

### The Book of Judges

#### Lesson 15 - Chapter 9

This week we will begin to explore Judges chapter 9, the story of a fellow called Avimelech, one of Gideon's 71 sons. Like so much of Judges chapter 9 it is just example after example, lesson after lesson, and application after application of the God-principles that we have learned in our extensive study of the Torah. It shows us what happens when those principles are followed faithfully, and what happens when they are abandoned.

Before we do, however, I want to re-read the final 6 verses of Judges 8 because it is the preface for what we will study today.

#### **RE-READ JUDGES 8:30 – end**

Gideon ruled as a legitimate Judge (Shophet) of Israel for 40 years. He was God appointed, God anointed, and performed in the typical way of a Judge: he was first a deliverer of some portion of Israel from the hand of an oppressor and then he ruled for a time.

As was also typical, quickly after each Judge died from old age the people of Israel would harden their hearts and revert to idolatry. Usually each cycle explains that the people forgot or abandoned Yehoveh, their God, despite the wonderful and fully visible things He did for them. Here it adds that the people showed no kindness to the descendants of Gideon (called Yeruba'al, meaning the Ba'al fighter). In Hebrew it says that the people offered no **chesed**, which in this context carries with it the concept of covenant loyalty.

**Chesed** in Hebrew culture then and today means acts of charity, mercy, and kindness; it also tilts towards all these acts being done out of a sense of faithfulness to God and (to a lesser degree) loyalty to a person who merits such loyalty. We know that while Gideon had officially and publically rejected kingship over the people, yet in many ways he lived and behaved and in some ways ruled more like royalty. So there must have been some kind of semi-formal relationship or agreement between the central-northern tribes of Israel that he judged over such that his family was seen as the rightful ruling family (a concept quite different from that of the earlier Judges whereby a Judge was less an absolute ruler and more of a powerful magistrate). Thus the context of the coming story is set in this background that shows that at the least portions of Israel were warming to the idea of a monarchy ruling over them, and some wanted a king NOW.

There are 4 important lessons that we can learn from the story of Gideon, and these will carry over into the next chapter. The first thing is that when God is the leader, when God stands with

Israel, no man and no army and no power can stand against them. That a mere 300 Israelite men who were personally hand picked by the Lord could engage in a Holy War against 135,000 enemy and prevail MUST be taken by those of us who read about it in the bible as either a fantastic and legendary fairy tale or an astounding truth that ought get our attention. What joy and courage that ought to put into our hearts if we honestly believe what we so casually say we believe: that the bible is the truth. I only wish that all the people of modern Israel could understand that; and rather than shove aside their election as God's chosen people and instead seek to blend and become as their neighbors (because they do not want all that comes with being God's chosen), that Israel would race to embrace it.

But as Believers we also need to understand that we, too, have been hand picked by God to be the soldiers of His Kingdom. Just like that 300, we are relatively few in the face of the billions on our planet who are God's enemies, and despite what some preach we will always be the few until Messiah returns to finish what He started. But if we are truly the Lord's, and if we are obedient and faithful to Him, then He will lead us and His purposes for us will not be defeated no matter the odds against us.

The second lesson is that if anything of a positive nature occurs in the lives of God's people, it is God's doing and He deserves all glory and honor for it.

The third is that despite what might seem to be so, reality is that the world will never be the biggest roadblock to God's people carrying out God's will on earth. Rather it will always be the lack of faithfulness of the Believers. Just as Israel was problematic for God to work with even though they were chosen and set apart for Him by Him, so it is with the Church. Israel was redeemed, but they didn't always behave that way. The Church is, by definition, a fellowship of the redeemed of God in Yeshua, but we sure don't always conduct ourselves that way, do we? In the end we're still just people, running around in corruptible bodies of flesh, and still fighting our evil inclinations that want to do wrong even though God's very spirit lives within us. Thus we saw the leaders of Succoth and Peniel (who were fellow Israelites, fellow redeemed) literally standing in the way of God's army of 300 who were pursuing God's enemies at God's direction.

We saw an arrogant group (Ephraim) who held themselves up as the best and most worthy of all of Israel because they were the largest and wealthiest of the tribes in that era. God didn't put this group in charge of this Holy War but they thought they should have been; so they did their part in trying to derail Gideon or perhaps, more to the point, they tried to jump in when they saw success and take over. Do we not see this exact thing within the Church? There are those who believe that by virtue of sheer numbers, or the size of their congregational building, or the amount of face time they have on TV, it is THEY who ought to lead; and if they do NOT bless something it ought not to be done because it must not be of God.

The fourth lesson is one that will set the stage for Judges chapter 9: it's a lesson about leadership. It is that those who accept a leadership position at the call of God are going to face great temptation to abandon that position and the divine purpose of whatever the specific cause, for personal ambitions. Of course personal ambitions tend to blind men and thus we tend to deny and rationalize it when we succumb to those temptations.

Gideon rightly (and to his merit) rejected the temptation of kingship over his people; yet it seems that in reality he only rejected the title because he lived like a king and instilled the same in his many sons. Further he seemed to have no qualms of creating for himself a position as a sort of High Priest, complete with the Ephod of the High Priest, and even built a worship center in his hometown of Ofrah that was in direct competition with the official one located in Shiloh. The result was that the savior of Israel actually led the people right back to idolatry and rebellion, and the path was paved with his own ambitions and the gold of the false ephod he anointed himself with. Because he was the leader of Israel, his family and the people of Israel would pay a terrible price.

Open your bibles to Judges chapter 9.

### READ JUDGES CHAPTER 9 all

The brief and ill-fated story of Avimelech is the subject of Judges 9. And let me state up front that this man was NOT a Judge. In fact some wonder why this episode is even included. We'll touch on the reason later. The story is somewhat of an antithesis of the previous 2 chapters in that while Gideon was a common man, raised up by God to be a Judge, and then serving the Lord in order to deliver His people from oppression, Avimelech was born into privilege, appointed himself as a leader of God's people, then served only his own personal lust for power in order to oppress his people. That would be bad enough if it wasn't for Avimelech being Gideon's own son.

The account of Avimelech makes it clear that his mother was his father's concubine (as opposed to the large number of legal wives than Gideon married). Now a concubine was not a personal prostitute nor was she a slave; but she did hold a somewhat lesser status in the household than a legal wife who was married under a **Chuppah** (a traditional wedding canopy) and supported by the legality of a **Kethubah** (a marriage document). But one needs to ask the question why Gideon had as many as possibly 70 legal wives yet had this one unnamed woman as a concubine? While I can't be 100% sure, I think the reason is self-evident: the legal wives were Hebrew women and thus they were legally entitled to a formal marriage ceremony and to a marriage certificate. Avimelech's mother was NOT a Hebrew; she was a Canaanite of Shechem (probably, more accurately, a Hivite). Thus Avimelech was born into a divided loyalty; he was part Hebrew and part Canaanite. Now this wouldn't have been all that unusual if it weren't for the fact that his father was the supreme leader of Israel and self-styled High Priest.

Thus we see in the first verse of this chapter that Avimelech must have been constantly at odds with his Hebrew siblings (all born to other mothers), and Avimelech also seems to have had a propensity to identify more with his Canaanite family side than his Israelite side. This shouldn't be hard for us to imagine; I've seen this exact dynamic in my own extended family, and witnessed it in countless others. I'm sure many of you have a good understanding of this rather typical family challenge of divided loyalties and tendency to build alliances and closer relationships with one part of the family as opposed to the other. It usually happens quite naturally, and not from any kind of plan or overt intent.

We also witnessed this kind of thing with Moses who was adopted as an infant by an Egyptian woman. Moses could never quite fit in with his Egyptian family, and so found himself in constant internal turmoil as he daily saw the injustice upon his biological and hereditary family and people. So to achieve his ambitions Avimelech went to the city of his mother's origin (Shechem), and solicited support from her brothers and her father. The proposition is stated in verse 2: choose me to rule over you or you'll be subject to 70 men (Gideon's sons) ruling over you.

Now inherent in this conversation is that Avimelech was part Canaanite as opposed to any of his brothers. And it was understood in these tribal cultures that blood mattered; the family of the leader or ruler would have advantages. Since it is taken for granted that the 70 sons of Gideon were Hebrews, they on the other hand would be more inclined to show favor for their Israelite brethren over and above the Canaanites who lived among them.

So we're told that this seemed to make sense to his mother's family, so they took Avimelech's proposition to the other residents of Shechem and campaigned for it. Shechem was a mixed city; it consisted of Canaanites and Hebrews living side-by-side (you can bet that there had also been much intermarriage). In fact it was a mostly Hebrew city, and it was generally under Israelite control, so it's not hard to understand why Avimelech's mother's family would see this as an opportunity to have as it's governor someone who is at least more sympathetic to the Canaanites due to a Canaanite heritage.

Yet there was more to this than meets the eye; Shechem was a strategically important city. It lay at a crossroads of major trade routes that wove through the area. Shechem was also well situated in a very fertile valley. And just as key was that Shechem was central in Israel's heritage and history, and it was both a place of spiritual and cultural importance to the Israelites. So if Avimelech could gain control of Shechem (as opposed to some other less revered towns) it would give him a political platform, a measure of credibility, and he would be able to extract the usual taxes from the many caravans that necessarily had to pass through his territory.

There is so much at play in this chapter that we'll not be able to delve deeply into all of it, but we are going to add some details that will help us in later chapters. For instance: you will notice that while Gideon is referred to a number of times in the chapter, he is only called Yeruba'al. I'll explain why in just a moment. Take a look first at verse two 2; this is where Avimelech asks his mother's family to speak on his behalf to, "all the men of Shechem". Or your bible version might say, "all the citizens of Shechem", or perhaps "all the leaders of Shechem". The Hebrew word that is being variously translated as men, or citizens, or leaders is "**ba'al**". That's right, it says Avimelech is asking his family to plead his case to all the **ba'als** of Shechem. **Ba'al** is a Canaanite loan word. In other words it's a Canaanite word that was simply incorporated as-is into the Hebrew language. The same goes for the word "**El**", like in **El Shaddai** (there are scores of others as well).

But **ba'al** can be used in a number of ways, both theologically and commonly. In a certain sense it's not unlike the Hebrew word **adonai**. In it's common usage **adonai** merely means lord or master (a human). However after about 300 B.C., it was eventually used as a

theological term that referred to the God of Israel (because it was deemed inappropriate to pronounce God's formal name YHWH). Now **adonai** could correctly be used to refer to a wealthy man, or a powerful man; but **adonai** was also used much the way we use the term "sir". The word "sir" was coined back in Europe in the days of Aristocracies and Sir became a formal title (like Sir Arthur). But it can also be used simply to denote respect to anyone of any status like when we say "sir" or "ma'am". So the use of **ba'al** here in Judges is not theological referring to gods in general, or is it referring to the specific chief god of the Canaanites, ol' Ba'al himself. Instead it's being used as word of respect or better, flattery with it's meaning more or less being "Canaanite lords".

It's ONLY because Avimelech is appealing to Canaanites that he uses the term **ba'als** (he would NEVER do that to curry the favor of Israelites loyal to Yehoveh). Thus when we see the editor of Judges use the name Yeruba'al to refer to Avimelech's Hebrew father, Gideon, it is to make a point. Yeruba'al (Gideon) cut down Ba'al's image and fought Ba'al's people because he was an enemy of Ba'al, while Avimelech identified himself with Ba'al and Ba'al's people as a friend of Ba'al. This is just another of hundreds of those important subtleties throughout the Old Testament that goes over our heads if we don't look at the Hebrew language and acknowledge the biblical context of an Israelite culture.

Avimelech's maternal family is so connected to Ba'al that they go and take 70 pieces of silver from Ba'al's temple (called Ba'al B'rit or the Covenant of Ba'al) in order to help Avimelech succeed. They didn't steal the money or do something wrong. Using temple treasury money for political purposes was quite normal in those days. The money was used to hire some good-for-nothings to do Avimelech's bidding. These hirelings would be used as assassins to kill all of Gideon's sons.

The hit men followed Avimelech to Ofrah and there killed 69 of Gideon's 70 sons (Avimelech made 71 sons). The remaining one was the youngest, **Yotam**, who somehow escaped the slaughter; but it wasn't like he was overlooked. Avimelech would have known that he got away.

Verse 6 describes Avimelech's coronation. Let's get the picture, though, of just what he was king over. There were only 4 towns under his rule: Shechem, Beth-Millo, Arumah, and Thebez. His territory probably extended a little further into parts of the western tribal area of Manessah (not much of a kingdom). Let's also understand that while this man saw himself as a king at the head of a monarchy in fact he was merely a tyrannical dictator and a murderer. He ruled ruthlessly and vengefully and very unwisely. He was a thug like Fidel Castro or Saddam Hussein. He cared nothing for the people, and didn't know how to build an economy or how to create loyalties and alliances.

Archeologists have actually uncovered Avimelech's place of coronation; the pillar used was probably from Joshua's day. The temple of Ba'al Brit is also in the midst of excavation. Thus we have Gideon's son being made king of part of Israel, in covenant with Canaanites and taking his vow in the name of Ba'al.

Now, folks, as ugly and horrendous as that coronation ceremony is to our minds, what

difference is there between that and millions of Christians bonded together by the InterFaith Movement, making it part of their platform that it is an acceptable and good thing to worship Allah or Hindi or Buddha or Jesus for the sake of universal peace and harmony? That all divinity is equal and is worth celebrating by any name we'd like to use? And of course governments the world over applauds this as a wonderful display of love and religious tolerance. Have you ever found a shred of religious tolerance in the Word of God? Have you ever found a single sentence that urges God's followers to show love to their neighbors by bowing down to other gods? I shudder at what I see happening among my believing brothers and sisters, and within my government led by leaders who advocate just this thing while at the same time declaring their Christian faith. Oh what blindness has enveloped us, just as it did Israel in the days of the Judges.

In verse 7 when the surviving son, **Yotam**, heard of his half-brother's coronation he took a very strange action that we read of in the next several verses. He climbed up to Mount Gerizim and from there shouted out a prophetic parable as a curse upon Avimelech and the people who made him their king. Recall that Shechem lay at the base of the twin mountains Ebal and Gerizim so Gerizim was quite an appropriate place for this oracle.

Almost 2 centuries earlier Joshua stood on this same spot and reconfirmed Israel's covenant with Yehoveh; now **Yotam** would use it as his pulpit. And he begins his parable of warning to the people of Shechem with the words, "**shema** men of Shechem that elohim might **shema** unto you". Remember that shema doesn't only mean to listen; it means to DO what it is you HEAR. **Shema** demands action not just passive acknowledgment. It is also instructive that **Yotam** used the generic word of that day for God, **elohim**, instead of God's formal name. By doing so each man could fill in the blank of just whom he regarded as god. Remember **Yotam** was talking to an audience of Canaanites, fallen Israelites, and people of mixed heritage and spiritual loyalties.

And then he begins an interesting parable that would have been easily understood by those who heard him; and it was memorable enough to be accurately communicated to others not present.

It goes like this: the trees (representing a group of people, in this case the citizens of Shechem) decided to anoint a king over them and invited an Olive Tree to be their king; it declined. Next the trees offered the job to a Fig tree that also rejected it. After that they asked a grape vine to rule over them and it too said, "no". Having failed at finding one willing to be the king they approached a Bramble; and the bramble responded that it would be honored to be their king, but with a catch.

The meaning is this: the Olive tree produces oil for the glory of God and for use by men; God created it for this purpose and it is a high calling. So the Olive tree says that to give up this calling merely to leisurely wave to and fro over some other trees would be a waste of it's purpose and gifting.

The Fig tree explains that God created it to produce wonderful sweet fruit for eating. Figs were the staple fruit of that region and highly prized. And the Fig tree says why would I leave that

production of sweetness and goodness behind just to rule over some other trees?

The vine produces grapes that, like the Olive tree, are used to both bring joy to God and man. To God it produces the libation offering (wine) that is necessary to many sacrifices and celebrations. For man it was the principle beverage in virtually every home. It soothed the stomach, tasted wonderful, and brought an extra measure of joy to parties and celebrations. The vine says why should I exchange such a wonderful purpose and privilege simply to be above some trees?

The trees were asking the Olive, Fig and grapevine to leave behind their God-ordained usefulness in exchange for what men see as a higher social status. Wise men understand that to take on a leadership role **MUST** be the role God intended for them and not just a personal ambition or the motives are all wrong. Further it is always best and more satisfying to be used for the purpose one was created rather than wishing we were created for another and different purpose that most men see as more important. To abandon our God-given gifts and assignment in His Kingdom in favor of something that personally pleases us or other men is a terrible misuse of those gifts.

Our value to the Kingdom is and will always be in whom God made us to be, not in how the world sees us or how we would prefer to see ourselves in the world. True contentment and peace is to discover those divine gifts and purposes and abide in them all of our days for the good service to God and mankind that we were made in the first place.

But the trees of **Yotam's** parable had thus far failed in finding a king so they went to what they saw as their last resort: the Bramble. The Bramble is the lowest grade of plant life and so any other position than the one it naturally holds would be a promotion!

The Bramble is hard, full of thorns and stickers, and lies like a carpet on the surface of the ground. A Bramble produces no fruit and no joy. It is worthless but to cause harm and be a menace to farmers and other plants. It was especially dangerous during the summer months when it turned brittle and dry and could easily catch fire, spreading at an amazing rate driven by the hot winds. And when it burned it caught other plants on fire as well.

So the Bramble replies that it **WILL** agree to be their king, but they must come down and “take shelter under its shade”. And if they confer kingship on it but won't shelter in its shade then the Bramble will burn those trees down. Of course what is portrayed here is an absurdity of sorts. Brambles cling so closely to the ground that they produce no usable shade except perhaps for unclean insects and reptiles. The reference of the parable to the Bramble burning down the cedars of Lebanon is that the cedars were considered the grandest and greatest of all the trees in the Middle East. Therefore the Bramble is saying that its fiery wrath at those who will not submit to the “shelter in its shade” is so hot that even the greatest of the trees will be destroyed.

Then comes the curse. Yotam says that if the people of Shechem have done a righteous thing in anointing Avimelech, and have been honest and fair with Yeruba'al's (Gideon's) family and descendants, then well and good. Because that's how it should be since whether the citizens

of Shechem are Canaanite, Israelite, or foreigners Yetom's father Gideon risked his life for their benefit. Everyone in the Land of Canaan suffered when the Midianites and Amalekites came and stole the harvests and whatever else they could get their pilfering hands on.

Of course this was sarcastic sense all who were present understood what had taken place. As Yotam reminded them, they were complicit in killing all of Gideon's sons except for himself and Avimelech; and then basically called Avimelech a bastard son by saying that he was merely the product of a slave-girl owned by Gideon. Now the point of this was as an insult; Avimelech's mother was NOT a slave-girl. Then Yotam basically says that this bastard king is YOUR (Shechem's) blood relative, so you are responsible for his actions.

Therefore if everything that they and Avimelech was righteous and good, then may they each enjoy one another. But if it was not then may fire come out of Avimelech and burn them, and may they in turn come out against Avimelech and destroy him.

Yotam knowing that his life was now worthless as a plug-nickel then fled the area for a place called Be'er so that Avimelech couldn't reach him. Probably this was to the south, and area that was under Judah's jurisdiction, but we really don't know where this place is. Be'er simply means "well" (like in water well), and there were dozens of places in Canaan with that name. Perhaps it was Be'er Sheva but that is conjecture.

Well it wasn't long before the self-serving and wicked Avimelech starting having friction with the **Shechemites**. Such kinds of people who ruled (and those who were ruled over) that are capable of such heinous acts as callously murdering 69 brothers just so a personal ambition can be realized don't make easy companions for the long term; trust would not be the basis of such a relationship. So it wasn't long before trouble started (verse 23 says it was 3 years to be exact).

It appears that Avimelech did not live and rule from Shechem; rather he appointed an overseer or governor name **Zebul** to deal with Shechem. The trouble that started was a direct result of God's intervention. It was that He sent an evil spirit between Avimelech and the ba'als of Shechem (we talked about this earlier and it is still referring to the Canaanite men of Shechem). God was using a demon to bring about the demise of Avimelech and he so-called kingdom. Does it surprise you that God would order a demon, an evil minion of Satan, to cause treachery among men? And that it was all to serve His purposes? Don't be. We'll see it again in the matter of Ahab. So as a result of a demonic attack (at Yehoveh's command) the citizens of Shechem began to plot against Avimelech. Now there would have been earthly and practical reasons for the Shechemites to go after Avimelech (at least in their minds there was) but in the end the Lord using that demon fomented it. What was the main reason for the Lord doing this? Verse 24 explains that it was necessary to avenge the blood of the sons of Yeruba'al (Gideon).

Remember, one of the God-principles established in the Torah is that murder (blood) must be dealt with by executing the murderer. The reason is that blood (unjust killing) pollutes the land spiritually and the only way that spiritual pollution ends is when the blood of the killer is spilled. Otherwise the land is under the curse of the law. So God takes the matter in these lawless



times into His own hands and arranges for the circumstances to bring the perpetrator (Avimelech and his henchmen) to justice.

You know, it is interesting that even though the wicked plans of evil men can be hidden from the people for a time, eventually it comes to light. Further it is interesting to me that it was a 3-year period of time that passed before the people of Shechem finally understood that they had been deceived, and so wanted a change of leaders. It's going to take 3 years from the time of his coronation as king of the world, swept into office by an adoring public willing to turn everything over to him, before the world finds out the true intentions of the Anti-Christ.

Next week we'll see how Avimelech's rule came to a predictable ending.