

Before this point in the history recounted in the book of Judges, the children of Israel have failed to stay faithful to God. Over and over they forget His victories on their behalf and return to idolatry. But then in desperation they call out to Him and He appoints a judge to rescue them.

The story of Abimelech breaks the pattern. The Israelites do *not* call upon God and Abimelech is not a judge but a self-appointed king. The Israelites do not fight with marauding tribes but with each other. It's a bloody contest for royal power worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy or television series.

There is nothing of the divine here except for God's just vengeance (vs. 23-24, 56-57). It is as if the Lord has stepped aside so that human pride and ambition can have full rein and show their fatal consequences. One is reminded of the time of tribulation in Revelation where the one who restrains evil is taken out of the way (2 Thess. 2:7).

This chapter contains one of the few fables in Scripture, where non-human characters (trees in this case) teach lessons about human behavior. Rossier's comments are worth reading:

*In [Jotham's] recital, three trees refuse to be promoted over the other trees. They depict, according to the word, the different characteristics of Israel under the blessing of Jehovah. The olive tree said: "Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?" (v. 9). Oil answers to the unction and the power of the Holy Spirit by which God and men are honoured. The Israel of God can only realize this power, when in thorough separation from the nation's and their principles. These latter set up kings over themselves (1 Sam. 8:5), whilst Jehovah was the sole ruler of the people when faithful. The fig tree said:*

*"Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?" (v. 11), for Israel could only bear fruit when in separation from the nations. The vine said: "Should I leave my wine, which cheers God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?" New wine is the joy found in the mutual communion of men with God, and this enjoyment — the highest that could be desired — was lost to Israel when they adopted the spirit and ways of the nations.*

*What a lesson for us Christians! The world is to the church, what the nations were to Israel. If we yield to its solicitations, we abandon our oil, our fruit, our new wine — that is to say, our spiritual power, the works which God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10), and the joy of communion. Oh! are we able to respond to all the offers of the world; Should I leave that which is my happiness and my strength, for fruitless turmoil, or to satisfy the lusts and ambitions of the heart of men?*

#### Notes

**8:33** Baal-Berith was a false idol. The name means Lord of the Covenant.

**9:1** The action shifts to Shechem, the city on the saddle between Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, and Mount Ebal, the mountain of curses.

This list may help keep the people straight:

**Jerub-Baal** is another name for Gideon.

**Abimelech** ("my father was king") is Gideon's son by his concubine in Shechem.

**Jotham** is Gideon's son by one of his wives in Ophrah, the only survivor of Abimelech's massacre of his brothers.

**Gaal** is a citizen of Shechem and opponent of Abimelech's.

**Zebul** is the governor of Shechem, loyal to Abimelech.

#### Questions:

1. What wrongs do the Israelites commit after the death of Gideon?

2. How does Abimelech gain political support in Shechem?

3. What point is Jotham making with the fable he shouts from Mount Gerizim?
4. Gaal is used by God to avenge the murder of Gideon's sons. Is Gaal a godly man?
5. Does anyone in this account act on behalf of the Lord or His people, the nation of Israel?
6. Where do the citizens of Shechem take refuge when Abimelech comes to attack them?
7. Previous chapters ended by describing a period of peace following a conflict. This does not. Why?