

Judges 8:28-9:57
Abimelech

Introduction

1. Over the last few weeks we've studied the historical account of God delivering Israel from the Midianites through the hand of Gideon and his 300 man army
2. God used him to usher in another lengthy time of peace (8:28): **"So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon."**
3. We saw both the good and the bad (if you will) in Gideon
 - a. He was the faithful servant used by God to deliver his people from their enemies
 - b. He was imperfect and his sin had dire consequences
 - 1) His vindictiveness led to the torture and murder of his fellow countrymen
 - 2) In verse 27 we learned that to celebrate the victory, Gideon collected almost 45 pounds of gold along with other royal items (i.e. crescent ornaments, pendants, the kings' purple robes) and fashioned them into an idol
 - 3) He then setup the idol in his home town of Ophrah where it became a snare to him and his household, and led all Israel to **"play the harlot with it there"**
4. Today we will see some additional consequences to Gideon's sin

A. Gideon's mixed legacy (29-35)

1. In spite of Gideon's refusal to be crowned king (v. 8:23), he appeared to have lived as a king:
 - a. He had a harem: **"for he had many wives"**:
 - 1) while the text doesn't tell us how many, there were likely a dozen or more simply based on the number of children he had
 - 2) Harem building was prohibited in Deuteronomy 17:17
 - b. He had AT LEAST 71 children (30): **"seventy sons"** plus Abimelech
 - 1) Only the number of sons is mentioned
 - 2) He likely had daughters as well (not mentioned)
 - 3) These were **"direct descendants"** so we know they were his own offspring (not grandchildren, etc.)
 - 4) NOTE: the number 70 in the Bible often reflects royalty, dynasty, rulership, etc. (Block, p. 303) and this may have been the author's way of identifying a family dynasty in Gideon
 - c. He also had a concubine (31):
 - 1) She was a Canaanite from Shechem which was in direct violation of the Law (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)
 - 2) He fathered a son by her and gave him a Canaanite name: Abimelech—there have been three primary proposals for the meaning of his name:
 - a) **"The King (divine) is my father"**: a possible reference to YHWY, though this is not widely supported by scholars

- b) **“The King (Gideon) is my father”**: more widely accepted, and if so is further evidence that Gideon ruled Israel like a king
 - c) **“Melek is my father”**: Melek being a Canaanite deity—quite likely considering Gideon’s idol worship and the boy’s Canaanite mother
2. It also appears, based on Abimelech’s comments in 9:2, that Gideon’s sons acted as rulers over part(s) of Israel (in spite of his objection to this in 8:23)
 3. After his death, we learn that Israel slid further into idol worship, but also refused to **“show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.”** (this is a reference to the rebellion of Shechem under Abimelech later)
 4. One last note that may indicate how the author viewed Gideon: every time the author refers to Gideon from this point on (chapter 9 and 1 Samuel 12:11) he uses only his Canaanite name, Jerubbaal.
 5. So, we have this mixed legacy of Gideon, doing both good and bad
 6. Unfortunately, the impact or consequences of Gideon’s choices don’t end with his death—they directly impacted Israel’s future

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| B. The rise of Abimelech (9:1-6) |
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1. After his death, Gideon’s son by his concubine conspires to take over Israel (likely Shechem, Penuel and Ophrah) as king (1-6)
 - a. He convinces the relatives on his mother’s side to campaign for his wresting control over Shechem away from Gideon’s sons and making him king (1-2)
 - b. They, in turn, convince the inhabitants of Shechem to make Abimelech king (3)
 - c. He hires thugs (financed by the leaders in Shechem), travels to Ophrah and executes 69 of Gideon’s sons (4-5)
 - 1) He is paid 70 shekels of silver to kill seventy men...a shekel a piece (which was nothing—even a slave was valued at 30 to 50 shekels according to Leviticus 27:3-7)
 - 2) He executes Gideon’s sons execution style one-by-one (**“on one stone”**)
 - d. The people of Shechem make Abimelech king (6)
2. Jotham, Gideon’s youngest son, escapes and issues a warning and prophecy against Abimelech and Shechem (7-21):
 - a. His name means “The LORD is perfect (or honest)”
 - b. He addresses Abimelech and Shechem in a fable (a moral lesson taught through a story):
 - 1) The trees (symbolizing Shechem) approach four plants to rule over them (8-13)
 - 2) The first three—all noble and highly valued--refuse:
 - a) Olive tree (8-9)
 - b) Fig tree (10-11)
 - c) Grape vine (12-13)
 - 3) The fourth--worthless bramble—accepts the offer but with a warning (14-15):
 - a) Bramble was basically a rough tangled thorny shrub with little value.
 - b) Notice the irony here—Gideon (Abimelech’s father) tortured his fellow Israelites with thorns and thistles

- c) Yet, even so, it warns the trees: **“If in truth [i.e. integrity] you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.”**
- c. Jotham reveals the meaning/interpretation of the fable (16-21):
 - 1) If the people of Shechem have made Abimelech king in truth (i.e. integrity) they can rejoice (16-19)
 - 2) If not, Abimelech will destroy Shechem and Shechem will destroy Abimelech (20-21)

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| C. The Fall of Abimelech (22-57) |
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1. Just as Jotham had warned, Abimelech’s reign begins to crumble almost as quickly as it began (22): **“Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years.”**
2. God causes strife between Abimelech and the people of Shechem (22-25):
 - a. He sends an **“evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem”** (i.e. evil in the sense of divisive, not moral evil)
 - b. As a result, the men of Shechem turn against Abimelech (23 & 25): **“and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,”** and **“set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who might pass by them along the road; and it was told to Abimelech.”**
 - c. God’s purpose is spelled out by the author (24): **“so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood might be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers.”**
 - 1) Judgment against Abimelech for murdering Gideon’s sons
 - 2) Judgment against Shechem for enabling Abimelech
3. God raises up Gaal to oppose Abimelech (26-41):
 - a. Gaal moved into Shechem with his relatives (26)
 - b. Shechem accepts and rejoices over Gaal (26b-27)
 - c. Gaal campaigns to become their king in place of Abimelech (28-29)
 - 1) He labels Abimelech an outsider—the son of an Israelite, Gideon (28a)
 - 2) He calls on them to serve a descendent of Hamon, the Father and founder of Shechem
 - 3) He promises to drive out Abimelech if he becomes king (29)
 - d. However, Zebul, Abimelech’s lieutenant in Shechem, warns him of the plot and together they defeat Gaal (30-41)
4. In fulfillment of Jotham’s prophesy, Abimelech destroys Shechem and kills the inhabitants (42-49):
 - a. The people of Shechem come out to battle Abimelech but they are defeated (42-45)
 - b. He then captures and destroys the city (45)
 - c. Finally, he burns down the defensive tower and kills the leaders of Shechem (46-49)
5. Also in fulfillment of Jotham’s prophesy, Abimelech is killed (50-55):
 - a. He moves on to Thebez and captures it (50)—Thebez was approximately 13 miles north of Shechem and likely conspired with them
 - b. The leaders and people lock themselves in the defensive tower (51)

- c. When Abimelech attempts to set fire to the tower, a woman drops a millstone on his head and mortally wounds him (52-53)
- d. He then calls on his sword bearer to finish him off to avoid the shame of being killed by a woman (54)

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| Conclusion |
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1. In commentaries and the like, Abimelech is often referred to as the sixth judge
2. However, unlike those before him in the book of judges, Abimelech is never referred to as a judge or deliverer for Israel
 - a. Instead, he is referred to as someone who acted as a prince or ruler over Israel (Hebrew sarar "he ruled" in 9:22)
 - b. His leadership was born out of selfish pride and self-promotion, and acquired through brutal violence
 - c. There is nothing in his life, or this narrative, to emulate
3. So, what can we learn from this account?
 - a. We are initially reminded of the pitfalls Gideon faced after rescuing Israel from its enemies, and the consequences they brought to Israel
 - 1) What role did Gideon's idolatry play?
 - 2) Would there have been a conflict had he not built a harem and fathered a dynasty of 70 sons who then ruled over Israel?
 - 3) Would his sons have not lived had he not fathered a child with a Canaanite woman?
 - 4) This reminds us not only of the pitfalls of failed leadership, but that there are consequences when we live our lives in disregard of the LORD's commands
 - b. Second, we are reminded of God's sovereign grace as He once again delivers Israel:
 - 1) This time, He rescued them from internal conflict and civil war, rather than an external enemy
 - 2) He acts on Israel's behalf in spite of the fact that there was no cry for help
 - 3) Everything about the Abimelech narrative indicates that God is in control and doing what is best for His people, even when they don't realize they need help
 - 4) Are we not like that at times?
 - 5) Do we sometimes fail to recognize the danger or difficulty we are in due to our own behavior or disregard of His commands?
 - 6) Does He not intervene in our lives at times to protect or deliver us from our own bad decisions and choices?