

“Here Comes the Judge!” - A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges

Session 6 October 28, 2020

Abimilech, the “False” Judge Judges 9:1–57

Recap: The Judges’ Cycle

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges Chapter 2, verses 10 through 19) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashtaroah, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

Session 5 Recap

In Session 5, we looked at the judge Gideon. Gideon was a return to a “military” type judge, unlike his predecessor Deborah. As a judge, Gideon lacked confidence in the beginning, requiring God to perform many signs to “prove” to him that this was truly a call from the divine (sacrifice and fleece). After securing confidence from these signs, Gideon leads a reduced army of 300 against the Midianites. After hearing a dream from a Midianite soldier, Gideon creates a unique battle plan – trumpets and pitchers with torches – to send the opposing army into confusion, self-battle, and eventually retreat. On his pursuit of the Midianite kings, Gideon seeks help from two Israelite cities, who refuse until the kings are caught. Promising to punish the cities upon his return, Gideon follows through with the punishment upon his return. The tribes of Israel desired to make Gideon king following the victory. Yet, Gideon refuses, instead creating a worship “idol” in his hometown from the battle spoils. This ushered in forty years of peace, but Gideon’s lineage would lead to great chaos to follow.

Session 6: Abimilech, the “False” Judge

Judges 9:1 – 57

The narrative of Abimilech, the “False” Judge, begins with his heritage, as the illegitimate son of Gideon. Abimilech seized the opportunity from the people of Shechem, desiring one leader (or king) to lead the tribes of Israel. After securing the citizens support, Abimilech and his motley crew kill all of his half-brothers (except for one, Jotham, who brings a prophecy against him). Abimilech causes chaos among the tribes, eventually having his own Shechem supporters to turn against him, led by Gaal and his relatives. Abimilech achieves victory in battle, but his rage against his oppressors leads to many deaths and an eventual “shameful” death involving a millstone and a sword. While desiring to be a “legitimate” ruler, Abimilech was never called by God to serve as a judge and his actions portrayed this lack of divine support. Abimilech’s story does not follow the cycle of the previous judges.

Abimilech Seizes Power

Judges 9:1-6

The root cause of Abimilech’s rise to power lies in the actions and sins of his father, Gideon. Gideon refused to become an “official” king following his battle with the Midianites, but consolidated authority in his hometown, Ophrah, by establishing a worship center and having citizens come to him for mediation and worship. The desire for a “king” grows, and after Gideon passes away, unofficial leadership falls into the hands of his 70 sons. At the same time, Gideon’s sexual sin led to the birth of an illegitimate son, Abimilech, who was shunned by Gideon’s family because of his heritage. The child of a possible slave or concubine in Shechem brought no prestige at all for Abimilech. He would receive no inheritance from Gideon’s family. Therefore, his desire for admiration and recognition grew, and he realized he would have to seize this power.

Realizing a possible leadership conflict with 70 sons, Abimilech travels to Shechem and his mother’s relatives to gain support as king. (Shechem was a central hub for Israelite authority and worship. Before the “idol” built in Gideon’s hometown, the tribes would travel to Shechem for worship. (Shechem is the site where God appeared to Abram in a dream, promising the Promised land to his family, the site of an altar built there in God’s honor (Genesis 12:6-7). It is also the location of the first worship in the Promised Land, following their return through Joshua’s leadership (Joshua 8:30-35). Even Joseph’s bones are buried there Joshua 24:32) Historically, Shechem was the spiritual center and

thermometer of Israel. Shechem also served as a crossroads for trade routes for the area, lying in the middle of the coastal plain and the Jordan River valley. Whoever controlled this area would control the countryside. Many of the residents in Shechem were Canaanites, and they would look forward to rising up against the Israelites if needed.

Abimilech had not been “called by God” to lead, but that did not stop him. Echoing his mother’s roots, he proclaims to be the son of a “kinglike” figure (Gideon), and a direct relative of his mother’s family. He asks his relatives, “Would it be better to follow 70 or just 1 (who happens to be a relative)?” His base of support was established, and the entire city approved of Abimilech’s leadership. He received 70 pieces of silver (from an altar of Baal), and hired mercenaries to assist his takeover. His first action was to dispose of any possible leadership threat – his 70 brothers. He successfully killed all but one of his brothers on one stone, with the youngest Jotham hiding and then later escaping. Irony resides in this account: (1) He killed all his brothers on one stone, but his later death would come from one stone being dropped on his head; and (2) His supporters agreed with him because he was “family”, but see what Abimilech does to “family” members – he kills them. Following the killings, Abimilech is crowned “king” by his relatives – a “human” appointed king/leader, not a God appointed leader. Unlike his father, Gideon, Abimilech did not turn it down!

Jotham’s Response

Judges 9:7-21

When Jotham hears the news of kingship, he responds with a story/prophecy from Mount Gerizim, a place known for covenants and proclaiming “blessings”. (Jotham’s name means, “Yahweh is perfect/blameless”. Abimilech’s name, on the other hand, means, “My father is king.” Ironic...) Jotham is calling out to the residents in Shechem to think about their actions and who to follow – man (Abimilech) or God! He uses a metaphor story with trees and a thornbush to capture their attention.

In the story, an olive tree, fig tree, and vine are given the opportunities to “lord over” the rest of the plants. Each, however, refuses to do so. (One interesting note, olives, figs, and grape vines were all valuable to the Israelite people, the main crops of their agriculture economy.) Finally, the trees turn to the thornbush – which has no value in society at all – to be their king. Thornbushes were short and provided no shade from the heat, often catching on

fire and spreading to all foliage – including trees. The thornbush responds with the positive, encouraging the other trees to find shade/protection in its shade (though it provides none at all!). The thornbush said for those that do not, may fire emerge from it and burn it all.

Jotham's point is this: if you have been fair to Gideon and his family, who brought them deliverance, in making Abimilech king, then may they find great protection and blessing from his leadership. However, if the residents have not been fair, then he hopes they get what they deserve – burning, destruction, and death. The trees represent the residents of Shechem in the story, while the thornbush represents Abimilech. Instead of a blessing, Jotham provides a prophetic curse. He then escapes.

The Fall of Shechem and Abimilech

Judges 9:22-57

Abimilech ruled over Israel for three years. (Can you imagine being Jotham, who had to wait this long for his half-brother to get what he deserved?) For the first time in the story, we see the emergence of God's presence. God sent an evil spirit between the people of Shechem and Abimilech, literally an attitude of strife and frustration. Turning against their leader for his past actions (against his brothers), the men of Shechem waited to ambush Abimilech and his mercenaries, while robbing all that passed through. At the same time, Gaal and his relatives arrive on the scene, and the men of Shechem put their faith in him. Essentially using the same logic and argument, Gaal gains the support of the citizens of Shechem. Gaal, a Canaanite, appeals to the people's loyalty to their once Canaanite king ruler, Hamor. (Reference to him can be found in Genesis 34).

One of the only remaining loyal figures in Shechem to Abimilech is Zebul, the ruler of the city. He sends word to Abimilech of Gaal's arrival and words of uprising. Zebul encourages Abimilech and his supporters to come at night and wait to ambush the citizens and Gaal's army. Abimilech prepares a three-phase attack. First, Abimilech and his army attacks Gaal and his forces, successfully defeating these troops (verses 34-41). An interesting note of this first phase, Gaal turns to Zebul (Abimilech's one supporter in Shechem) to confirm the attack and possibly get reinforcements from the citizens. After first denying the attack, Zebul then "challenges" Gaal to go out and face Abimilech if he was confident. Gaal went out, was defeated, many of his relatives dying, and he eventually fled. Zebul then drives out the rest of Gaal's relatives that remained in the city. At this point,

Abimilech had succeeded and his “battle” could have stopped. However, Abimilech’s ruthless character shines through.

Second, Abimilech takes his revenge on the citizens of Shechem (verses 42-45). He awaits for the citizens to come out to tend the fields outside the city’s walls. When they do, Abimilech and his army slaughtered them. Remember, these are not soldiers. These citizens were the common folk of the city. He even had one third of his army stand at the city gate, preventing anyone from coming to help. The soldiers fought all day, and eventually captured the city of Shechem. (In verse 45, Abimilech is said to have “razed the city and sowed it with salt”. Abimilech destroyed the land so crops would no longer grow in this area. Again, he was going over and above in showing his cruelty.)

Third, Abimilech attacked the leadership of the city (verses 46-49). The leaders had locked themselves up in the temple of El-berith, a tower found in the city. (El-berith means “god of the covenant”. The temple recalls the “covenant” Abimilech had with the citizens of Shechem, one Jotham calls a farce. Ironic...) Abimilech and his supporters gather trees and bramble (as Jotham had used to characterize Abimilech) and set fire to the tower, killing all those gathered inside. The estimated number is between a thousand men and women.

Abimilech does not stop his rage at the city gates of Shechem. Instead, he turns his attention to the neighboring town of Thebez. Thebez had not been involved in the prior coup and battle. For Abimilech to turn his attention on these citizens reflects his out of control nature. Abimilech captured the city of Thebez, but many of its leaders and residents gathered in its tower for safety. Wishing to do the same as was done in Shechem, he and his troops attacked and prepared to set fire to the tower. However, a “certain woman” dropped a millstone from the top of the tower, landing on Abimilech’s skull. Realizing the fatal blow, Abimilech calls for his armor bearer to pierce him with a sword so a woman would not kill him. (In battle, women were often asked to join the men on the city’s wall and drop heavy objects on the soldiers below. A millstone, a stone with a hole in the center, was used to grind grain into flour. Traditionally, a millstone would be eighteen inches in diameter. Abimilech’s humiliating fate was sealed in three fold – by a woman, not by fighting, and by a farmer’s tool!)

With Abimilech dead, his supporters retreated and returned to their homes. Jotham foretold this dark demise, and it finally came true. This period of internal strife differs from the other oppression found throughout the book of

Judges. The pain and agony that Abimilech created was by “one of their own”, an Israelite. This stage reveals a growing darkness and shame on the tribes of Israel. While some scholars share that God was “absent” during this time, I tend to believe that he was waging a “silent judgment”. Allowing the tribes to fall into the trap of following humans instead of God, He knew this would lead to only destruction and chaos. The fabric of the Israelite tribes had been torn. The question is whether this tear is temporary or permanent. Time will tell.

Questions to Reflect On...

In the story of Abimilech, this son of Gideon was on a downward spiral that ended in his death. He needed to be saved from himself, as God does for many. How has God “saved you from yourself” in the past? How does this make you feel about His presence in your life?

The citizens of Shechem were swayed by the words of this “emerging leader”. What impresses you most when you think of “leadership” in our world today? Are you influenced more by your personal priorities rather than the world’s needs? Where does God’s priorities fall in the equation?

Next Week...

“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 7

Wednesday, November 4 6:30 PM

Focus – Tola, Jair, and Jephthah

Judges 10:1-2, Judges 10:3-4, Judges 10:6 – 12:7