

# A Hero Will Rise

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 9:1-21

Topic

Gideon's youngest son tells a fable to the men of Shechem that personifies his evil half-brother, Abimelech, as a bramble bush

Title

*"Lord, I Was Born a Bramblin' Man"*

## Introduction

According to a very recent Gallup poll, more Americans would say that the Bible is a book of fables than it is the Word of God.

- Gallup reported that a mere 24% of Americans believe the Bible should be taken literally.
- By comparison 26% view the Bible as "a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by men."

This is the first time in four-decades that biblical literalism has not surpassed biblical skepticism.

Answering this charge, one apologetics source says the following:

The Bible is most assuredly not a fairy tale [or fable]. In fact, the Bible was “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), and this essentially means God wrote it. Its human authors wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (Second Peter 1:21). That’s why this divinely woven text of nearly three quarters of a million words is perfect in harmony from start to finish and contains no contradictions, even though its sixty-six books have forty different authors from different walks of life, written in three different languages and taking nearly sixteen centuries to complete.

In defense of the Word of God, we could cite it's accuracy, which has been confirmed by history, biology, geology, and astronomy.

We could cite the over 2000 fulfilled prophecies - most of them extremely detailed, and with no way of being fulfilled other than divinely.

We could cite the millions upon millions of changed lives, attesting to the power of our resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Bible is not a fairy tale, **but it does contain at least two fables**. A fable is a short story, typically with animals or inanimate things as its speaking characters, that conveys a moral.

In Second Kings we read,

2Ki 14:9 And Jehoash king of Israel sent to Amaziah king of Judah, saying, "The thistle that *was* in Lebanon sent to the cedar that *was* in Lebanon, saying, 'Give your daughter to my son as wife'; and a wild beast that *was* in Lebanon passed by and trampled the thistle.

It was Jehoash's way of saying that Amaziah's request was like that of a weed making a demand upon a mighty tree.

The other fable is in our text today. In it, the youngest son of Gideon, Jotham, exposes his half-brother Abimelech as being altogether evil and destructive. He puts it in the form of a fable involving an olive tree, a fig tree, a grape vine, and a bramble.

Abimelech is not like an olive tree, or a fig tree, or a grapevine, bearing fruit. No, he is a bramble, good only for starting destructive fires in the groves or vineyards.

Jotham did not have us in mind in the telling of his fable. Nevertheless there is a point of contact for us.

We'll see that the fruit-bearing trees and vine were *selfless*, while the bramble was *selfish*. Since we, too, can be either selfless or selfish, there's a moral here for us.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Live Selfish And You Kindle A Destructive Fire, or #2 Live Selfless And You Contribute Delightful Fruit.

## #1 Live Selfish And You Kindle A Destructive Fire

(v1-6)

Phil Cooke is President and CEO of *Cooke Pictures*, a media production and consulting company based in Los Angeles. He advises many of the largest Christian and nonprofit organizations in the world on media issues. In an e-mail to the *Christian Post*, he wrote, "If you filmed 'The Bible,' much of it would be R-rated and some of it possibly 'X.'" That's the remarkable thing about the Bible - it tells honest, authentic and true stories.

So why do we spend so much time trying to convince Hollywood that serious films about real life that push the edge aren't welcomed by the faith community? I think the culture would respect our message much more if we stopped producing just cheesy, G-rated films and started telling gritty stories about real life."

I suggest they start with the Book of Judges. If you want grit, the post-Gideon period would be high on the list.

As part of his unspiritual eulogy in chapter eight, we learned that Gideon had multiple wives that produced for him seventy sons. He also had a girl on the side, in the Gentile city of Shechem. This concubine also bore Gideon a son. They named him Abimelech, which means, *my father is king*.

Gideon was not king; but he acted like he was. When he died, it created a leadership void. Abimelech rushed in to fill it.

Jdg 9:1 Then Abimelech the son of Jerub-Baal went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father...

"Jerub-Baal" was the nickname the men of Israel gave Gideon after he destroyed the altar of Baal in his father's house. He "contended with Baal," which is loosely what Jerub-Baal means.

Abimelech called a secret counsel with his uncles. The whole thing has the feel of a *Godfather* movie, with Abimelech making moves to consolidate his power over the family.

Jdg 9:2 "Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerub-Baal reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I am your own flesh and bone."

Abimelech was the least of Gideon's sons, since he was part Gentile, and being born of a concubine he had no legal rights. With Gideon dead, he was #71 on the depth-chart for leadership.

He argued that, for Shechem, it would be like all seventy of Gideon's Hebrew sons were lording over them, with no relief in the foreseeable future. It made more sense for them to throw-in with someone related to them.

Abimelech convinced them it was time to make a bold move.

Jdg 9:3 And his mother's brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother."

The power base widened to include "all the men of Shechem." They took up Abimelech's argument, convincing the town to back him.

Jdg 9:4 So they gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.

"Baal-Berith" was their local interpretation of the so-called god, Baal. According to one source, "berith" refers to an erotic, obscene object that was carried around on your person.

From the moment he first spoke to his uncles, everyone knew that in order to prevail, Abimelech would have to murder the sons of Gideon - all of whom preceded him in any succession. Thus "seventy shekels" - one for each of his half-brothers.

"Worthless and reckless men." Abimelech's administration was off to a great start:

- He was backed by guys who were so addicted to pornography that they carried erotica around with them.
- He was funded in his bid to take over Israel by a pagan Temple.
- His military force was murderers for hire.

Jdg 9:5 Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerub-Baal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerub-Baal was left, because he hid himself.

They were murdered in their father's house, where his wives slept, and his children played with their toys.

"On one stone" indicates individual, formal execution. One-by-one, probably in order of birth, the sons of Gideon were murdered.

All but one - the youngest - who somehow had opportunity to hide, and to escape. After all, worthless, reckless men aren't very reliable.

Jdg 9:6 And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem.

"Beth Millo" is believed to be a nearby Canaanite stronghold. They joined with Shechem, seeing it as the smart move in the current political climate.

Warren Wiersbe says the "terebinth tree" is probably the "oak of Moreh," where the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised to give him and his descendants the land (Genesis 12:6).

It was near this site that the nation of Israel heard the blessings and curses read from the Law and promised to obey the Lord (Deuteronomy 11:26-32; Joshua 8:30-35). Jacob buried the idols here as he called his family back to God (Genesis 35:1-5), and here Joshua gave his last speech and led the people in reaffirming their obedience to God (Joshua 24:25-26).

All of that sacred history was tainted by the selfish ambition of Abimelech. In one long afternoon, for his own desires, he spoiled so many things that the Lord had ordered for the good of Israel.

Anymore it seems that folks don't think very much about establishing their own 'sacred history.' I'm thinking particularly of the too-many marriages I've seen go bust over the years as one of the spouses walks away from the Lord.

What they walk toward is always their version of Baal - the fulfillment of some lust or desire that ought to have been brought to the Cross and crucified.

It's Baal-Materialism; or Baal-Personal Freedom; or Baal-God Wants Me to Be Happy; or Baal-I'm in Love with Someone Else.

Whatever ungodly, unbiblical reason they give for reneging on their sacred marriage vows, it's a Baal.

It all finds its root in living for self, rather than in dying to self and living for Jesus.

Jotham is going to compare Abimelech to a bramble among fruit-bearing trees and vines. Brambles were dry weeds that could easily ignite, creating fires destructive to the many valuable fruit bearing trees and vines.

And that's what selfishness does. It causes severe damage to those bearing fruit.

If you find yourself now, or ever, carrying around with you some desire that is ungodly and unbiblical, get rid of that Baal immediately. Otherwise you run the risk of bursting into flame, and damaging all that is beautiful and holy.

There's a saying in the Bible, "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). It means that what God says is true, no matter what you might think or say. His morals, His virtues, His commandments, are true, no matter what a society might say.

Marriage itself, as instituted by God, has been under attack. It's nothing new, by the way. God has given His instruction on marriage. What He says is true, regardless man making laws that contradict it.

If you contradict God, **you're** the liar - not Him.

Let me be unusually blunt: If you are contemplating divorce, and you do not have grounds biblically, it is sin. If you're thinking about a marriage that is outside the biblical boundaries, it is sin

God is right; you are wrong. Instead of kindling that fire...



## #2 Live Selfless And You Contribute Delightful Fruit

(v7-21)

Saturday morning cartoons meant Rocky & Bullwinkle, and that included *Fractured Fairy Tales (as told by Edward Everett Horton)*. They were classic tales retold with a comic twist.

The dark drama of Abimelech's bloody reign has one positive: Jotham's fable. It pictures for the men of Israel, and Shechem, a better life, a spiritual life, a fruitful life - if they will follow the Lord, and not Abimelech.

Jdg 9:7 Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them: "Listen to me, you men of Shechem, That God may listen to you!

Those who have been to this spot say there is an outcropping of rock, a ledge, and the natural acoustics allow you to be heard in the valley below.

Still mourning the murders of his brothers, and himself in danger, Jotham holds out the possibility that God would be merciful to them if they will "listen."

Jotham's obedience is itself evidence of spiritual fruit. He wasn't looking for his own worthless, reckless men in order to retaliate. He appealed to something higher.

If you've sinned... If you are sinning now... Listen for God's mercy. Flee to Him, to His throne - to His will - and find grace and mercy in your time of need.

The fable itself is straightforward:

Jdg 9:8 "The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them.  
And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!'

Jdg 9:9 But the olive tree said to them, 'Should I cease giving my  
oil, With which they honor God and men, And go to sway over  
trees?'

Jdg 9:10 "Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come *and* reign  
over us!'

Jdg 9:11 But the fig tree said to them, 'Should I cease my  
sweetness and my good fruit, And go to sway over trees?'

Jdg 9:12 "Then the trees said to the vine, 'You come *and* reign  
over us!'

Jdg 9:13 But the vine said to them, 'Should I cease my new wine,  
Which cheers *both* God and men, And go to sway over trees?'

Smart trees. They had no ambition to rule over other trees. They were more than content with what God had made them, and the work He had given them to do. Their only concern was fruitfulness.

We know from the New Testament that Jesus is pictured as a vine, with us as the branches. Fruit is the natural result of our remaining connected with the Lord. We sometimes describe it as "abiding in Christ."

The one requirement upon us as servants is that we be found faithful. Be faithful and you will be fruitful. The fable is encouraging us to faithfulness that contributes to fruitfulness.

The olive tree, the fig tree, and the grape vine were content with what God had made them. They had no envy, no selfish ambition. Just keep cranking-out olives, and figs, and grapes, for God's glory, and for the good of men.

Let's once again use marriage as our illustration, since we can all relate. One thing I dislike at weddings is talk about how hard it's going to be; about the tremendous difficulties the couple will face.

It can be so negative, that I wonder why some couples don't interrupt the service and change their mind.

The place to discuss what marriage will be like is *before* the wedding, not at it. The ceremony should be a celebration through-and-through.

Having said that, once in the marriage you need to abide in Jesus. Times it might be hard, or stressful, are times to produce fruit in the orchard of your marriage - not times to seek a way out.

Make the decision to abide in Him, in His will, rather than follow your own will. Let God be true.

Jdg 9:14 "Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come *and* reign over us!'

Behind some of this is the understanding that Israel always clamored for a king. God was their king; they needed no earthly king. But they wanted to be like the other nations. It was a wrong desire.

If the Israelites had been walking with the Lord, the other nations would have wanted to be like them.

I should not want to be more like the unsaved. They should want to be more like me. If I've got that backwards, I'm in for trouble.

Jdg 9:15 And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you anoint me as king over you, *Then* come *and* take shelter in my shade; But if not, let fire come out of the bramble And devour the cedars of Lebanon!'

If you search for "bramble" in a Bible dictionary, you might be redirected to search for "thorns." There are many varieties of these thorn bushes. Think tumbleweed - only much stouter, and with huge thorns.

In fact some sources say the thorny crown plaited and placed upon the head of Jesus was from a bramble.

There was no shade from a bramble. Even a variety that grew tall enough wouldn't produce shade. The bramble thought more highly of himself than he ought to.

The bramble had the potential to cause damage to the mighty cedars. It was threatening to destroy if it didn't get its way.

It's a great contrast between selflessness and selfishness. The fruit bearing trees and vine were selfless, contributing good things to God and to man, asking for no glory. The bramble threatened to upset nature, and demanded recognition.

Look into your heart and 'weed-out' the attitude of the bramble.

Jotham makes the application:

Jdg 9:16 "Now therefore, if you have acted in truth and sincerity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerub-Baal and his house, and have done to him as he deserves -

Jdg 9:17 for my father fought for you, risked his life, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian;

Jdg 9:18 but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and killed his seventy sons on one stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother -

Jotham was diplomatic, but direct. Of course they had not "acted in truth and sincerity." Sadly, they didn't care.

Too many professing Christians don't act in the truth of God's Word. They are insincere.

For example, I hear quite often that obedience would require sacrifice, and the person feels they have somehow sacrificed enough.

Jesus sacrificed His life so that they we might be delivered from sin and death and Hell. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He desired that the suffering of the Cross not be necessary; but it was.

Can you imagine Jesus saying, "That's it. I can't take it anymore. God wants Me to be happy."

Jdg 9:19 if then you have acted in truth and sincerity with Jerub-Baal and with his house this day, *then* rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.

They could not "rejoice." They might feel happy, for a time; but there could be no settled, spiritual joy.

Sin is definitely pleasurable for a time. But it brings forth death.

Jdg 9:20 But if not, let fire come from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and Beth Millo; and let fire come from the men of Shechem and from Beth Millo and devour Abimelech!"

- If you choose as your leader a murderer, he just might murder you.
- If you choose for your subjects murderers, they just might murder you.

Jdg 9:21 And Jotham ran away and fled; and he went to Beer and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.

Jotham was never heard from again. Whatever his life had been like as the 70th son of an idolator, he had this one outstanding moment. It is what we remember about him.

God gave him a word, and he spoke it, at great risk, and through much personal difficulty.

He presented this fable, and its application, just after his whole world had been shattered and his siblings murdered.

He did it with dignity and integrity. He did not seek retaliation or revenge; he left that with God.

At arguably the most difficult moment in his life, Jotham remained connected to the vine, and contributed spiritual fruit.

He was selfless in his obedience, a good and faithful servant. In a more spiritual setting, the men of Israel would have repented, and sought to elevate Jotham to be king.

For his part, Jotham would have refused, letting the Lord reign over them.

Seeing that, the men of Shechem would have repented, and converted to Judaism.

None of that happened. But it wasn't on Jotham. He did what he was told; he was faithful.

Have you ever thought about how many Bible heroes seem like failures?

- Jeremiah warned his countrymen for I think forty years, but they consistently ignored him when they were not persecuting him.
- Isaiah was told that his message would not be received by the Israelites (6:8-13).

It was so bad that Stephen, the first martyr of the church, said to the Jewish leaders, "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers..." (Acts 7:52).

A servant is to be faithful - *not* successful. Faithfulness contributes fruitfulness no matter what the brambles are doing to damage and destroy.

A great way to conclude this passage is to ask this question: "Who do I want to be in this story?"

You certainly don't want to be Abimelech, do you? You don't want to be a person who is willing to murder what God says is true and good just to get your own way.

With apologies to Led Zeppelin, you don't want to bramble-on through life, leaving destruction in your wake.

No, you want to be Jotham - standing your ground on God's truth, regardless that life isn't quite the way you'd like it to be; or is, in fact, terrible.