

The Book of Judges

Lesson 7: Abimelech's Bramble Kingship -- Judges 9:1-57

Picture a young man with a grievance and a plan. Abimelech is the son of Gideon, but not by Gideon's wife; he is the son of a concubine in Shechem, and he knows it. He has watched his seventy half-brothers and thought about what their lives might mean for him. So he goes to his mother's relatives in Shechem and whispers a question into their ears: would you rather be ruled by seventy men, or by one? And by the way, remember, I am your bone and your flesh. It is the oldest pitch in the world, and it works. They give him silver from the temple of their idol, and with that silver he hires worthless and reckless men to follow him. You can almost feel the story tightening like a noose.

What happens next is the kind of thing you wish were not in the Bible, except that it is in the Bible precisely so we will not pretend such things never happen. Abimelech goes to his father's house at Ophrah and murders his brothers, seventy men, on one stone. One stone. The phrase is meant to make you flinch. Only the youngest, Jotham, escapes, because he hid himself. A father once tore down an altar to a false god, and now his own son builds a throne on the bodies of his sons. Sin, when it is left to grow, does not stay small. It grafts itself onto the next generation and bears a darker fruit.

Then comes one of the strangest sermons in all of Scripture. Jotham, the survivor, climbs to the top of Mount Gerizim and shouts down a fable to the men of Shechem. The trees, he says, once went out to anoint a king over them. They asked the olive tree, then the fig, then the vine, and each useful tree refused, because each had real work to do, oil and sweetness and wine to give. Only the bramble, the thornbush that produces nothing and scratches everyone, said yes. Come, put your trust in my shadow, the bramble said, and if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars. A bramble has no shade and cannot shelter anyone, but it can burn. Jotham was telling Shechem exactly what kind of king they had crowned.

You and I do not crown brambles in our own land, but we are tempted to crown them in our own hearts. Every time we grasp for control we did not earn, every time we climb over people to get where we want to be, every time we tell ourselves that one ruler, me, would be so much better than sharing the throne with God, we are repeating Abimelech's pitch in miniature. This chapter is hard, and it is bloody, and it does not end well for anyone who reached for power apart from God. But it is also a chapter that makes us ache for a different kind of king, a true and righteous one, and that ache is exactly what God intends us to feel. Read this story carefully, and let it teach you to long for the King who reigns in righteousness.

Group Discussion: Jotham's fable shows the useful trees declining the crown while only the worthless bramble grasps it. What does the willingness of the bramble, and the reluctance of

the fruitful trees, teach us about the kind of person who tends to chase power, and the kind of person God actually uses?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own life right now are you tempted to grasp for control that is not yours to take, whether at work, in your family, in your church, or in your own plans, and what would it look like to release that grip and let God reign there instead?

Read Judges 9:1-57

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Samuel 8:4–9, Israel's later demand for a king like the nations and the Lord's warning about grasping kingship; 2 Samuel 3:1, 39 and 1 Kings 2:32–33, bloodguilt returning on the head of the one who shed innocent blood; Proverbs 16:18 and Proverbs 29:23, pride going before destruction and a man's pride bringing him low; Galatians 6:7–8, a man reaps whatever he sows; Acts 2:30–36 and Daniel 2:44, the true King enthroned at God's right hand whose kingdom is established now and shall never be destroyed

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