminder of how easily good gifts (family, friendship, position) can be bent toward selfish ends.

We do this in subtler ways. We lean on a friendship to get a favor we have no right to expect. We trade on our reputation in the church to push our preference. We use our role as parent, employer, or leader to get our way rather than to serve those under our care. The mechanics are the same as Abimelech's: a relationship that should be about giving becomes a tool for taking.

The question turns the spotlight inward. Most of us will never bribe a city or hire an army, but most of us have, at some point, used a relationship to get what we wanted. The chapter invites honest self-examination about the difference between influence used to serve and influence used to grasp.

Jesus shows the opposite pattern. The one who had every right to be served instead came to serve and to give His life (Mark 10:45). The way of the kingdom is to spend our relationships and position pouring out for others, not leveraging them to climb.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God-given relationships are for service and love, not for manipulation.
- Influence is a stewardship; it can be used to serve or abused to grasp.
- Self-examination is required; the line between persuasion and manipulation runs through our own motives.
- Jesus' servant leadership (Mark 10:42-45) is the standard against which we measure our use of position.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between rightly persuading someone and manipulating them through a relationship?
- Can you recall a time you used a friendship, role, or loyalty to get something you wanted? What did it cost?
- How would treating your relationships as a stewardship for others change the way you use your influence this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Jotham's fable (9:7–15), the olive, fig, and vine each refuse the crown because they are busy doing good and fruitful work, while only the empty bramble accepts it. What does this say about how God evaluates greatness compared to how the world measures it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jotham's fable is one of the oldest in the world and one of the sharpest in Scripture. The trees go looking for a king. They ask the olive tree, but the olive will not leave its rich oil, by which gods and men are honored, to sway over the trees. They ask the fig, which will not leave its sweetness and good fruit. They ask the vine, which will not leave the wine that cheers God and men. Each fruitful tree is too busy doing genuine good to want to rule.

Then they ask the bramble, the thornbush. The bramble has nothing to give, no oil, no fruit, no wine, only thorns that scratch and dry wood that burns. And the bramble alone says yes. Come, put your trust in my shadow, it says, though a bramble casts no shade worth trusting. The fable's logic is precise: the ones most fit to lead are content with fruitful labor, and the one most eager to rule is the one with nothing to offer.

The world measures greatness by who sits highest, who commands most, who is most visible. God measures greatness by faithfulness and fruit. Jesus made the same reversal explicit: whoever would be great among you must be your servant (Matthew 20:26). The olive, fig, and vine are great in God's eyes precisely because they keep producing good without grasping for a throne.

This is not a blanket condemnation of leadership; God appoints leaders and elders (Acts 20:28). The warning is against the bramble spirit, the craving to rule for the sake of ruling, in someone whose life produces nothing nourishing. True leaders are fruitful servants pressed into responsibility, not empty climbers grasping at status.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God measures greatness by faithfulness and fruit, not by position or visibility (Matthew 20:26–28).

- The most fit to lead are often the most reluctant to grasp; eagerness for power can itself be a warning sign.
- Leadership rightly exists (Acts 20:28); the fable condemns the bramble spirit, not godly oversight.
- Fruitful, hidden labor honors God even when it brings no title or recognition.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think the fruitful trees were all reluctant, while only the worthless bramble was eager?
- How does the world's measure of greatness differ from God's, and which one shapes your ambitions?
- What fruitful work are you doing right now that God sees, even though no one applauds it?

Question 4

Student Question:

The fruitful trees were content to keep giving their oil, sweetness, and wine without ruling over anyone. What good and fruitful work has God given you to do faithfully, even if it never brings you recognition or a title?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The olive, fig, and vine all give the same kind of answer: they will not abandon their fruitful work to wave over the other trees. Their oil, sweetness, and wine bless God and men. They have something better to do than rule, and they know it. Their contentment in fruitful labor is quietly heroic against the backdrop of Abimelech's grasping.

Most of the good God calls us to is unglamorous and unseen. The faithful parent, the quiet encourager, the diligent worker, the brother who shows up to set up chairs and pray with the discouraged, these are the olive, fig, and vine. They produce real nourishment for others, and they do it without a crown. God notices what no one else does (Matthew 6:4).

The question asks the student to name that work. It is easy to feel that our service does not count because it brings no title. The fable insists otherwise. The fruit is the point; the throne is not. A life of faithful, hidden fruitfulness is precisely what God honors.

There is a freedom here. If your worth before God is not measured by your position, you are released from the exhausting climb. You can pour out your oil and your sweetness gladly, because the One who matters most is watching, and He calls it good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful, unrecognized service is genuinely valuable in God's sight (Matthew 6:4; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

- Contentment in our calling guards us against the grasping that destroyed Abimelech.
- Worth before God is not measured by title or visibility, which frees us from the exhausting climb.
- Every believer has fruitful work to do; no one is exempt from serving.

Discussion Prompts

- What good and fruitful work has God given you that rarely gets noticed?
- How does knowing God sees your hidden service change the way you do it?
- What would it look like to be as content in your calling as the olive, fig, and vine were in theirs?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jotham warns that the bramble offers only false shelter and ends in fire (9:15, 19–20). How does the chapter show that grasping for power apart from God ultimately destroys both the one who grasps and those who follow him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The bramble's offer is a study in false promises. Come and take refuge in my shadow, it says, but a thornbush has no shade. It cannot shelter anyone. What it can do is burn, and so the bramble's invitation comes wrapped in a threat: if you will not trust me, let fire come out and devour even the cedars of Lebanon, the mightiest trees of all. Grasping power offers protection it cannot give and delivers destruction it can.

Jotham spells out the application. If the men of Shechem have acted in good faith with Abimelech, let them rejoice in him; but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour them, and fire from them to devour Abimelech (9:19–20). It is almost a prophecy, and the rest of the chapter is its fulfillment. The fire the bramble king kindles consumes both the followers and himself.

This is how grasping for power apart from God works. It promises shelter, significance, and security, and it cannot deliver any of them. What it actually produces is mutual destruction. Abimelech's reign was built on the murder of his brothers, held by fear, and it ended in flames and a shattered skull. The bramble always burns.

The lesson for us is to distrust the bramble's pitch wherever we meet it, including in our own hearts. The promise that one more grab for control will finally make us safe, significant, or settled is a lie. Real shelter is found only under the wings of God (Psalm 91:1–2), never in the thornbush of our own ambition.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grasping power promises shelter it cannot give and delivers destruction it can; the bramble burns.
- Jotham's words (9:19–20) function as a true warning that the chapter goes on to fulfill.
- Sin's promises are false advertising; it never delivers the security or significance it offers.
- True refuge is found in God alone (Psalm 91:1–2), not in our own grasping for control.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the bramble promise, and why can it never deliver?
- Where have you trusted a bramble (a grab for control or status) to give you security it could not provide?
- How does the chapter show that the fire a power-grasper kindles eventually consumes the grasper too?

Question 6

Student Question:

Abimelech's reign was built on bloodshed and held together by fear for three years before it collapsed (9:22–23). What are the warning signs in your own heart when ambition starts to crowd out conscience and conviction?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Abimelech ruled Israel three years (9:22). The number is short, and the text moves quickly, because a kingdom founded on blood has no stable foundation. There is no mention of justice administered, enemies defeated, or people protected. The only fruit of his reign is the suspicion and treachery that soon tear it apart. Power seized by violence must be held by violence, and that is an exhausting and finally impossible way to live.

The question asks us to watch our own hearts for the warning signs when ambition begins to crowd out conscience. For Abimelech the line was crossed long before the throne; it was crossed the moment he decided his advancement was worth his brothers' lives. For us the signs are usually quieter: a willingness to bend the truth, to use people, to silence the inner voice that says this is wrong, all in service of getting ahead.

Conscience is a gift, a God-given alarm. When ambition is healthy it serves love; when it becomes idolatrous it starts negotiating with conscience and then overruling it. The first time we tell ourselves the end justifies a small dishonesty, we are walking Abimelech's road, even if we never reach his crimes.

The remedy is to keep ambition under the lordship of Christ, to want His will more than our advancement, and to take seriously the warning signals when they come. A conscience kept tender by the Word and prayer is one of God's mercies, protecting us from becoming the thing we now despise in Abimelech.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A kingdom built on violence is inherently unstable; it bears no good fruit and cannot last.
- Conscience is a God-given gift; ignoring its warnings is a danger sign of idolatrous ambition.
- The line into great sin is usually crossed early, in small compromises, not all at once.
- Ambition is safe only under the lordship of Christ, where it serves love rather than self.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the text give Abimelech's reign so little space and so few accomplishments?
- What are the early warning signs in your own heart when ambition starts crowding out conscience?
- How can keeping your conscience tender through Scripture and prayer guard you from the road Abimelech walked?

Question 7

Student Question:

Judges 9:23–24 says God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem so that their violence would rebound on them. How do we understand God's righteous justice repaying bloodguilt without making God the author of their sin (compare Ezekiel 18:20)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Judges 9:23–24 is one of the harder verses in the book: God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem, so that the crime against Gideon's seventy sons might be avenged and their blood laid on Abimelech and on the men of Shechem who helped him. We must read this carefully and faithfully. The text presents God as the righteous Judge who repays bloodguilt, and it presents the means as a spirit of ill will that turned the conspirators against one another.

This is not God planting sin in innocent hearts. Abimelech and the Shechemites were already guilty; they had freely chosen murder and treachery. What God does in righteous judgment is hand them over to the consequences of their own wickedness, withdrawing restraint so that their mutual treachery does its work. Scripture elsewhere describes God giving rebellious people up to the very sins they have chosen (Romans 1:24–28). The evil is theirs; the just governance of it is God's.

This guards an important truth. Ezekiel 18:20 declares that the soul who sins shall die, and that each person bears the guilt of his own sin, not another's. God does not make men evil and then punish them for it. He is righteous. What He does here is ensure that planted evil does not go unanswered, that innocent blood does not cry out forever unheard. The justice is exact: the very men who shed blood together are turned against one another and destroyed.

For us this is both sobering and steadying. Sobering, because God genuinely judges sin and will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). Steadying, because it means evil never has the last word; the moral order of the universe is not indifferent. A holy God governs it, and He repays. We can leave vengeance in His righteous hands rather than taking it into our own (Romans 12:19).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is the righteous Judge who repays bloodguilt; innocent blood does not cry out unheard.
- God is not the author of sin; the Shechemites and Abimelech freely chose their own evil (Ezekiel 18:20).
- God's judgment here is to hand rebels over to the consequences of sins they already chose (compare Romans 1:24–28).
- Each person bears his own guilt; God does not make men evil and then condemn them for it.
- Because God repays justly, we are freed from taking vengeance ourselves (Romans 12:19; Galatians 6:7).

Discussion Prompts

- How can we affirm that God justly repaid this evil without making God the author of the Shechemites' sin?
- How does Ezekiel 18:20 help us read the evil spirit of 9:23 rightly?
- What comfort is there in knowing that injustice and bloodshed do not finally escape God's righteous judgment?

Question 8

Student Question:

Abimelech dies ingloriously when a woman drops a millstone on his head, and he begs his armor-bearer to finish him so no one will say a woman killed him (9:53–54). What does the pride that clings even to a dying man teach you about the sins you most need to watch in yourself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Abimelech's end is as inglorious as his rise was ruthless. Besieging the tower of Thebez, he presses too close, and a woman drops an upper millstone on his head and cracks his skull (9:53). Mortally wounded, his last concern is not repentance but reputation. He calls his armor-bearer and says, draw your sword and kill me, so men will not say of me, a woman killed him (9:54). Even with his life draining away, pride is in the driver's seat.

There is something terribly revealing in this. The sin that ruled Abimelech in life rules him in death. He climbed over his brothers' bodies because his pride demanded a throne; now he begs to be run through because his pride cannot bear the shame of how he is dying. The man never escapes himself. His whole story is the story of a heart that would not bow.

The question presses this home. What sin so rules us that it would cling to us even at the end? For most of us pride is a strong candidate, the deep refusal to be humbled, the constant management of how we appear, the inability to admit we were wrong. Abimelech is a warning portrait of pride followed all the way to the grave, image-management to the last breath.

The contrast with Christ could not be sharper. The true King did not grasp at honor; He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even to death on a cross, and therefore God exalted Him (Philippians 2:8–9). Abimelech clutched at status and died in shame; Jesus laid down His status and was raised in glory. The way up, in God's kingdom, is always down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sin that rules us in life tends to rule us at the end; pride dies hard and clings even to the dying.
- Abimelech's concern with reputation over repentance exposes a heart that never bowed to God.
- Self-examination is the point; we must name the sins that most need watching in ourselves.
- Christ's self-humbling (Philippians 2:8–9) is the exact reverse of Abimelech's pride and shows the way of the kingdom.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Abimelech's dying request reveal about what truly ruled his heart?
- Which sin, if you are honest, would cling to you even at the end, and what would it take to put it to death now?
- How does Christ's downward path of humility expose and answer the pride we see in Abimelech?

Question 9

Student Question:

Judges 9:56–57 declares that God returned the evil of Abimelech and all the evil of the men of Shechem on their own heads. Taking the whole chapter together, what does this account teach us about God's righteous justice, and about the deep human need it exposes for a true and righteous King, fulfilled in Christ who reigns now over His church and rules hearts in righteousness rather than from a future earthly throne?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter closes with a verdict that ties the whole story together. Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; and all the wickedness of the men of Shechem God returned upon their heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham (9:56–57). Nothing was forgotten. The blood of the seventy, the treachery of Shechem, the bramble's threat of fire, all of it came home. God's justice is exact,

patient, and certain. He repays evil, and He does so righteously, each receiving the fruit of his own deeds (Galatians 6:7–8).

But the chapter does more than satisfy our sense of justice. It opens a wound it cannot heal. Israel has tasted what self-appointed kingship produces, a bramble that scratches and burns, a throne built on graves, a reign that collapses in flames. The whole account leaves us aching for a different kind of king, one who is not crowned by his own hand or his own violence, one who shelters rather than scorches, one who rules in righteousness. Judges keeps repeating that in those days there was no king in Israel, and the longing grows with every chapter.

That longing is answered in Christ, and we must answer it carefully and reverently. The kingdom God promised, which would never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44), was established when Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand. Peter declares it plainly at Pentecost: God has made Him both Lord and Christ, enthroned to reign (Acts 2:30–36). Christ is King now. He reigns over His church and rules the hearts of His people in righteousness. This is not a throne deferred to some future earthly political reign; the King is already crowned and already reigning.

See the contrast in full. Abimelech seized a crown; Christ was given one by the Father. Abimelech built his throne on his brothers' blood; Christ shed His own blood for His brethren. Abimelech could only burn; Christ shelters all who take refuge in Him. Abimelech's reign collapsed in three years; of Christ's kingdom there shall be no end. The bramble king is the dark photographic negative against which the true King shines.

So the chapter's heaviest lesson is twofold. First, God's justice is real and exact; He repays evil and will not be mocked. Second, the human heart was made to be ruled, not by a bramble of its own making, and not by self, but by the true and righteous King. The deepest answer to Abimelech is not better politics but the reign of Christ over the church and over every heart that bows to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's justice is exact and certain; He repaid every part of this evil, forgetting nothing (9:56–57; Galatians 6:7–8).
- The chapter exposes the human need for a true and righteous King, a need self-rule can never satisfy.
- The promised kingdom that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44) was established at Christ's resurrection and enthronement (Acts 2:30–36).
- Christ reigns now over His church and rules hearts in righteousness; this is a present reign, not a future earthly political throne.
- Abimelech the bramble king is the dark contrast that makes the true King's righteousness and self-giving shine all the brighter.
- The deepest remedy for the human condition is not better government but submission to the reign of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How do verses 56–57 show that God's justice is both exact and patient, leaving no evil finally unanswered?
- In what specific ways is Abimelech the opposite of Christ the true King, and what does that contrast stir in you?
- What does it mean, practically, that Christ reigns now over His church and over your heart, rather than waiting to reign from a future earthly throne?

Question 10

Student Question:

Abimelech crowned himself; the true King was crowned by God and rules in righteousness. Name one specific way Jesus the true King is right now dethroning some piece of self-rule in your life, and what your next obedient step toward Him looks like.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This whole chapter has been about a man who crowned himself, and a people who let him. The closing question turns the camera around on us. Abimelech grasped a throne; the true King was crowned by God and rules in righteousness. The question is not whether someone reigns in your life; someone always does. The only question is whether it is self or Christ.

Self-rule is subtle. It rarely announces itself with murder and bribery. It shows up as the decision we will not bring to God in prayer, the area of life we have quietly marked off-limits, the resentment we nurse, the plan we cling to whatever God says, the habit we defend. Each of these is a small throne where self still sits, a corner of the heart Christ has not yet been allowed to rule.

The good news is that the true King is patient and persistent. Right now, by His Word and His Spirit, Christ is at work to dethrone self in His people and reign more fully. The question asks the student to name one specific place where that is happening, one piece of self-rule He is currently challenging, and to take the next obedient step. This is where formation becomes concrete. Repentance is not a vague wish but a specific surrender.

To bow to this King is not loss; it is rescue. Abimelech ruled himself all the way to a millstone and a shameful death. Christ rules His people toward life, peace, and righteousness. Surrendering a piece of self-rule to Him is exchanging a bramble for the true King, the thornbush for the shelter of His wings. The student who can name one such surrender and take one obedient step has heard the chapter rightly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Someone always reigns in a life; the real question is whether it is self or Christ.

- Self-rule is usually subtle, hiding in off-limits areas, cherished plans, and defended habits.
- Christ the true King is actively dethroning self in His people now, by His Word and Spirit.
- Genuine repentance is specific; it names a particular surrender and takes a concrete next step.
- Bowing to Christ's reign is rescue, not loss; it exchanges the bramble of self-rule for the true King's shelter.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is self still sitting on a throne in your life that belongs to Christ alone?
- Name one specific way Jesus the true King is challenging some piece of your self-rule right now.
- What is the next concrete, obedient step you will take this week to let Him reign there?