

## "LESSONS FROM ABIMELECH"

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

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### **Thematic Emphases**

The story of Abimelech is a reminder of what can happen to God's people when they become ungrateful and their leaders act unwisely and inconsistently. Gideon declared the Lord's kingship, but sent a false signal to both the people and his son when he acted like a typical Canaanite king. Abimelech took his father's actions to new depths and exploited the people's faulty view of kingship and rejection of the Lord. Even when some semblance of peace was restored, Jair carried on Gideon's kinglike ways.

However, the Lord remains sovereign even during the worst of times. He preserved Jotham and brought his justified curse to pass. In the process he intervened supernaturally (by sending a spirit to stir up strife) and manipulated people and circumstances in order to accomplish his just purposes. Through a series of reports he drew Abimelech to Shechem and brought about the destruction of that sinful city. By giving Abimelech temporary success, the Lord placed him in a vulnerable position where his daring became his downfall. By using a woman armed with a millstone to kill Abimelech, the Lord once more showed he can accomplish his purposes through unlikely instruments. Following Abimelech's death, the Lord providentially restored some semblance of order to Israel through the judges Tola and Jair.

**Exegetical Idea:** *When unwise and inconsistent Gideon planted the seeds of discord, chaos resulted as his son, the power-hungry megalomaniac Abimelech, tried to become Israel's king. He and the people who supported him brought conflict and violence to the covenant community, but God punished the perpetrators and restored a semblance of order to the land. Unfortunately, Gideon's bad example of acting in a kinglike manner was perpetuated by Jair.*

### **Theological Principles**

Kingship in the hands of the wrong person is dangerous. The epilogue to Judges makes the point that a king could have prevented the moral chaos that engulfed Israel during the Judges period (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 21:25). But the account of Abimelech's aborted attempt to become king shows that not just any king would do. Israel needed a king like the one depicted in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, not a power-hungry tyrant. The Lord is the real king of his people. In the ancient Near East, kings were responsible for promoting and maintaining justice in their realm, at least ideally (Weinfeld 1995). This chapter reveals Yahweh the just king in action as he intervenes supernaturally and providentially to vindicate his servant Gideon by bringing Jotham's curse to pass.

In the account of Abimelech the Lord once more demonstrates his superiority to the Canaanite god Baal. When Baal finally does strike at Jerubbaal, his effort blows up in his face, leaving the pagan temple(s) of Shechem in ruins.

**Theological Idea:** *When unwise and inconsistent leaders plant the seeds of discord, chaos can be the result as power-hungry megalomaniacs move into the leadership void. Such leaders and the people who find them attractive can bring misery to God's people, but God is just and will punish those who abuse others and who spread strife through the covenant community. Even so, the negative example of an unwise leader often lives on in his successors.*



### ***Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]***

The Abimelech story is actually part of one large literary unit (6:1-10:5); it is the sequel to Gideon's story. Since it describes events that occurred after Gideon's death, it may be treated separately for homiletical purposes. Nevertheless, one should recognize its relationship to what precedes. The story of Abimelech, as well as the brief notice about Jair, illustrate how unwise leadership decisions can have destructive long-range consequences for the covenant community.

(1) The Lord is the ultimate King of his people and will not allow power-hungry imposters or false gods to usurp his position. He faithfully fulfills his royal responsibility of dispensing justice. Acting both directly and providentially, he brings down those who commit murderous deeds and threaten to destroy the covenant community.

(2) When the covenant community becomes paganized, it looks to the wrong kind of people to lead it and ends up being torn by dissension.

(3) Power-hungry opportunists threaten to destroy the covenant community. They inevitably elevate themselves, rather than God. But God opposes such individuals and those who follow them (cf. 3 John 9-11).

**Preaching Idea:** *When we embrace the attitude of the pagan culture in which we live, power-hungry opportunists sometimes seize leadership and spread conflict, but God opposes such people and will hold them accountable for their abusive, self-serving behavior.*

If we focus on the first trajectory, a preaching idea might be: *We can be confident that our just God, in response to the prayers of innocent victims, will punish those who abuse others and spread discord through the covenant community. Another way of developing this idea would be as follows: If your pagan attitudes and actions are threatening God's covenant community by promoting conflict, you had better watch out for "falling rocks"! If power-hungry pagans are causing chaos in your little corner of God's covenant community, appeal to and trust in our just and sovereign God for deliverance and vindication.*

If we focus on the second and third trajectories, a preaching idea might be: *We must remain faithful to God, for embracing pagan attitudes and turning to pagan practices and leaders is self-destructive and does severe harm to God's covenant community.*