

Judges Chapter 9 – John Karmelich

1. One of the things that's always puzzled me about the bible is why does it include horrid stories of some really bad characters? I get it wants to cover Israel's history, both good and bad. I grasp that some of Israel's leaders were horrible people. Still, I don't think of the bible as a history book. It is a guide on how God wants us to live. So if the bible tells a story of a horrid individual why is that part of the bible? Other than learning about a murderer who lived several thousand years ago in Israel, why should I care about this guy? Thought you'd never ask!
 - a) The first thing to keep in mind is that God's desire is that we be a good witness for Him. I believe that includes the "carrot and stick" approach. That refers to encouraging horses or donkeys to go by enticing them with a carrot or hitting them. The bible is full of stories of good and bad people as if to say, "Here's what God desires of us" and other stories give us examples of what to avoid or we'll suffer the consequences! (Even devout Christians!)
 - b) So if you haven't figured it out by now, this chapter tells a story of a horrid man who was one of the many sons of Gideon, the hero from the last chapter. The end of the last chapter told us that he had (wait for it) over 70 sons from multiple women. Now we realize how Gideon kept busy after the war, lots of marriage and lots of sex! That probably means he had over 70 daughters. The bible never outright condemns polygamy except Genesis 2:24 says a man is to leave his mother and father and marry a wife (singular). The bible never has anything good from any story involving multiple wives including this chapter.
 - c) Bottom line time: One of those sons came from a woman who worshipped Baal. That son killed all his brothers (except one) and that bad son went on to rule in Israel. He is not one of the judges. He's just a son of Gideon who assumed leadership by killing his brothers to assume leadership. His name is Abimelech, which means "son of a king".
 - d) The rest of the chapter deals with how God ordained his downfall. It's as if He said, "I did not pick you for leadership even though you assumed it!" God was also thinking that you did kill all those innocent people and now you'll suffer for it. In effect, this guy will die in a similar method to way he killed all of his half brothers!
 - e) OK John, I'm glad he got his. However, that was over 3,000 years ago. Why should I care about this story? After all, we all know stories of horrid evils done by people and it seems like they're getting away with it! One of the things to grasp is if this life is all that there is, it's a very unfair place to live. I'd much rather go through life believing in a just God who will right the wrongs of this life than to believe this life is all that there is. Let's be honest, if there is no next life, this one is very unfair! What does one say to a child with cancer, "I hope you have better luck next time"! Of course not. Obviously, I believe the bible is God's word and if you give me enough time, I can prove it to you. My point is God exists and if we believe He died for all our sins and is in charge of our lives, then we'll be with Him in heaven forever and serve Him then as we do now! That's how this life is preparation for the next one!
2. All of that leads me back to the question: Why is this story here? Why does God want me to read this horrid story of a wicked man, who kills lots of people and then "gets his" for his evil act?
 - a) To teach us that God exists and there is a price to pay for disobedience!
 - b) To teach us that unless we work by His Spirit, even if we're the son of "somebody", we can only make a difference by our trust in Him to guide our lives. Unless we're called by God to make a difference, in effect we're useless. Gideon's son, again named Abimelech was an example of someone who thought he could make a difference based on his family's name as opposed to being called by God.
 - c) Also it is to teach us that God desires obedience. Just because we're saved, the question is "Saved to do what?" The "what" is to make a difference for Him! That's why I write these lessons and that question is what should drive us as Christians to live for!

3. So what do you call this chapter? "The price of not being a good witness for God!" The Christian life is all about trying to figure out God's will, living as He desires, making the best decisions we can giving the information in front of us and living by the guidelines set out in the bible. (That is, we don't steal, murder, or worship things other than God, which includes ourselves.) The point's that when God's people choose to ignore Him, innocent people suffer. He cares for those who've suffered and He'll judge people for what they've done. That's standard Christian theology. Let's assume most of us Christians already accept that, why should we study this chapter?
 - a) To remind ourselves, when things go horribly, a judgment day is still coming!
 - b) To remind ourselves, God will judge people on His timing!
 - c) To remind ourselves, this life is not always fair and many innocent people suffer!
 - d) Think of it as peace of mind. We all have things we can worry about. There's suffering all around us. Reading about injustice and God working it out for His glory's a reminder that despite all the suffering around us, we can have joy in our hearts knowing God's ruling in our world and will work things out for His glory!
 - e) There, that's a reason to be joyful despite a gloomy chapter.
4. OK, time for the overview, and I'll make it brief.
 - a) Gideon from the last chapter had 70 sons by lots of wives. One of the sons came from one of the families who worshipped Baal. That's the start of bad news.
 - b) That son was named Abimelech. It means son of a king even though Gideon was never a king. He assumed kingship by killing all but one of his brothers. He executed all of them on a single stone. It's debated whether or not he ruled over all of Israel but just parts of it.
 - c) The one brother he didn't kill gave a speech in effect saying, Abimelech, you're like a bush that is no good for anything except kindle! You are doing wrong and God knows it!
 - d) The town where Abimelech's from turns on him. Another man emerges who fights a little war against Abimelech. The short version's Abimelech won and killed every person living in his hometown. That event was God ordained because that town helped Abimelech.
 - e) Abimelech went on to fight another town. The residents there ran to a tower. From there a woman dropped a stone on Abimelech's head that killed him. Remember he killed all his half brothers with one stone, so three years later, he was effectively killed by a stone.
 - f) Yes it's a strange tragic story about a man who turned from God and many people died in account of this man wanting to be king. It took three years for God to end his life. Why? I suspect to give time for him to repent. I suspect it was time for Abimelech to think there's no Jewish God, I'm still ruling and nothing has changed! It's a reminder that God will not let injustice continue forever. He's on the throne and working on His timing.
 - g) Well, that's the tragic tale of Abimelech in a few thoughts. If you'd like to read the details I invite you to join me as we go through this chapter. Thanks as always, John
5. Chapter 9, Verse 1: Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother's clan, ² "Ask all the citizens of Shechem, 'Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal's sons rule over you, or just one man?' Remember, I am your flesh and blood."
 - a) One of the prime rules of studying the bible, is always to read the text within the context of the surrounding verses. The chapter breaks were not added until millennium after this was written. Verse 29 of the previous singles out Abimelech as one of the 70 sons through multiple wives and concubines. A concubine is essentially a "lower status wife". We don't read anything else about Abimelech or his family in Chapter 8. That chapter only gives us a "teaser" of the main focus of Chapter 9. The rest of Chapter 8 essentially says Gideon did live to an old age. The last thing Chapter 8 says is the Israelites returned to Baal worship.
 - i) The key point of Chapter 8 is that Gideon the main character of Chapters 6-8 didn't finish well and the Israelites returned to their sinful ways after Gideon died.
 - ii) The fact that Abimelech became a center figure is indicative of turning from God!

- b) My point is the "seeds" of the horrid time in Israel's history when Gideon's son Abimelech took over was planted in Chapter 8. Even before this chapter opened, we learned that the Israelites were already turning back to worshipping a false god (Baal) so when Abimelech started reigning in Israel, in a sense this "bad egg" was giving the Israelites just what they wanted. The point for you and me is when we live in a society that as a whole turns away from God, the consequences grow worse and worse, as we'll see in this chapter.
 - c) Also keep in mind Gideon himself wasn't the most innocent judge, as Chapter 8 told of his downfall. The fact he married lots of wives wasn't technically illegal, but nothing positive is said of any multi-marriage in the bible. Yes, Jacob had four women that gave us the 12 tribes of Israel, but that's God using the situation at hand for His glory. It doesn't mean He approves of multiple wives. Again as Genesis 2:24, says a man shall leave his mother and father and cling to his wife. It doesn't say "wives", but wife singular. So in that sense Gideon did mess up by marrying all those wives and having concubines.
 - d) With that said, we actually made it to Chapter 9, Verse 1. The chapter opens with this one son of Gideon who's mother was a concubine, meeting with the leading men who lived in that town, which included a lot of his relatives. Abimelech then asked the question of who do you want to reign over you. Remember that Abimelech's father wasn't a king. He was a judge and Abimelech who's name means "Son of a king" wrongly assumed God wanted one of Gideon's children to be the next king or at the least the next judge in Israel. As we'll find out that assumption was not only wrong, but deadly to a lot of Israelites!
 - e) Chapter 9 opens Abimelech "campaigning" to be a leader. He gathers all the leaders of his hometown, which includes a lot of his relatives to ask, "Hey you want all of Gideon's sons to rule over you, or just me. Since I'm one of yours, everyone here would benefit from me being the king versus all of those people!" Those were not his exact words, but that's what he was implying. Notice Abimelech didn't give a third option. He implies the only option is either he rules or all of his half brothers rule, so ok, citizens of the town of Shechem, tell me what you choose? That leads to Verse 3:
6. Verse 3: When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴ They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers. ⁵ He went to his father's home in Ophrah and on one stone murdered his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerub-Baal, escaped by hiding. ⁶ Then all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king.
- a) Apparently when Abimelech talked it wasn't to the whole town, but a selected group that I suspect was mostly relatives. Bottom line is the town liked the idea, as let's face it, they'd be privileged by having a king from their town!
 - b) So why did the town agree to give him money? Think of it as a campaign donation. They knew the rest of Israel may not be crazy about having a Baal-worshipping son (among the 70 sons) being the next ruler, so they gave him money to either to wipe out his brothers or to somehow defeat them so he could rule.
 - c) Then Abimelech took the "evil route". He hired some worthless men (this bible version is referring to them as "reckless adventurers" and I expect we all know the type!). Abimelech went on to murder all but one of his half brothers. He probably asked all of them to come to their father's hometown to decide who would rule over Israel. Out of curiosity, they all came. I suspect the "worthless band of marauders" as I call them, then accused all of them of blasphemy or other crimes in order to sentence them to death. Then Abimelech gave a death sentence on all of them. He killed each of them over some large stone in his father's hometown. We don't get the gruesome details of how Abimelech killed them, just the fact he did. The text mentioned the youngest of the 70 sons escaped and wasn't caught. Notice that Gideon is referred to as "Jerub-Baal" which means "defeater of Baal".

- d) The text mentions that the residents of the town Abimelech is from along with those from a neighboring town gathered to crown Abimelech as king. As one can tell, it's all part of a big effort to make him king whether the rest of Israel liked it or not! It is debated whether or not all of Israel respected this, or just the citizens of these two towns who wanted it for power for themselves!
 - i) Back in my first lesson on Judges I stated that one of the recurring themes is all the people "did whatever they felt like doing". Here we get the citizens of one town to want power for themselves, and worked to make Abimelech a king!
 - ii) One of the appeals of worshipping Baal was power for oneself! However, as we'll read later in the chapter, there is always a price to pay for turning from God!
 - iii) Meanwhile God is working in the background trying to get people to turn back to Him. He'll start by using the one surviving brother of this massacre:
- 7. Verse 7: When Jotham was told about this, he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. ⁸ One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.'
 - a) Realize that Verses 7 to 15 is a poem cited by the surviving brother of this massacre. I give this surviving brother credit for his boldness. He didn't go into hiding. He didn't go into a pity party for the murder of all his brothers and half brother! He had the boldness to go take a stand for what was right! Of all the characteristics of being a Christian, I'm positive the hardest one is boldness! That's why we have to ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as to make a difference for Jesus!
 - b) For all you bible trivia fans, when Joshua brought the Israelites into the land of Israel, they gathered on two mountains and shouted out God's laws for people to obey. It was on one of those same mountains where Jotham (the last living half brother of Abimelech) stood!
 - i) It's also a practical thing. There were no microphones. There were no newspapers to spread the word. A great way to be heard was to go up on a mountain as sound will carry. (Just as Jesus spoke from a boat on the Sea of Galilee as sound bounces off the water!)
 - c) OK, enough background. Let's read what Jothan had to say. What he wanted to do is use trees as an analogy of what it was like for Abimelech to reign over them. He will list three different types of trees (or bushes) to effectively say, "We as good trees were designed for the purpose of creating fruit that people can use for consumption. We won't stop being a thing God designed us to be just because someone says so." With that said, Jothan begins by listing a olive tree and saying, "Hey you, olive tree, be our king!" Obviously Jothan isn't being literal but trying to use these trees as an example with the goal of making all Israel know what a mistake it is to make Abimelech a king.
 - d) With that said, let's get back to the poem!
- 8. Verse 9: "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' ¹⁰ "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.' ¹¹ "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' ¹² "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.' ¹³ "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?'
 - a) The three trees (or bushes) used were olive trees, fig trees and grape branches. The point is all three of them give fruit that is wonderful for human consumption. All of them were common in Israel then as well as today. They're designed to give fruit not be rulers. What is the point is don't pick someone to lead that wasn't called to lead. The underlying point is that Abimelech is not a worthwhile person and doesn't give off "good things" like these trees do! It's meant as a backhanded insult to Abimelech. The implication is Abimelech is not a good leader. The next example of this poem will drive the final nail in that coffin!

9. Verse 14: "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.' ¹⁵ "The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!"
- a) I assume all of us have seen a tumbleweed rolling across the ground or at least seen them on television or a movie. Essentially that's what a thornbush is. You will find in the desert and they often die by becoming detached from the ground. The idea is thornbushes do not have a lot of value. Stop and think about the idea of people sitting under the shade of one of those bushes. It doesn't happen. The ridiculous picture is this bush saying, "You want to make me king over you? Then watch when you set me on fire, I can burn a forest". The "cedars of Lebanon" was a nearby forest area.
 - b) Remember the speaker is a man named Jotham. He was the only surviving son of Gideon who was not massacred by his half brother. Instead of hiding in a corner, he yells from the top of a mountain so that his voice carries. The mountain is above the town of Shechem so they in a sense could hear the crime they committed by supporting Abimelech, the villain of this story. It was not only meant as a condemnation against Abimelech but against the people who made this possible. If you have any doubts, wait until you read the next set of verses where Jotham pretty much condemns the town.
 - c) OK let me finish Jotham's back handed curse of this whole event and then I'll get into why we should care about all of this. Here we go:
10. Verse 16: "Now if you have acted honorably and in good faith when you made Abimelech king, and if you have been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family, and if you have treated him as he deserves-- ¹⁷ and to think that my father fought for you, risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian ¹⁸ (but today you have revolted against my father's family, murdered his seventy sons on a single stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave girl, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your brother)-- ¹⁹ if then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today, may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too! ²⁰ But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!"
- a) The text goes from the "semi-silly" tree analogy to the very serious history of the family of Midian and the good and bad parts of his children. Midian was the last judge in Israel and the main character of the last three chapters. The good part is he conquered a very large army with God's help. The bad part is his life went downhill near the end and most of the Israelites went back to worshipping a false god. One of the things he did wrong was he married lots of women and had seventy sons and assumedly lots of daughters as well. In this chapter, we read that one of those sons murdered all of the rest of them, except one.
 - i) The one son that escaped was pretty ticked off! He gives this speech from Verse 8 through Verse 20. The essential point is Israel is making a huge mistake by having this guy as the next leader. He may be a son of the last judge, but God didn't make him the next judge in Israel, nor a king. Besides he rose to power by murder!
 - ii) This "good son" still has to be in fear for his life. If Abimelech murdered all his half and full brothers, let's just say the he wants this speech maker's head as well!
 - b) You can sense the sarcasm as Jotham praises his murdering half brother" in Verse 19: The essential point is (paraphrasing), "Hey if Abimelech was a good guy like his father, then let him rule here in Israel. But if he's really a bad guy, then let the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo (the towns that supported his rise to power) burn my half brother to death or if he's a bad guy, let Abimelech burn you with fire.
 - i) So why is this strange rant included in the bible? Because it'll end up coming true as predicted. We'll come to that in a matter of verses. Bottom line both Abimelech and the cities that helped him rise to power will suffer for the murder they caused. It's a "believers don't get away with things when we're called to be His witnesses!"

- ii) That is in effect, the point for you and me reading this. There's a false view taught by some Christians that as believers we never have to worry about sin. It's the false idea that since Jesus paid for every sin we'll ever commit, we're now free to go sin as much as we want. That statement is both true and false. If we truly believe Jesus died for every sin and hold that view despite our sins, we can't blow our salvation based on sinning too much. The real question becomes, if we believe Jesus is Lord over our lives (that is just as much of being a Christian as believing He died for all of sins) then why would we want to sin? Yes there are consequences for sin as this chapter makes clear. However, an underlying lesson for us, is why would we want to sin in the first place, not only to avoid the consequences but also to displease the God who created us and saved us in the first place.
 - iii) Bottom line, Christians are free to sin all the want. However, if we truly believe in Jesus as God, paying for our sins and in charge of our lives, why would we desire to sin in the first place?
 - iv) By the way, I'm not saying if we sin we lose our salvation. Sin for the Christian just means we're a bad witness for Jesus at that moment! We confess and turn from sin as that's how God desires we live.
 - v) Now that I've beaten that fundamental point to death, back to the text!
11. Verse 21: Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and he lived there because he was afraid of his brother Abimelech.
- a) This is the last we read of Jotham, the half brother of the main character and evil villain of our story. Notice he didn't say, "OK Abimelech I said my peace, kill me now". Notice that he didn't join an army to fight Abimelech. He said his peace, which will turn out to be the future for both Abimelech and the town who supported him, and now he went to hide as to avoid being killed. Since the villain of this story will die before the end of the chapter, I am positive he didn't hide forever. God didn't call Jotham to be a judge, and I'm guessing he went on to live a normal life after this.
 - b) Meanwhile it's time to focus on the main character of this story again, the evil Abimelech!
12. Verse 22: After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, ²³ God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. ²⁴ God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal's seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers. ²⁵ In opposition to him these citizens of Shechem set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob everyone who passed by, and this was reported to Abimelech.
- a) I want you to catch the first sentence, "three years went by". I'm sure Abimelech thought he got away with murder as all that time past and no one has arrested him. I suspect the people feared him. Let's face it, he killed 69 half brothers, so out of fear, people accepted him as their ruler. That reminds me of a famous biblical expression, "The wheels of God grind slowly, but they also grind thoroughly". It's the idea that God works on his timing and not ours.
 - b) So why did God wait three years? We don't know. Maybe it was to give Abimelech some time to repent. Maybe it was to watch and see if other Israelites would stop him. Maybe it was simply the time needed for God's plan of justice to play out. Whatever the reason we are about to see God work on both revenge of the murder of all the brothers as well as the people of the city (or town) of Shechem who were just as guilty for being a part of it.
 - c) If you have any doubts God was behind this revenge, notice Verse 23. It says God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of that town. That leads to the question of whether or not God can do evil? My view is God is incapable of doing evil. However He'll let go of the reign He has over evil and allow "dark forces" to do what they do! God does allow evil in the world, ultimately for His glory. Let me elaborate.
 - i) If this is true, why didn't God prevent the evil deed I'm thinking of right now?

- ii) The answer is if God say, sent an angel to stop every murder that's about to occur or even every robbery, people would complain that He never gives us a chance to prove ourselves to Him. He allows it as part of free will.
 - iii) So if that's true, why did He step in here? He has the right to do whatever it is He wants to do. He may be stopping lots of evil things and we're not aware of it. The point is God allowed evil forces to work for Him here!
 - iv) So if "evil forces" are against God, what is their motivation? The way I describe it is that Satan rules over this world until Jesus returns to "set up shop". Therefore, they want to do all they can to delay that event. That includes killing believers or even harming us to prevent us from being a good witness for Jesus. Before Jesus time, it is a matter of not letting Israelites be a good witness for God. Therefore if they can cause the death of some Israelites it makes them look like a bad witness for God.
 - v) Little did they realize that despite their plan to destroy some Israelites, God meant that plan for His glory as an example of not letting believers get away with sin!
 - vi) That should be the part that scares us Christians. We may be saved if we sin, but we can still suffer the consequences for it. OK then, back to the story!
 - d) The rest of the verses pretty much expand on why God allowed all of this to occur. As to avenge the murder of all those men. So if that's true, why do some people get away with murder or other horrid things in this lifetime? Again, it's God's business and I am the first to admit, this life is not fair. That's why I insist on going through life trusting in a God that will bring justice to all people. Yes, I'm convinced God exists and the bible is God's word, but even more basic than that, in order to have peace, I need to accept that God performs both justice and love as He's "100% both". As the classic Christian line goes, the only way to reconcile a 100% just God with a 100% loving God is to have God Himself pay the full price for all our sins, but most of us know that by now.
 - e) In the meantime, it's time for this plot point to play out.
13. Verse 26: Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his brothers into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him. ²⁷ After they had gone out into the fields and gathered the grapes and trodden them, they held a festival in the temple of their god. While they were eating and drinking, they cursed Abimelech. ²⁸ Then Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should be subject to him? Isn't he Jerub-Baal's son, and isn't Zebul his deputy? Serve the men of Hamor, Shechem's father! Why should we serve Abimelech? ²⁹ If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelech, 'Call out your whole army!' "
- a) In these verses, we get introduced to a new character in the story. His name is Gaal. He is moving to Shechem along with his family. Gaal ends up being a leader in Shechem. He is asking the question, "Why should we follow Abimelech anyway?" We know that God was behind this in order to stir up trouble. The way Gaal does this is he appeals to the citizens of Shechem as to say, "Wait a minute, Abimelech's father was the guy who tore down the altar to Baal. Besides Abimelech's right hand man is also a God worshipper (it's assumed as we don't know much else about him) The point is Gaal is stirring up trouble by asking in effect, "So why are we supporting Abimelech anyway?"
 - b) Remember when Abimelech first came to power, the people of Shechem supported him as he was one of their relatives and they thought they'd benefit from his power. It's a logical guess, but I suspect no one from Shechem was benefiting from Abimelech's leadership, so they're willing to listen to the new guy plan to rebel against him.
 - i) Whether or not that's actually why the town rebelled against Abimelech is a guess, but it's a logical one. The point we do know is God allowed this happen as He did want revenge for all the murder that occurred three years earlier. God wanted the culprits to suffer and that included the town of Shechem as well as Abimelech.
 - ii) Anyway, the battle lines are being drawn in a civil war in this town in Israel.

14. Verse 30: When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry.³¹ Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelech, saying, "Gaal son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you."³² Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields.³³ In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, do whatever your hand finds to do."
 - a) Here we get another new character, a man named Zebul who was the mayor of Shechem. Apparently he was on Abimelech's side. Zebul set messengers to Abimelech saying that there's a man in town causing trouble and is organizing a rebellion against you. Zebul's advice to Abimelech was "organize a small army in the fields then at sunrise, attack this city and put an end to this once and for all.
 - b) I'm sure Abimelech thought, "I need to set an example here so other cities wouldn't get the same idea. Despite his faults, Abimelech was a leader and got people to join him to put a stop to this rebellion. Now that we got the plot points established, let's read on.
 - c) Remember that "God's hand" was behind all of this. If nothing else, it reminds us that the God we worship loves to get involved in the world He created!
15. Verse 34: So Abimelech and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies.³⁵ Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance to the city gate just as Abimelech and his soldiers came out from their hiding place. When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" Zebul replied, "You mistake the shadows of the mountains for men."³⁷ But Gaal spoke up again: "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and a company is coming from the direction of the soothsayers' tree."³⁸ Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your big talk now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech that we should be subject to him?' Aren't these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!"
 - a) This is one of those stories, where you have to remember who's on who's side. We have a man named Gaal who is leading a rebellion against Abimelech who apparently assumed the role of the leader of Israel. On Abimelech's side is the "governor" (think mayor) of the town (or city) of Shechem named Zebul. Both Zebul and Gaal are inside the town and are working against each other!
 - b) In fact the mayor ridicules Gaal by saying, "Hey you wanted to overthrow Abimelech as a leader? Here's your big opportunity! At first Gaal saw the army in the field. Zebul stated "you're wrong". When that lie didn't work, he moved on to say, "Since Abimelech's army's out there, go fight them."
 - c) Keep in mind everyone here is in effect "scoundrels". One of the constant themes stated in this book and implied a lot is "everyone did whatever they felt like doing", which includes rebelling against God and not caring what God wants for their lives. Abimelech fits in the role because he killed almost all his half brothers to assume leadership. Gaal deserves it as he wants no part of Abimelech and wants to overthrow him just so he could be leader. As to the mayor, he was in effect in on the plot to kill all the brothers as that city provided the money for Abimelech to start his campaign. The underlying point is when we start going down the road against God, one can see trouble coming.
 - d) Let's get back to the story and I'll add some application after this battle is over:
16. Verse 39: So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelech.⁴⁰ Abimelech chased him, and many fell wounded in the flight--all the way to the entrance to the gate.⁴¹ Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem.
 - a) We've got a "city size" civil war occurring. It appears the townsfolk followed Gaal because he lead them out to fight Abimelech. The "mayor" also fought for Abimelech.
 - b) Let's talk about civil wars, be they bloody or just arguing. I've been in my share of splits in a church for example. My first response is to pray for God's guidance as what should be a course of action. The next is try to do what's right and solve the problem.

- c) In this case, God was "behind" it, so it was going to happen. In many cases, we've got no idea who's side God's on. Sometimes both sides make good cases. Sometimes in church we have to pray for God's love to overcome our egos and desire to do things our way. In my lifetime I've been on winning and losing sides of non-violent battles. Often we have to let it play out while praying for His will, along with our willingness to accept the results. I have also seen church splits over such issues and sometimes those splits are His will! All I am getting at is sometimes civil wars occur. Hopefully they're not bloody and hopefully it can be settled peacefully. As for the main characters in this story, God "ordained" it as He wanted the guilty to suffer for their sins! OK then, let's read on.
17. Verse 42: The next day the people of Shechem went out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelech. ⁴³ So he took his men, divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose to attack them. ⁴⁴ Abimelech and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance to the city gate. Then two companies rushed upon those in the fields and struck them down. ⁴⁵ All that day Abimelech pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it.
- a) Bottom line is Abimelech won this civil war. He captured the city and killed all the people who lived there. Isn't that a bit drastic? Yes. In Abimelech's mind this city had to suffer badly as to set an example for no other city to rebel against him. It's also "God's revenge" as this city helped Abimelech get to power and effectively helped him kill all his brothers.
- b) The final verse mentions scattering salt. This was an ancient practice to prevent anything from growing there as the salt ruins the soil. There's a famous story in the Roman wars as they defeated a powerful rival called "Gaul" and after Rome completely destroyed Gaul, the Romans too, spread salt all over that city. My simple point is it was a common thing done in wartime. For those who care, one of the Israel kings many centuries later rebuilt that city ("Jeroboam" for all you bible trivia fans, the first king of "North Israel".)
- c) We're almost there through this story. About a dozen verses to go. Let's continue:
18. Verse 46: On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. ⁴⁷ When Abimelech heard that they had assembled there, ⁴⁸ he and all his men went up Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and cut off some branches, which he lifted to his shoulders. He ordered the men with him, "Quick! Do what you have seen me do!" ⁴⁹ So all the men cut branches and followed Abimelech. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire over the people inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.
- a) If you recall back in Verse 20, the surviving brother of Abimelech's killing spree predicted that the citizens of this town will all die for condoning Abimelech's action and financially supporting his killing spree. That statement in Verse 20 turned out to be a prophesy that is coming true here in these verses. The text here gives some "military details" of how he (Abimelech) won. I don't think the specifics of how Abimelech killed all the people living in this place is as significant as the fact God got His will done by all of that town suffering for what they did.
- i) Notice how Abimelech had natural leader skills. He cut some branches to make a fire and told his soldiers to do likewise. My point is even though God condemned this man to death (sending the evil spirit), it doesn't mean He doesn't give genuine talents and gifts to men. It's when people choose to turn from how God expects us to live is why we suffer. Remember Abimelech lived in Israel. He knew or should have known something of Israel's history. God held him accountable as an Israelite or even a half-one. We're accountable for what we know or should know of Him
- ii) Coming back to the story, Abimelech and his men killed everyone who lived there in his hometown. Those who survived the initial attack ran into a tower to avoid a final defeat. There, Abimelech burned it and everyone died in that town!

- iii) We're not there innocent people killed by this action? Of course, that's why I have been arguing this world isn't fair and I believe in a God who judges fairly based on whether or not we've been a good witness for Him.
 - iv) As I said in the introduction, this is a bad man! The story's here not to learn history but to teach us what the consequences of when our leaders turn from God and the consequences of those actions! Innocent people suffer when our leaders don't fear the living God. What if I don't have to fear that right now? It's not just a leader of a country. We may not suffer murder but when we have bosses who aren't seeking God's will, we can suffer the consequences. Of course we'll suffer ourselves when we turn from God as we see from this example here!
 - v) The good news is Abimelech will get his, as we'll see in the next set of verses!
19. Verse 50: Next Abimelech went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. ⁵¹ Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women--all the people of the city--fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. ⁵² Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, ⁵³ a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.
- a) Abimelech is on a role and wants to continue. Maybe he was worried about the rebellion spreading and wanted to attack this town too. Maybe he just wanted to destroy it to show he's king and not to be messed with. Whatever the reason, Abimelech attacked the town of Thebez with the intent of destroying it.
 - b) Unfortunately, he didn't have the same luck here he had in Shechem. Remember that God was behind all of this with the purpose of avenging the death of the 70 "brothers". That is why God allowed Abimelech to win at Shechem as they deserved a lot of the guilt for the rise of Abimelech. Now it's God's turn to work on Abimelech himself.
 - c) The way God did this was the people of this town climbed up into and on top of a tower. As Abimelech was about to set fire to the tower as he did in Shechem, a women in or on that tower, dropped a big stone and which hit Abimelech on the head. If I recall correctly a millstone is about a foot and half in diameter and used to grind wheat. That shot wasn't enough to kill him, but it was enough to do a lot of damage.
 - d) The irony of course, is that Abimelech killed all his half brothers on a stone (Verse 5) and here we read of him dying by being hit by a stone. To borrow an old Jewish expression "Coincidence is not a kosher word".
 - e) Anyway, now Abimelech is in horrid pain and close to dying.
20. Verse 54: Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him.' " So his servant ran him through, and he died. ⁵⁵ When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.
- a) Even with his dying breath, Abimelech had a big ego even to the end. In that culture to be killed by a woman was a horrid embarrassment. How did he know a woman dropped it? I suspect he heard comments coming from where it was dropped! When Judges was first put together probably 100 years or more after this event, the story was still around how he was killed.
 - b) Anyway, the embarrassment was so bad for him, he asked his assistant (an armor-bearer) to kill him. I don't know about you, but it's one thing to be embarrassed, it's another thing to want to die from it. Again, you can see how big the ego is here!
 - c) Let me pause to ask a related question: Is suicide a forgivable sin? In Judaism, they'd say no as one is taking an innocent life (murder). Jesus stated the only unforgivable sin was a lifetime denial that Jesus is God. That is what Jesus meant in Mark 3:28-30. Obviously it's not something God wants us to do as it affects those around us. Others have to deal with the mess if we commit such an act! At the least, it makes us a bad witness for Jesus. That's why I'd argue it's forgivable if one still believes Jesus is God and died for one's sins, but it is obviously not something to be encouraged or makes one a good witness for Jesus!

- d) Anyway, the consequences of Abimelech killing himself, is those who followed him went home. The man had leadership skills as I've pointed out in this lesson. When he died, no one stood up to say, "I'm in charge now". Everyone just walked away.
 - e) Again, keep in mind the key phrase of the book of Judges. "Everyone did what they felt is right in their own eyes". It's the last line of the book. It's meant as an insult because it also means that people turned from how God wanted them to live to go live however they did want to live. Abimelech was not appointed by God to be a king much less a judge there in Israel at that time. God allowed this whole scenario to play out to show the consequences of sin. If you think I'm reading too much into this, notice the last two chapter verses:
21. Verse 56: Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers.⁵⁷ God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.
- a) As I said earlier, "Coincidence is not a kosher word": Jotham who also a son of Gideon in this chapter predicted both the fall of the town of Shechem and the death of Abimelech as both were guilty of this plot to murder all the brothers. Was it right for Gideon to have all those wives and children? I'd argue no, but that doesn't excuse the murder of all of them. Polygamy isn't what God desired but nowhere in the bible is a punishment spelled out for that sin. That's because having to live with all those women is punishment all to itself!
 - b) God arranged it so those who lived in Shechem died and Abimelech died. That death did not spread to other towns, although I suspect may innocent people suffered when he was ruling over Israel.
22. With that completed, time to come back to the question, why should I care about any of this? I'll assume none of us have multiple wives at the same time. I'll assume none of us killed anyone. It is a story that is easy to believe but difficult to apply to our own lives. What we need to get out of it, is the idea that "sin has consequences". We may not lose our salvation for our sins, but we will suffer the consequences. I'd even argue that Christians suffer far more than nonbelievers. That's because God expects us as believers to be a good witness for Him. Does God expect perfection. I would argue no, but when we become aware of whatever sin we've committed, we're to confess it and turn from it and recognize that sin was our will and not God's will.
- a) So this whole lesson is about the dangers of the consequences of sin? Couldn't He just say that without having to tell this horrid historically accurate tell? It's one thing to hear that it is true. It's another to see the story play out to remind ourselves how we're to live as a follower of Jesus. That's what I want each of us, myself included to remember as we read stories of how people turned from God and the consequences they suffered for it.
 - b) On that not to happy note, let's close in prayer:
23. Heavenly Father, first we thank You for our salvation and the confidence You give us that as long as we believe Jesus is God, died for all our sins and believe He's in charge of our lives, there is no way we can mess that up! With that said, the temptation to do whatever we want to do is always right in front us. Guide us by Your Spirit to do what is Your will. Help us as we study Your word how it is we're to apply it to our lives. Help us to trust in Your power to do what it is You desire of us so that we can be a good witness for You. Help us to remember that the purpose for living is to glorify You in all that we do. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.