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## **Judges 9**

(2020)

Bible House of Grace contains an easy to read New and Old Testament commentary full of spiritual treasures and pearls, complete with an insightful resource guide illuminating God's love and grace.



Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

## Judges 9

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### Topics.

- Gideon goes to his relatives and Abimelech hires worthless men.
- Worthless men kill Gideon's seventy sons and make Abimelech king.
- Jotham tells a parable and afterward flees to Beer.
- God sends an evil spirit and Ebed moves into Shechem.
- Abimelech attacks Shechem and kills 1,000 people.
- A woman throws a stone on Abimelech's head.
- Abimelech asks his armour-bearer to slay him.

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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The Israelites forgot the LORD, and worshipped false gods, so the LORD removed His protection and blessings from them, which resulted in them being oppressed by their enemies and crying to the LORD for deliverance. In answer to their prayer the LORD raised up twelve Judges to deliver them, but not Judges as we think of Judges today or preachers of righteousness, but rather military leaders and fighters, that led Israel to triumph over their enemies and delivered them from their wicked behaviour.

Most suppose that Samuel (considered by some to be the last Judge) wrote some parts of the book, while other parts were written at a later time by someone of his generation or a later generation. The primary purpose of the Judges is best articulated in the following words, "The LORD raised up Judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. (Judges 2:16). For an overview of the entire book see the title:

- Overview of the Book of Judges (at the beginning of the index).

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### THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER

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Gideon and his 300 men crossed over the Jordan river. The officials of Succoth and men of Penuel refused to give bread to Gideon and his men. Gideon captured Zebah and Zalmunna the two kings of Midian and with thorns and briers taught the elders of Succoth a lesson, destroyed the tower of Penuel and killed Zebah and Zalmunna. He made an ephod and put it in his city Ophrah. The chapter concluded with the words, Midian was subdued, the land had rest for forty years while Gideon lived, but after he died Israel whored after Baal and made Baal-berith their god.

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### GIDEON GOES TO HIS MOTHERS RELATIVES

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#### JUDGES 9:1-2

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- **Judges 9:1-2:** 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,<sup>2</sup> "Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal (Gideon) rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."

**Jerubbaal:** in (Judges 6:30-33) we read, "on the day Gideon was saved from being put to death for breaking down the altar of Baal and the Asherah beside it, he was called Jerubbaal," meaning, "Let Baal contend against him," because he broke down his altar. (Judges 6:30-33).

**All the leaders of Shechem:** embraces the principal men and the officials of the city, who have the power and authority to influence the common people.

**Which is better for you:** (v2), the choice given to the leaders of Shechem is, "do you want Gideons seventy sons ruling over you or one," which implies that at this time the government of Shechem consisted of Joshua and his seventy sons (or at least a great many of them), and perhaps some other city officials ruling over the people. This idea is supported by the fact, when the people of Shechem did ask Gideon to be king over them, he refused, and said, "I will not rule over you, and my sons will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." (Judges 8:23), which indicate, that he believed a government of many under God, was better and safer than one dictator over all the people. Added to this it does not appear that any of Gideon's sons had any thought or desire to be exalted as king over the people, as appears from Jotham's following parable. (v8-15).

The question, "Which is better for you, that one or seventy rules over you?" (v2), is a wicked and false insinuation artfully contrived to stir up jealousy and alarm from a man with an ambitious view of getting the sovereign power of the kingdom to himself.

**Your bone and your flesh:** (v2) firstly embrace the fact that Abimelech was of their kindred by his mother's side and of the same tribe with them, and by extension embraces the fact, he was born among them and his mother has always lived with them. By this the statement, I am your bone and your flesh, he was hoping by having many near relations by his mother's side that dwell with him enhance the advantages they would have by appointing a king to reign over them, rather than having a government of many ruling over them.

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## ABIMELECH HIRES WORTHLESS MEN

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### JUDGES 9:3-4

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- **Judges 9:3-4:** 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." <sup>4</sup> And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows (vain and light persons in KJV), who followed him.

Abimelech's cleverly crafted and articulate speech was extremely successful, for the people preferred to have one who was a Shechemite by birth that was their brother and so closely related reign over them as king, rather than a government of many from the Abi-ezrites.

**The house of Baal-berith:** (v4) Baal-berith means, "god of the covenant," while "the house of Baal-berith," refers to the sacred place where they worshipped the Baals or the sacred idol-temple, that they had built after Gideon's death (for he would never have allowed such a thing to be built while he lived)

**Seventy pieces of silver:** (v4) some say that these would have been silver shekels, and then say that if they were they would have been a very small gift to give a king, to advance himself to the throne and who has to raise and support an army, this of course would be true, but they are not giving him the seventy pieces of silver for any of these purposes, but to bribe seventy men to kill the seventy sons of Gideon.

**Worthless and reckless fellows (vain and light persons in KJV):** (v4) refers to ignorant, idle worthless and murderous men that wandered about the country doing whatever was offered to them for money, no matter how little it was. or what evil it involved.

**They gave him seventy pieces of silver:** (v4) the same number of sons they killed; it seems they bribed the seventy murderous men by offering them one piece of silver each. It is estimated that a silver shekel was around one to four days wages depending upon the era, the nation and the country, but even if it was only one day's wage it would be enough for men of this type of evil nature to murder, because for them it is simply another job, besides this, it would gain them great favour with the king.

**SNAPSHOT** Without consulting God whether they should have a king reigning over them or a government the majority of the inhabitants of Shechem chose Abimelech to be their king. If parents could see into the future, what their children would do, and what they might suffer, even their moments of joy in them would be tainted with sorrow. We may all be thankful that we cannot know the future of our lives on earth and what will happen. However, we should fear and watch against sin, for sinful behaviour and conduct can produce disastrous effects upon our families and loved ones, even after we are laid in our grave.

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## ABIMELECH KILLS SEVENTY MEN AND IS MADE KING

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### JUDGES 9:5-6

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- **Judges 9:5-6:** And he (Abimelech) 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

Here is manifested the power of evil ambition, Abimelech, with the seventy worthless men that he had bribed, seized all seventy of Gideons brothers and murdered them, so that Abimelech could fulfil his self-exalting dream to be king and establish his rule, which was one of tyranny.

**Upon one stone:** some have supposed that Abimelech (their brother) and the men of Shechem slew Gideons sons on the stone altar Gideon sacrificed the bull on after tearing down the altar of Baal (Judges 6:25) in revenge for the demolition of Baal's altar and to appease Baal.

**NOTE:** Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal is not counted in this number for he survived. Even though one escaped, they are said to be seventy that were slain, for the round number is given.

By slaughtering all the sons of Gideon Abimelech set a fatal precedent, which was followed again and again in the kingdom of Israel, as the following shows:

Baasha killed all the house of Jeroboam

- As soon as he (Baasha) was king, he killed all the house of Jeroboam. He left to the house of Jeroboam not one that breathed, until he had destroyed it, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by his servant Ahijah the Shilonite. (1 Kings 15:29).

Zimri slew all the house of Baasha.

- When he (Zimri) began to reign, as soon as he had seated himself on his throne, he struck down all the house of Baasha. He did not leave him a single male of his relatives or his friends. (1 Kings 16:11).

Jehu slaughtered seventy sons of the kings.

- As soon as the letter came to them (servants of Jehu), they took the king's sons and slaughtered them, seventy persons, and put their heads in baskets and sent them to him (Jehu) at Jezreel. (2 Kings 10:7).

Athaliah destroyed all the royal family.

- Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family. (2 Kings 11:1).

The rest of the Israelites were so shamefully degenerate that they did nothing to protect the sons of Gideon, or avenge their death; but instead submitted to the bloody usurpation of this tyrant.

**All leaders of Shechem came together:** (v6) after Abimelech, with his cold-blooded men had murdered his brethren and returned to his city, the chief men, the magistrates and officials of the city gathered together.

**All Beth-millo, came together:** (v6) it cannot be determined here whether Beth Millo is a proper name, or whether Beth means the family or inhabitants of Millo.

It could refer to:

1. The town hall or common hall, where the principal inhabitants and council of the city met.
2. The family of Abimelech's mother, or some other renowned and prominent family living in or near Shechem.
3. A fortified place close to, but separate from, Shechem, perhaps the tower of Shechem mentioned in the following verses:
  - When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. <sup>47</sup> Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. (Judges 9:46-47).

**They made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem:** (v6) rather than to prosecute and punish Abimelech for this most barbarous murder, as they should have done, they instead made him a king. Abimelech was the first Israelite who ever bore the title, king. They did not consult God, or the high-priest, or seek advice with their brethren of any of the tribes whether they should have any king at all, much less who it should be. At this time the title king was unknown to Israel, so exalting Abimelech to king manifests a strong Canaanite influence at Shechem, for Canaanite chiefs were called kings.

**By the oak of the pillar (plain of the pillar in KJV) at Shechem:** (v6) the Hebrew word rendered plain, also signifies an oak. It refers to the place where they met together, and voted Abimelech to be king, near a place where a pillar or oak was in Shechem, and could very likely refer to a stone statute under an oak, that Joshua placed there as a testimony between God and the people.

- So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules (an ordinance in KJV) for them at Shechem. (Joshua 24:25).

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## JOTHAM TELLS A PARABLE OF TREES

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### JUDGES 9:7-15

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- **Judges 9:7-15:** 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. <sup>8</sup> The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' <sup>9</sup> But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance (leave my fatness in KJV), by which gods and men are honoured (by which they honour God and man in the KJV), and go hold sway over the trees?' <sup>10</sup> And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' <sup>11</sup> But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' <sup>12</sup> And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' <sup>13</sup> But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my

wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’<sup>14</sup> Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’<sup>15</sup> 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.’

In this chapter we have:

1. The first Israelite king.
2. The first massacre of brethren.
3. The first parable.

**Jotham stood on top of mount Gerizim:** (v7) that overlooked the city of Shechem. This was not on the same day that Abimelech was appointed king, but sometime later. The valley between Gerizim and Ebal was a famous place, used for the solemn reading of the law, and its blessings and curses; and it is probable it was still used, even by the superstitious and idolatrous Israelites at this time for such occasions, for it was the custom to use the same places which their ancestors had used.

- When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. (Deut. 11:29).
- When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. (Deut. 27:12).
- All Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. (Joshua 8:33).

**Jotham lifted up his voice and cried:** (v7) so that all the leaders who stood in the valley might hear, and so no one could suddenly seize him. It is likely, Jotham had sent messengers out to gather the chief and principal men of Shechem to the valley at a time when Abimelech was absent. From the Mount he cries, “You men of Shechem,” his words, “listen to me, so that God may listen to you,” implies, if they did not listen to him, God would not listen to them.

**Trees** It very likely that the scenery of the many variety of trees on the mountain with their beautiful foliage, surrounding Jotham inspired the words of this parable.

**NOTE:** the following verses (v16-18) show that this parable is about Gideon and his seventy sons and Abimelech.

**The trees went forth:** (v8) the trees symbolise the people of Israel especially the chief men and nobles of the Shechemites who greatly desired to anoint a king over them. This was the common method amongst the Israelites and other nations when appointing a man to be king.

1. THE TREES (CHIEF MEN AND NOBLES) FIRSTLY ASKED:

- **An olive tree to reign over them:** (v9) the olive tree was a highly esteemed tree, with its silvery leaves and fruitfulness, and a most suitable symbol for a godly man, gifted with excellent virtues, skills and qualifications for good. David the king of Israel was compared to such a tree:
- I (David) *am* like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever. (Psalm 52:8).

Based upon the context of this story, and the following verses (v16-19) most suppose the olive tree here in this parable refers to Gideon who refused the kingly government when it was offered to him (Judges

8:22–23). The olive tree, refused their offer, basically saying, why would I leave my abundance and good fruit, by which I am able to bless and honour nobles, leaders and rulers to become a king.

2. THE TREES (CHIEF MEN AND NOBLES) THEN ASKED:

- **The fig tree to reign over them:** (v10) the luscious fruit bearing tree and broad green shade of the ancient fig would naturally make it the next best choice; but it also rejects the trees offer to be anointed king. Since the men of Israel not only asked Gideon to rule over them as king, but also made the same offer to his son and grandsons, and Gideon refused the offer saying, “neither I nor my son will rule over you” (Judges 8:22-23), the olive tree in this context may refer to one of Gideons seventy sons, but could refer to any noble man that would be suitable for such an offer to be made.

3. THE TREES (CHIEF MEN AND NOBLES) THEN ASKED:

- **The vine to reign over them:** (v12), the vine with its low-growing branches and trellised vine, which needs support for its own healthy growth, make it a little less suitable choice, but other than this it basically signifies the same thing as the olive and fig tree.

4. THE TREES (CHIEF MEN AND NOBLES) THEN ASKED:

- **The bramble to reign over them:** (v14) the bramble or thorn symbolises a cruel, fruitless and hurtful tree, which suitably represents Abimelech, the son of a concubine, and man of ruthless character and great cruelty. The idea is Gideon and his sons or some other suitable noble, rejected the trees offer to rule over them as king), so they give the same offer to a bramble (Abimelech), a murderous, ruthless man of unscrupulous ambition, who immediately accepts the offer. The bramble, is a worthless plant, that rather than bear fruit, grows thorns, and the closer one draws near to it, the more they will be afflicted with scratches and pain, and its end is to be burnt, making it a suitable symbol of Abimelech.

**Put your trust in my shadow then you may expect protection under my government**(v15), these words of Abimelech’s, boast protection to those under his rule which is common with deceitful and wicked rulers during their speeches to win the people over. But, brambles with their small leaves and bristling thorns in reality provide no shadow of any effective use, and even if a person did shelter under it for shade, they would find no comfort for the nearer and closer they came to it, the more they would be scratched and torn by it.

**Let fire come out of the bramble:** (v16), based upon the following verses, most suppose the words, “fire comes out of the bramble,” is a reference to bramble bushes and their thorns easily burning. The following verses show that burning thorns have the power to destroy entire grain fields.

- If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution. (Exod. 22:6).

Burning thorns are used to heat pots.

- Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away! (Psalm 58:9). (Eccl. 7:6).

Abimelech (the bramble) is saying, “if the people anoint him king and they submit to his government, he will protect them, but if they do not faithfully follow him, he will destroy their nobles, officers and principal men (the cedars) and the people (the trees) will feel his wrath and vengeance. Throughout this parable the symbolic images it contains are perfectly matched for even here, the symbolism is of worthless and weak brambles growing under the tallest and strongest cedars kindling a flame as they

can easily do, that has the potential to burn a stately cedar forest to the ground. The symbolism, is of course of Abimelech (the bramble) bringing to ruin the people of Israel.

**NOTE:** in verse thirteen it is written, "the vine says, shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men?" It has been suggested by some that the words, "wine that cheers God and man" presents a false and unworthy notion of God, but the words are part of a parable, and as such not every word or sentence is to be interpreted literally, unless it is strictly teaching doctrinal Scripture, remember, the parable speaks of trees talking, yet we don't take these words literally.

Some explain the words, "wine that cheers God and man" in the following way:

The words should read, "gods and men," for Jotham is speaking to an idolatrous people that whored after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god. (Judges 8:33), and therefore should be read in the same way that the following verse states, gods and men are honoured by abundance.

- The olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance (fatness in KJV), by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?' (Judges 9:9).

God is not cheered by wine in the same way as man is, but by it, when offered with acceptable sacrifices as He is said also to be honoured by oil (Jud 9:9).

- You shall offer with the burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb. (Num. 15:5).
- For the drink offering you shall offer a third of a hin of wine, a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (Num. 15:7).
- You shall offer for the drink offering half a hin of wine, as a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (Num. 15:10).

Added to this, wine gladdens the heart of man:

- Wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart. (Psalm 104:15).

Wine offered to God, would have been drunk by the priesthood, not on Sabbath Days or at Holy Services, but at Israel's festivals and feasts of celebration, and it is in this way that wine cheers God, for the priests were God's representatives on earth.

**Overview of the parable:** there was no reason for the trees to choose a king, for all the trees are all of the LORD, and it is the LORD who has planted them. Likewise, there was no reason for Israel to set a king over them, for as Gideon stated, "the LORD was their King." By this parable Jotham signified to the Shechemites that the most-worthy men in Israel, figured by the olive, the fig-tree, and the vine, which bear the most useful and excellent fruits, had not aimed at kingly dominion over them; and that his father Gideon had even refused it, when offered to him.

By the bramble, the most worthless of shrubs, accepting the offer of the trees to be their king, and calling to them to put their trust in its shadow, though by its nature it could give no effective shadow or protection to them, he shows what a worthless choice they had made. The speech of the bramble represents how foolish Abimelech was, in imagining he would be able to maintain the authority of a king, as he could by no means give the protection, he promised any more than the bramble, could give adequate shade. The threat of the bramble indicates the cruelty of Abimelech's temper, manifested in his threat to destroy the Shechemites, if he found them unfaithful to him.

**A principal of leadership:** those who are exalted to public trust and power, must put the well-being of those they rule over, before their own private ambitions, interests and advantages, for the good of others. To be

exalted to public trust and power is a great privilege, while at the same time also a great risk, for the pride of those who are esteemed by the masses, to fame, honour and dignity, are in danger of pride rising up, and thereby lose their fruitfulness, which is why those who are wise and desire to bring good to the masses, are mindful that they are but man, and always conscious to never allow themselves to view themselves as being superior to others, but rather remain humble and grateful for the honoured and privilege they have.

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## JOTHAM STANDS UP FOR HIS FATHER GIDEON

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### JUDGES 9:16-20

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- **Judges 9:16-20:** “Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal (Gideon) and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved—<sup>17</sup> for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian,<sup>18</sup> 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—<sup>19</sup> if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal (Gideon) and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.<sup>20</sup> 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.”

These verses contain the interpretation of the parable. Jotham applies his parable to the Shechemites, basically saying, “if they have done right to the family of Gideon, in murdering his seventy legitimate sons, and exalting Abimelech (the son of Gideon’s concubine) to be king over them, then he prays they will be happy with his rule. But, if they have done what was unjust (as they certainly had,) he prays that jealousies and divisions would break out amongst them, and that they would injure and destroy each other.

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The following verse shows that God answered this prayer within three years:

- Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. (Judges 9:23).

**For my father fought for you:** (v17) in the valley of Jezreel, and at Karkor, where Gideon with his three hundred men defeated and destroyed an army of 135,000.

**You have risen up against my father’s house:** (v18) which manifests their enormous ingratitude for all that Gideon had achieved for them.

**You have slain his sons:** (v18), seventy men murdered on one stone, except Jotham himself, though they would have murdered him if he hadn’t hidden himself. Though it was Abimelech’s plan, the men of Shechem gave him money to hire men to assist him in it and showed their approval of it, by making Abimelech king and are therefore justly charged equally guilty.

**You have made Abimelech your king:** (v18), they made Abimelech the son of Gideon’s handmaid, a ruthless murderer, a king over Shechem, not because he had any right to the kingdom, or had any qualification for it, but because his mother lived among them and her family belonged to them. No doubt they hoped to gain many favours from him, because he was so closely related to many of them, but this ungodly behaviour was not only a disgrace to Gideon and his family, but also a disgrace of themselves, and an offence to God.

**Let fire from Abimelech devour leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo:** (v20), Jotham is saying, “if the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo have acted unjustly, let God’s wrath come upon them and upon Abimelech.”

### JUDGES 9:21-22

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- **Judges 9:21-22:** And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother. <sup>22</sup> Abimelech ruled over Israel three years.

**Jotham fled and to Beer:** (v21), the word "Beer" means, "a well," it was a very common name in Palestine. For fear of Abimelech his half-brother Jotham, fled to a place called Beer. Following are the locations various commentators suppose it may refer to:

- A place remote from Shechem.
- The modern village El-Bireh, on the ridge that bounds the northern panorama viewpoint of Jerusalem.
- Baalathbeer in the tribe of Simeon.
- The village Bera, eight miles north of Eleutheropolis.
- A place a little under three hours travel from Bethel and a little over three hours from Jerusalem.

We cannot know for sure which of these places Jotham fled to, but we can be certain it was someplace out of Abimelech's reach, how long he dwelt there we cannot know, for we hear no more of him after this. Jotham highlights the extreme ingratitude of the people in raising Abimelech up on the murder of his seventy sons. Though by murder the men of Shechem advanced Abimelech to the throne, it appears that the rest of the people consented to this new form of government, or at least made no resistance against it. At the beginning of his reign, he probably only ruled over Shechem, but by stealthy and progressive advances he brought some of the neighbouring towns to align with him. By murder he gained the throne that his father Gideon refused, but his glory only lasts three years (i.e., the bramble withered and burned).

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## GOD SENDS AND EVIL SPIRIT

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### JUDGES 9:23-24

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- **Judges 9:23-24:** And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, <sup>24</sup> that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal (Gideon) 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.

The word evil in this context carries the following ideas, harmful, wicked, trouble and grievous, while the word spirit embraces, anger, jealousy, strife, trouble, distrust and rebellion. The statement, "God sent an evil spirit," simply means that He allowed these attitudes of the flesh to rise up amongst the people. The following verses show that God allowed certain circumstances that created jealousies, mistrust and envy between the leaders of Shechem and Abimelech.

Some of the leaders of Shechem were sickened with Abimelech's murder of Gideon's seventy sons. God stirred up these contentions and ill will amongst the leaders of Shechem, by giving them up to the lusts of their own hearts to think evil of one another. The following verses show that in this way God brought to ruin Abimelech's royal reign and punished the idolatrous usurper and those who consented with the king in shedding innocent blood.

## JUDGES 9:25-27

- **Judges 9:25-27:** And the leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him (Abimelech) on the mountaintops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way. And it was told to Abimelech. <sup>26</sup> And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his relatives (brethren in KJV), and the leaders of Shechem put confidence in him. <sup>27</sup> 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 (cursed in KJV) Abimelech.

**Gaal the son of Ebed:** (v26) we are not given any further information who Gaal was, but the context implies that he was a man of considerable wealth and strength, and a man who was not pleased with Abimelech's power and government. He may have been an opportunist and probably belonged to the Canaanite population. His relatives (brethren in KJV) may have formed the nucleus of his marauding band.

**Ebal and Gerizim:** were near Shechem, and the places he travelled through when he came to the city of Shechem.

**Leaders of Shechem put men in ambush against him:** (v27) certain leaders of Shechem who were against Abimelech and his government appointed men to lie in wait for Abimelech to pass through the mountains so they could rush out and kill him, but while waiting for Abimelech it appears they robbed others of his royal house as they passed by. When Abimelech heard what was happening, it appears that the leaders of Shechem invited Gaal with his forces, to move into Shechem to protect them from Abimelech's wrath.

**They went out and gathered the grapes:** (v27) with Gaal in Shechem, the leaders felt safe to go out to the fields and gather their grapes from their vineyards without fear of Abimelech.

**They held a festival, ate and drank:** (v27) after treading out the grapes, they made merry, sung songs and danced, which was the usual practice after the ingathering of the vineyards. The word, merry carries the idea of eating, drinking, praising and offering thanksgivings in this context with drunken religious fervour to honour their idols, in their temple as was the custom of idolaters to do partly for the vintage, and partly for Gaals protection from Abimelech's tyranny.

This was a pagan feast corresponding to Israel's Feast of Ingathering, which manifests the depth of apostasy that the people of Shechem had sunk to, and shows that they had transferred Israel's true customs of worship from the LORD to Baal.

**They went into the house of their god:** (v27) the temple of Baal-berith (Judges 9:4), it seems the peoples joy and merriment were made before their idol, to who they gave the praise of their vintage, rather than giving it to the true God. This was an idolatrous feast in the house of Baal-berith. The fulness of their rebellion against God reached its peak when they were drunken with wine and offered their praises to their pagan god.

**They reviled (cursed in KJV) Abimelech:** (v27) carries the idea that they not only loathed and detested Abimelech, but also wished they had never seen him and known him. From the moment onward, they began to speak insultingly against him desiring to be rid of him as soon as it was possible. This seems to have been the first outburst of rebellion among the general population of Shechem, and Gaal saw an opportunity to take advantage of it. Remember during these days of the Judges there was no legitimate king in Israel, and everyone was doing what they considered was right in their own eyes. (Judges 21:25).

**SNAPSHOT:** We are now beginning to see what the words, "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem," (v23), mean, for the evil spirit is here manifested in the hatred the leaders of Shechem now have toward Abimelech.

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## GAAL CHALLENGES ABIMELECH

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### JUDGES 9:28-29

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- **Judges 9:28-29:** 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 (Gideon), and is not Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him? <sup>29</sup> Would that this people were under my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out.'"

**Hamor:** was the father of Shechem (Gen. 33:19) (Josh. 24:32).

Amongst commentators there are various explanations and interpretation of this very brief speech of Gaal's, the following seems to best harmonise with the context, because Gaal's end goal was to promote himself and esteem his own authority. Rather than immediately promote himself Gaal begins his speech saying, "Why should we serve Abimelech, what is he but a self-serving ambitious, ruthless, cruel tyrant who is unworthy to rule and govern you, why should we men of Shechem serve the son of Gideon."

He then suggests another possibility (probably aware many were thinking of doing this) which was to align themselves with the descendants of their past native prince Hamor the father of Shechem (Gen. 33:19) (Josh. 24:32). Finally, he seizes the opportunity to get control of the government of the city by promoting himself and pointing out the benefits of making him king.

**Would that this people were under my hand:** (v29) Gaal proudly boasts saying, if he was the ruler of their city, he would gather his forces and remove Abimelech from his kingly office, and drive him out of the country of Shechem. The remainder of the story shows that these prideful words of Gaal turn out to be an empty promise.

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## ABIMELECH IS WARNED OF GAALS CHALLENGE

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### JUDGES 9:30-33

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- **Judges 9:30-33:** When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Now therefore, go by night, you and the people who are with you, and set an ambush in the field. <sup>33</sup> 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."

When Zebul heard the words of Gaal, he immediately sent messengers to Abimelech, to warn him that Gaal was inciting the Shechemites up against him.

**Go by night, you and set an ambush:** (v32) Zebul's messengers tell Abimelech to go with his forces the following night so they would be less liable to be discovered, and Gaal would have no time to gather his troops together. Then lie in wait in the field until morning.

**In the morning, as soon as the sun is up:** (v32) they were to rise up and attack the city before the inhabitants were up to defend it, and in this way take the city by surprise.

**Do to them as your hand finds to do:** (v32) meaning according to what unfolds and as the circumstances determine and according to his military knowledge and skill. Having a full awareness of Abimelech knowledge of warfare, he knew there was no need to advise him more than he has.

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## ABIMELECH ATTACKS SHECHEM

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### JUDGES 9:34-37

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- **Judges 9:34-37:** So Abimelech and all the men who were with him rose up by night and set an ambush against Shechem in four companies. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> 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."

**Ebal and Gerizim:** the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim were near to Shechem.

**The plain of Meonenim:** is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, some translate it as, "the oak of Meonenim" or of the oak of soothsayers, due to the fact oaks were held in great esteem (because of their majesty and strength) with idolaters, and an ideal place to sit under (because of their great shade) and speak their oracles and divinations to the people. It may have been some plain where oak trees grew, that was well known, because people meet to hear the divinations and oracles the soothsayers spoke.

According to the advice of Zebul, all the people with Abimelech went by night, and laid wait until morning against Shechem. Abimelech divided his army into four separate companies, which he placed some distance from the city on each of its four sides.

**Gaal stood at the gate of the city:** (v35), it maybe that Gaal had heard a rumour that Abimelech was gathering against him and went out to look.

**Gaal said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming:** (v36) Zebul, concealing his anger against Gaal (Judges 9:30) pretends to be in league with Gaal, so that he would stall him off from gathering his army and at the same time draw him further out into the field, where Abimelech would have greater opportunity of slaying and overthrowing him. Zebul tells him it's not people, but just the shadows of the mountains (keep in mind they would still be some distance away), for his goal was to keep Gaal deceived as long as possible.

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## ZEBUL MOCKS GAAL

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### JUDGES 9:38-41

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- **Judges 9:38-41:** 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." <sup>39</sup> And Gaal went out at the head of the leaders of Shechem and fought with Abimelech. <sup>40</sup> And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. And many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. <sup>41</sup> And Abimelech lived at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his relatives, so that they could not dwell at Shechem.

Abimelech and his army came out of their ambush, which meant Zebul, could now safely throw off his deceitful pretence, and now having to pretend no longer, turned to Gaal, saying, "Where is your bragging now," referring to his contemptuous boast, "Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?"

**NOTE:** there seems to have been two parties in Shechem, one that hated Abimelech, and another that was more aligned with his interest, it was by this second groups favour that Zebul, Abimelechs officer was able to keep his post, and that prevented Gaal from getting hold of the government for himself.

Gaal gathered the men of Shechem together and as their captain led them out of the city to battle against Abimelech. Abimelech overpowered Gaal, and he with his forces fled.

**Arumah:** seems to be some place not far away from Shechem.

After Abimelech's victory he did not take advantage of it, but instead went to Arumah, some say for the following reasons:

- To see whether the Shechemites would willing return to his government or not.
- To wait for another opportunity to take his revenge upon on the Shechemites.

**Zebul thrust out Gaal:** while Abimelech dwelt in Arumah, Zebul cast Gaal and the leaders of Shechem out of Shechem, which he could easily do because the great majority of the population of Shechem were enraged against Gaal and the leaders of Shechem, probably supposing Gaal to be a boaster of empty promises and the leaders to be guilty of treachery.

Added to this, the multitudes of Shechemites would have thought that the expulsion of Gaal would please Abimelech, which would in turn make him far less likely to go to war against them. But even though the Shechemites were offended with Gaal, which meant Zebul's could have killed Gaal and the leaders of Shechem with him, he chose rather to simply cast them them out of Shechem, the most likely reason for this is that he didn't want to risk offending any of the people, and thought it better to wait for another opportunity to get his revenge and put them to death at a later time.

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## ABIMELECH KILLS PEOPLE IN THE FIELD

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### JUDGES 9:0-00

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- **Judges 9:42-43:** On the following day (after Zebul had driven out Gaal) (v41), the people went out into the field, and Abimelech was told.<sup>43</sup> 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.

It is very possible Abimelech and his forces withdraw to Arumah to lull the Shechemites into a false sense of security, which if this was his plan, it worked, for the Shechemites are now returning to their fields either to complete the vintage, or for some other agricultural work. When Abimelech hears of this, he divides his forces into three companies and has them hide themselves in the fields so they can kill the people as they come out of the city into the fields.

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## ABIMELECH KILLS PEOPLE IN THE CITY

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### JUDGES 9:44-45

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- **Judges 9:44-45:** 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.

While some of the companies attacked the men of Shechem in the field, another company, rushed out of their ambush and stood at the gate of the city, and in this way could slay any Shechemite fleeing toward the city from Abimelech's companies in the fields. At the end of the day Abimelech had killed all the people within the city, excepting his own family, his friends and all who had taken up arms with him.

**He razed the city and sowed it with salt:** (v45) meaning he destroyed its walls and burnt its houses, and afterward, covered the land of the city with salt. Not so much to make the place barren, as salt will do, for if this was the goal, he would have sowed it in the fields, not the city, but rather to show his utter detestation of the city and its inhabitants, for salt used in this way was used as a symbol that expressed:

- Utter loathing and great hatred and anger against any place.
- A desire that it should never be inhabited again.
- A desire that it should never again produce any fruitful produce.

The following verse shows salt symbolises utter devastation and destruction.

- The whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath. (Deut. 29:23).
- Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever." (Zeph. 2:9).
- A fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the evil of its inhabitants. (Psalm 107:34).

Covering a land with salt signifies that a place should never be rebuilt again, however, Shechem was built and became again a very flourishing city in Jeroboam's time. Despite the fact Abimelech took the city of Shechem, utterly destroyed it, and burnt the temple of Baal-berith where the people had fled for safety and covered the land with salt, the city was rebuilt in the 10th century BC and was probably the capital of Ephraim (1 Kings 4). Today Shechem also spelled Shekhem, is a Canaanite city of ancient Palestine, near Nablus.

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## ABIMELECH KILLS 1,000 MEN AND WOMEN

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### JUDGES 9:46-49

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- **Judges 9:46-49:** When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith (the god Berith in KJV).<sup>47</sup> Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together.<sup>48</sup> 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."<sup>49</sup> 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.

The house of El-berith (the god Berith in KJV), is the same as Baal-berith spoken of in the following verses:

- As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. (Judges 8:33).
- 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. (Judges 9:4).

It appears the Tower of Shechem was some kind of stronghold or fortress, perhaps built near the house of El-berith (the god Berith in KJV), the same as Baal-berith, a pagan sanctuary/temple to defend and protect it from enemies. It was common during these ancient times to have a fortress built alongside a sacred temple to defend and safeguard it from enemies.

The fact Abimelech had taken the city of Shechem killed the inhabitants, destroyed the houses and walls and sowed the ground with salt, shows that this tower was not within the city, because if it was the people in focus here would have seen what had been done to the city, which means the words, "when all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard of it," (v46) would not have needed to be written." However, it was possessed by Shechemites, located not far from the city, and it was to here that certain leaders, and about a thousand people and women of Shechem fled for safety.

**Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon:** (v46) since the name Zalmon means shady it is supposed by most that Mount Zalmon refers to a thickly-wooded hill covered with many shady trees growing on it, in the neighbourhood of Shechem, and the nearest place where Abimelech could get combustible firewood.

**Every man cut down a bough:** (v49) they did as Abimelech had done and cut down some combustible wood, carried them on their shoulder and laid them all around the tower/fortress then set them on fire, the flames spread and the entire structure burnt to the ground, killing about a thousand men and women by fire and by the thickness of smoke.

**Jotham's curse:** this utter destruction by fire was the literal fulfillment of the first part of Jotham's curse previously spoken of in the following verses:

- 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." (Judges 9:20).

That curse is noted to have its effect:

- 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. (Judges 9:57).

The second half of Jotham's curse, the destruction of Abimelech is recorded at the end of the chapter (v55-57). Two things took place during Abimelech's battles against the Shechemites:

1. Abimelech punished the people of Shechem for previously betraying him.
2. God punished the Shechemites for serving Abimelech who had gained his royal throne by murdering Gideon's seventy sons.

These two truths show that God uses men as instruments in His hand to do His work.

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## A WOMAN THROWS A STONE ON ABIMELECH'S HEAD

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### JUDGES 9:50-54

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- **Judges 9:50-54:** Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. <sup>51</sup> 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. <sup>52</sup> And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. <sup>53</sup> And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. <sup>54</sup> 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.

**Thebez:** (v50) was a city (perhaps Tubas) that worshipped Baal, not far from Shechem as it appears and within their territory inhabited by Shechemites, to fulfil Jotham's curse.

- But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo.” (Judges 9:20).

No doubt the men of Thebez had joined the Shechemites in their rebellion against Abimelech.

**There was a strong tower within the city:** (v51), the tower of Shechem was outside the city, but this tower was within the city, as towers mostly were. The fact towers and strongholds are constantly mentioned shows the unsettled state of the country during this time of the Judges. The top of the tower refers to the flat platform built around the tops of watchtowers, so guards could keep watch for approaching enemies.

**All the men, women and leaders fled to the tower:** (v51), including children, maid servants and all the inhabitants of the city of Shechem who survived Abimelech's destruction of the city fled to their strong hold within the city. Clearly this was a very large stronghold with a high tower probably with various rooms surrounding the tower. The people strongly barred and bolted the gates, to lock the enemy out. Many in great fear would have gone to the top of the tower to see if Abimelech was approaching.

**Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it:** (v52), breaking into the fortress by burning its solid wooden gates with fire. Throwing large stones down from a tower or the walls of a stronghold were common practises during battles in these ancient years.

**A certain woman threw an upper millstone:** (v53) this verse has cause difficulty for some, because millstones weighed up to 1,500 kilograms, which no woman could lift, but the writer would expect the ready to use some common sense and understand that this was not a full millstone, but part of one, which was probably broken up into many pieces for that the people to throw down on the enemy, for it was common practise to have stones laid up on the top floor of a tower or fortress walls ready to be thrown upon enemies in times of attack. While Abimelech was attempting to set fire to the gates to get entrance into it a woman saw him at the door of the tower, and took up a stone and threw it down upon him, which fractured his skull so badly that he knew death was certain

**Abimelech quickly called his armour bearer:** (v54) perceiving he was about to die, by a stone thrown from the hand of a woman, Abimelech desired that his armourbearer would draw his sword and slay him, so that it would not be said that a woman killed him, for it was counted a great disgrace to be killed by a woman, especially if it was a king, a notable person or commander of an army.

**It is interesting to note:** by having his armour bearer kill him to conceal the shame that he was killed by a woman, seemed to bring about the totally opposite result for the following verse shows that the manner of his death was remembered and spoken of almost two hundred years later:

- Who killed Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall? then you shall say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.’” (2 Sam. 11:21).

As much as Abimelech desired to escape the taunt, it appears he increased it. Here the justice of God is appropriately suitable for Abimelech's punishment, for he slew seventy of Gideons sons on a stone and he himself is killed by a stone.

- And he (Abimelech) went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal (Gideon), seventy men, on one stone. (Judges 9:5).

JUDGES 9:55-57

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- **Judges 9:55-57:** And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. <sup>56</sup> Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. <sup>57</sup> 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.

When the men of Israel that were with Abimelech saw that he was dead they disbanded his army and returned to their own home, and the inhabitants of Thebez escaped the vengeance of Abimelech.

**How amazing is this:** we see God, the judge of all, not only punished both Abimelech and the men of Shechem according to their crimes, but also made them the instruments of each other's destruction, and all within less than four years, shining a spotlight upon the truth that no one should think these things came to pass by chance.

**This is fantastic:** the events recorded in this chapter literally fulfil the following curse of Jotham's for both the Shechemites and Abimelech are destroyed because Abimelech killed Gideons seventy sons and the Shechemites supported him.

- 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." (Judges 9:20).

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*As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.*

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