

JUDGES—WEEK 9

THE ENEMY WITHIN



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

This time, Israel doesn't need an external enemy to oppress them. God sends a spirit of ill-will between Abimelech and the people of Shechem. They then proceed to destroy each other, as well as a lot of precious things—such as the city itself. Thus, a special level of sin's insanity is displayed.

After that, the usual cycle of judges and apostasy resumes.

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Joshua, Week 9 — The Enemy Within
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1 Judges 9:22–29

After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years, God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers. And the men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech.

Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brothers and went over to Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him. So they went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and made merry. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech. Then Gaal the son of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech, and who is 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? If only this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech.” So he said to Abimelech, “Increase your army and come out!”

Partners in crime make lousy partners. Their willingness to victimize people makes them unsafe—even for their partners.

Men of no conscience will be men of no constancy. — Matthew Henry (in his comments on this passage)

So it’s not surprising that the partnership between Abimelech and Shechem collapses. That happens naturally all the time.

But God triggers this collapse supernaturally, sending *a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem*. The sinful reactions of everyone involved quickly escalate things. At every step, they act like a bunch of pirates.

God is fulfilling Jotham’s courageous speech as prophecy.

But Jotham isn’t a prophet. Can a non-prophet prophesy?

Well, can someone who doesn’t have the gift of healing have a prayer for healing granted?

Of course. It happens all the time. The view that the gift of healing ceased at the end of the apostolic age doesn’t mean God stopped healing. It just means that everyone’s prayers for healing are merely requests. It’s up to Him what happens next.

And praise God that He honors so many of those mere requests. No one deserves His audience, much less His favor. Yet He commands us to bring our requests before Him.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. — Philippians 4:6–7

2 Judges 9:30–41

When Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was aroused. And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, “Take note! Gaal the son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem; and here they are, fortifying the city against you. Now therefore, get up by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field. And it shall be, as soon as the sun is up in the morning, that you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may then do to them as you find opportunity.”

So Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies. When Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance to the city gate, Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from lying in wait. And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!”

But Zebul said to him, “You see the shadows of the mountains as if they were men.”

So Gaal spoke again and said, “See, people are coming down from the center of the land, and another company is coming from the Diviners’ Terebinth Tree.”

Then Zebul said to him, “Where indeed is your mouth now, with which you said, ‘Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?’ Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out, if you will, and fight with them now.”

So Gaal went out, leading the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. And Abimelech chased him, and he fled from him; and many fell wounded, to the very entrance of the gate. Then Abimelech dwelt at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers, so that they would not dwell in Shechem.

Abimelech wins round one of what has now become a classic civil war. It’s a battle for the throne except that there’s no throne. Wow.

As long as we’re on the subject of people being amazingly stupid, let’s note Gaal’s actions. He makes a speech in Shechem busting on Abimelech and his officer Zebul, *the ruler of the city*. Zebul hears about it—no surprise there—and is none too happy. So he lays a trap.

But just a few verses later, we see Gaal and Zebul chit-chatting about what they see in the hills outside the city. Moreover, Zebul ridicules him by quoting what Gaal said in his speech—“*Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?*” Zebul is revealing that he knows what Gaal said.

But Gaal’s very next sentence (in verse 28) was, “*Is he not the son of Jerubbaal, and is not Zebul his officer?*” Zebul has to know that part too. So, it hits Gaal that he’s standing next to a man he has offended.

Yet when challenged to go out and fight a battle he cannot win, he takes the bait. What was he thinking?

This isn’t about thinking; it’s about pride. Zebul’s challenge is essentially a dare. People often respond stupidly to a dare (by accepting it). That has to be pride; the person making the dare is no friend.

3 Judges 9:42–49 (ESV)

On the following day, the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told. 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. 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. 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.

When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of Elberith. Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. 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.” 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.

Abimelech demolishing Shechem and sowing it with salt (which ruins the soil for agriculture) is a great evil. And this was no ordinary city; it was where the LORD promised the land of Canaan to Abraham.

When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. — Genesis 12:5b–7 (ESV)

So, here they are in the promised land, and they destroy the actual place of the promise fighting over who sits on a throne over that promised land—and it’s not even a real throne.

Then, just to make sure the irony is lost on no one, they fulfill Jotham’s prophesy (curse, really).

Sin is madness.

A thousand men and women dying is a great tragedy. Wars often have horrible consequences like that. We tend to view these tragedies as unintended consequences, the collateral damage inherent in war.

But what if they’re more like sacrifices on an altar—part of an insane human sacrifice ritual to the god of greed?

Caveat: this analogy isn’t perfect, and may not apply to all war, nor to all the casualties in any particular war.

But in the heat of battle, people often lose track of the spiritual warfare behind the battle.

And what the battle represents.

4 Judges 9:50–57

Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and took it. But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women—all the people of the city—fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower. So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire. But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man, his armorbearer, and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’” So his young man thrust him through, and he died. And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed, every man to his place.

Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers. And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

Sorry Abimelech. You were killed by a woman no matter what your armorbearer did. Men do say of you, “*A woman killed him.*”

Better still, they say that Abimelech was killed by an upper millstone. That isn’t random. Remember this?

Then he went to his father’s house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. — Judges 9:5a

That presumably was not a reference to a millstone but an altar. Yikes. Could it be that those seventy sons were sacrificed to a pagan god?

That’s what it sounds like.

A millstone falling on Abimelech’s head makes, “evil being *returned on their own heads*,” remarkably precise.

God has a way of running His universe so elegantly that it’s like art. Things happen in a kind of symphonic synchrony. Abimelech’s end in today’s passage is a good example of God’s artistic style.

But this is not always so easy to see. In Judges, events have been recorded in a helpful way. Things that took years to transpire are covered in just a few paragraphs. The highlights are highlighted while the mundane is skipped over. That makes the patterns stand out.

But watching these things unfold slowly in real time obscures these patterns. This is especially true in our own lives. In real time, we don’t have the benefit of an inspired summary to help us see.

But we can make our own summaries. In particular, always record prayer requests. I have found this quite valuable on occasion. Big prayer requests can evolve over time. Those can be the most beautiful.

But if you don’t keep a record (of the prayers and of God’s response) you can miss the big picture.

5 Judges 10:1–9 (ESV)

After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.

After him arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

Time out. *To save Israel?* Tola “*arose to save Israel?*” To save them from what?

Themselves, of course. Their only problem lately has been themselves. They don’t need Midianites to ruin everything. Left to their own devices, they ruin everything just fine.

And notice how the spiritual evils and the secular evils go hand in hand. Chapter nine showed that left to their own devices, the Israelites go at each other’s throats. The desire for power was just as destructive as anything else. It’s destructive, not because of the nature of power, but because of the nature of the desire for power. People don’t just casually want power; they crave it. They’re addicted to it; they’re slaves to it.

Now chapter ten gets back to the main plot line of Judges, which is showing how, left to their own devices, the Israelites always start serving other gods.

Power is just another god.

The New Testament teaches how an idol (or god) doesn’t have to be some little statue made of gold or whatever. It’s typically thought of as something like money.

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” — Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

The link between Matthew 6:24 and today’s lesson is the word “*serve*.” The question, “Who do you serve?” is the same as, “Who is your lord?” or, “Who is your god?” Just as we can serve money so that it becomes our lord, Abimelech (and his enemies) served their quest for power.

Abimelech never really was king. The quest for power was king.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever seen something like prophesy happen?

2. What's the worst dare you've seen?

3. When is war just?

4. Have you detected a "style" in answered prayer?

5. Have you seen a quest for power look like an addiction?

Items for prayer: