

Judges

Chapter 9

Abimelech's Conspiracy

Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, 2 "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." 3 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, "He is our brother." 4 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. 5 And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. 6 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. 7 When it was told to Jotham, 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. 8 The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' 9 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?' 10 And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' 11 But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' 12 And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' 13 But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?' 14 Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' 15 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, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.' 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— 17 for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, 18 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— 19 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. 20 But if not, 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." 21 And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.

9:1–57 The stories of Gideon and Abimelech form the literary center of Judges (see Introduction: Literary Features). Abimelech, who tried to set himself up like a Canaanite city king with the help of Baal (v. 4), stands in sharp contrast to his father Gideon (Jerub-Baal), who had attacked Baal worship and insisted that the Lord ruled over Israel. Abimelech attempted this Canaanite revival in the very place where Joshua had earlier reaffirmed Israel's allegiance to the Lord (Jos 24:14–27). In every respect Abimelech was the antithesis of the Lord's appointed judges. (CSB)

Ch 9 Abimelech's story illustrates a tragically flawed attempt at kingship during the judges era. He acted willfully throughout. The lack of tribal designations in ch 9 probably reflects the weak association these people had with Israel. Archaeology confirms that Israelites and Canaanites lived alongside one another for centuries at Shechem. (TLSB)

9:1 *Abimelech*. This oppressor of Israel was half-Israelite, half-Canaanite. (TLSB)

Shechem. Ruins dating from the Canaanite era give evidence of a sacred area, probably to be associated with the temple of Baal-Berith or El-Berith (vv. 4, 46). Archaeological evidence, which is compatible with the destruction of Shechem by Abimelech, indicates that its sacred area was used only for secular purposes after this time. (CSB)

9:2 *leaders*. The singular form of the Hebrew for this word is *ba'al*. It means “lord” or “owner” and probably refers here to the aristocracy or landowners of the city. (CSB)

bone and your flesh. Being half-Canaanite, Abimelech intimated that it was in their best interest to make him king rather than be under the rule of Gideon’s 70 sons. The following he gathered was based on this relationship and became a threat to the people of Israel. (CSB)

Abimelech must have felt monarchy was inevitable and that the people’s only choice concerned who their monarch would be. (TLSB)

9:4 *seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith*. Cf 8:33. Ancient temples also served as depositories for personal and government money. (TLSB)

out of the house of Baal. Ancient temples served as depositories for personal and civic funds. The payments of vows and penalties, as well as gifts, were also part of the temple treasury. (CSB)

reckless fellows. Use of mercenaries to accomplish political or military goals was common in ancient times. Others who used them are Jephthah (11:3), David (1Sa 22:1–2), Absalom (2Sa 15:1), Adonijah (1Ki 1:5), Rezon (1Ki 11:23–24) and Jeroboam (2Ch 13:6–7). (CSB)

The Israelite majority were greatly influenced by Canaanite religion and culture. (TLSB)

9:5 *on one stone*. Abimelech’s 70 brothers were slaughtered like sacrificial animals (see 13:19–20; 1Sa 14:33–34). In effect he inaugurated his kingship by using his Israelite half brothers as his coronation sacrifices (see 2Sa 15:10, 12; 1Ki 1:5, 9; 3:4). (CSB)

He killed his brothers in a ritual execution. (TLSB)

9:6 *Beth Millo*. “Millo” is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning “to fill” and probably refers to the earthen fill used to erect a platform on which walls and other large structures were built. Beth Millo may be identical to the “stronghold” of v. 46. (CSB)

“House of filling-in,” referring to earthen fill or rubble used to build a platform for walls and other structures. (TLSB)

made Abimelech king. Probably a local ruler for the people around Shechem. (TLSB)

pillar. A large stone (“stela”) set up as a monument (cf Is 29:3, where the term is used in a military context). (TLSB)

9:7 *top*. Probably a ledge that overlooked the city. (CSB)

God may listen to you. Jotham hoped to persuade people that Abimelech was a poor choice to be their king. If they would reject Abimelech, God would answer their prayers. Jotham spoke as a prophet might speak, but he is never called a prophet. (TLSB)

9:8 *trees once went out.* Fables of this type, in which inanimate objects speak and act, were popular among Eastern peoples of that time (see 2Ki 14:9). (CSB)

9:8–15 Jotham’s parable features plants that can speak, representing various rulers; first parable recorded in Scripture. Jotham’s story did not oppose kingship but rejected Abimelech as king. The olive tree, fig tree, and vine all produced abundant food in the land, but the bramble was worthless and its thorns were harmful. The parable also voiced a warning to the Shechemites. If they had not made their choice in good faith, and if their choice did not give proper recognition to Abimelech’s father and his family, the “bramble” would stir a fire that would devour their beautiful “cedars.” (TLSB)

9:9–13 The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine were all plants that produced fruit of great importance to the people of the Near East. (CSB)

9:14 *bramble.* Probably the well-known buckthorn, a scraggly bush common in the hills of Palestine and a constant menace to farming. It produced nothing of value and was an apt figure for Abimelech. (CSB)

9:15 *shade.* Ironically, in offering shade to the trees, the thornbush symbolized the traditional role of kings as protectors of their subjects (see Isa 30:2–3; 32:1–2; La 4:20; Da 4:12). (CSB)

cedars of Lebanon. The most valuable of Near Eastern trees, here symbolic of the leading men of Shechem (see v. 20). (CSB)

9:16 *good faith and integrity.* Jotham’s conclusion is sarcastic. Because neither Abimelech nor the Shechemites had acted in good faith and integrity, they could each rejoice in the other. (TLSB)

9:18 *female servant.* Concubine. (TLSB)

9:20 *fire come out ... and devour.* A grim prediction that Abimelech and the people of Shechem would destroy each other. Fire spreads rapidly through bramble bushes and brings about swift destruction (see Ex 22:6; Isa 9:18). (CSB)

A curse, anticipating that the conspirators would destroy one another. (TLSB)

9:21 *Beer.* A very common name, meaning “a well.” (CSB)

Most likely in Moab. (TLSB)

9:1–21 Abimelech, Gideon’s illegitimate son, brutally murders his 70 brothers and has himself appointed king in Shechem. One brother, however, manages to escape and in a parable warns that Abimelech is unworthy of the office. Today, the Lord calls us to act with integrity when we choose our leaders or when we speak up against them. Through God’s Word we learn genuine integrity, which the Holy Spirit produces in sinners through the Word of Christ, our Savior. • Heavenly Father, forgive our lack of integrity and failure to follow Your Word. Make us bold to speak the truth with integrity from You. Amen. (TLSB)

The Downfall of Abimelech

22 Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. 23 And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, 24 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. 25 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. 26 And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives, and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. 27 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. 28 And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? 29 Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say[a] to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out.'" 30 When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. 31 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. 32 Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. 33 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." 34 So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. 35 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. 36 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." 37 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." 38 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." 39 And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. 40 And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. 41 And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem. 42 On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. 43 He took his people and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. And he looked and saw the people coming out of the city. So he rose against them and killed them. 44 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. 45 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 and sowed it with salt.

46 When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. 47 Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. 48 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 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." 49 So every one of the people cut down his bundle 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.

50 Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. **51** 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. **52** And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. **53** And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. **54** 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.'" And his young man thrust him through, and he died. **55** And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. **56** Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. **57** 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.

9:22 *ruled.* During his three years as ruler in the central region of Israel, Abimelech exploited Israel and did not rule for people's benefit. (TLSB)

Israel. Those Israelites who recognized Abimelech's authority, mainly in the vicinity of Shechem. (CSB)

9:23 *evil spirit.* Perhaps a spirit of distrust and bitterness. The Hebrew for "spirit" is often used to describe an attitude or disposition. (CSB)

The Lord allows Satan and his evil angels to inspire an attitude of distrust and bitterness. (TLSB)

dealt treacherously. The one who founded his kingdom by treachery is himself undone by treachery. (CSB)

The Shechemites' true character became obvious. Their unhappiness with Abimelech may have arisen because Abimelech did not reside in their city (cf v 26; 41), and they had not benefited from his kingship. (TLSB)

9:25 *ambush against him on the mountaintops.* Shechem lay on the most important trade route through the central hill country of Canaan, where most Israelites dwelt. People expected a king to collect taxes from passing merchants and in return provide the merchants safe travel. The robbers stole Abimelech's profit and his reputation. (TLSB)

9:26 *Gaal.* Another character entered the drama and won the confidence of the disgruntled Shechemites. Just as they had conspired with Abimelech against their rightful rulers, so they conspired with Gaal against Abimelech. (TLSB)

put their confidence in him. Just as the fickle population had followed Abimelech, so they are now swayed by the deceptive proposals of Gaal. (CSB)

9:27 *gathered the grapes.* Harvested in Aug and Sept. (TLSB)

held a festival. The vintage harvest was one of the most joyous times of the year (see Isa 16:9–10; Jer 25:30), but festivals and celebrations held at pagan temples often degenerated into debauched drinking affairs. (CSB)

Harvest festivals could disintegrate into debauchery, particularly when devoted to pagan gods. (TLSB)

house of their god. Cf 8:33. Temples were equipped with kitchens and banquet halls. (TLSB)

reviled Abimelech. As today, people enjoyed complaining about their government. (TLSB)

9:28 *son of Jerubbaal.* Baal worshipers complained about Abimelech, whose father, Gideon, had torn down Baal's altar (6:25–32) and reestablished worship of Yahweh. (TLSB)

Hamor. The Hivite ruler who had founded the city of Shechem (Ge 33:19; 34:2; Jos 24:32). (CSB)

Canaanite prince (Hivite; see p 345) who founded Shechem (Gn 33:19). (TLSB)

9:29 *under my hand!* Similar to the later would-be king Absalom, who stole the hearts of the people (cf 2Sm 15–18). (TLSB)

9:30–31 In Shechem, Zebul was angered by Gaal's insurrection and, true to his loyalties, warned Abimelech. (TLSB)

9:32–33 *ambush.* Zebul proposed that Abimelech's men attack the hungover followers of Gaal (cf v 27) at sunrise. (TLSB)

9:34 *four companies.* Smaller segments meant less chance of detection. Also, attack from several directions was good strategy. (CSB)

Four smaller segments instead of one large mass of troops would decrease the chance of detection and cause the attack to come from several directions. (TLSB)

9:36 Zebul could be treacherous, as his misinformation shows. (TLSB)

9:37 *Diviners Oak.* Probably a sacred tree in some way related to the temple of Baal-Berith. (CSB)

Large trees served as gathering points and as places of superstitious devotion. A diviner used interpretive methods to discern the will of the gods (e.g., reading signs in nature). Gaal's vision was likely distorted from the previous night's revelry (cf v 27). (TLSB)

9:38 *Where is your mouth now.* In panic, he ceased to be mouthy and boastful. (TLSB)

9:40 *fell ... up to the entrance.* Disastrous retreat to the city. (TLSB)

9:41 *lived.* Lit, "sat down." (TLSB)

Arumah. Abimelech's encampment. Zebul pressed the engagement. (TLSB)

9:42–43 Not satisfied with Gaal's defeat, Abimelech attacked the unsuspecting Shechemites on their way out to their fields, because they had supported his enemy. Jotham's parable (v 15) had come true: the "bramble" had brought "fire" to the city. (TLSB)

9:44–45 Abimelech's attack blocked the people's retreat to safety. (TLSB)

9:45 *sowed it with salt.* To condemn it to perpetual barrenness and desolation (see Dt 29:23; Ps 107:33–34; Jer 17:6; Zep 2:9). (CSB)

Plants could not grow in salt, so the land became an unproductive wilderness. The Romans did this to Carthage in 146 BC. (TLSB)

9:46 leaders. Lit, “lords,” the aristocrats of Shechem (cf v 6). (TLSB)

Tower. Taller fortress outside the city wall. Perhaps the “millo” (v 6). This tower may have been the Baal-berith temple (v 4). Communities built special fortifications because city walls could easily be breached. Such towers were squat-shaped piles of stone and debris (not the tall, hollow spires of later architecture). Archaeologists discovered a square base of unworked stones for such a tower at Giloh. (TLSB)

stronghold. Probably the Beth Millo of v. 6. (CSB)

El-Berith. Baal-Berith Lit, “god of the covenant.” Previously called Baal-berith (8:33; 9:4). Hbr *’el* could be used interchangeably with *baal*, “lord.” (TLSB)

9:48 *Mount Zalmon ... brushwood.* The high ground was still wooded. (TLSB)

9:49 *set the stronghold on fire.* In fulfillment of Jotham’s curse (v. 20). (CSB)

The heat may have expanded the stones of the tower, causing them to burst or fall from the wall. Smoke would have smothered the people. (TLSB)

9:50 *Thebez.* Usually identified as modern Tubas, 9 mi NE of Shechem, though recent scholarship suggests Tell el-Farah, 6 mi from Shechem. (CSB)

9:51 Apparently the town was loyal to Gaal. (TLSB)

strong tower. Probably located along the city’s edge, perhaps even constructed on the city wall. From the tower, defenders could deploy rocks, arrows, spears, or boiling water or oil on attackers below. Cf Pr 18:10. (TLSB)

9:52 Same strategy as in vv 48–49, but against a better fortress (“strong,” v 51). (TLSB)

9:53 *woman.* While the men used bows, arrows and spears, women helped to defend the tower by dropping heavy stones on those who came near it. (CSB)

upper millstone. The upper, revolving stone of a mill was circular, with a hole in the center. Grinding grain was women’s work (see Ex 11:5), usually considered too lowly for men to perform (see 16:21). Abimelech was killed by a woman using a domestic implement (see also 4:21). (CSB)

The “rider” stone rolled along a track carved in a larger lower stone. Descriptions of its size and shape vary: perhaps 1–1½ ft wide, 3–5 in thick, either circular or loaf-shaped. It was small enough to be used by one person. Milling grain was woman’s work. (TLSB)

9:54 *armor-bearer.* A military leader usually had a young man carry his shield and spear (see 1Sa 14:6; 31:4). (CSB)

A warrior’s apprentice, who maintained and bore the equipment. (TLSB)

A woman killed him. It was considered a disgrace for a soldier to die at the hands of a woman. Abimelech’s shameful death was long remembered (2Sa 11:21). (CSB)

Proud to the end, Abimelech tried to make the circumstances of his death appear more heroic. 3,200 years later, readers still learn that Abimelech was killed by a woman. Cf 5:26. (TLSB)

9:56 *God returned.* God was in control of the events. As Israel's true King, he brought Abimelech's wickedness to a quick and shameful end. (CSB)

He who by a stone once overcame (v 18) was likewise by a stone overcome (v 53). God avenged the blood of His servant Gideon. (TLSB)

9:57 *curse of Jotham.* Jotham's curse was fulfilled about the people of Shechem just as it was about Abimelech. (TLSB)

9:22–57 The first attempt at kingship in Israel fails miserably, not because monarchy is an unacceptable form of government but because Abimelech is an unworthy candidate. How frequently rulers exploit people rather than seeing leadership as an opportunity for service! Luther once said that a wise prince was a rare bird; every form of government requires leaders of integrity. How different a leader is our Lord Jesus, who maintained His integrity. Rather than exploit us, He sacrificed Himself for us. • Lord God, ruler of the nations, bless our land with wise and godly leaders. Amen. (TLSB)