

General Church Education



# Abimelech and Jotham's Parable

Judges 9

## Lesson 23

Jacob's Ladder Religion Lessons

Level 4: The Lord Is the Hero

For ages 9-10

# Abimelech and Jotham's Parable

## Judges 9

### Teacher Background

Gideon was such a popular leader that the people wanted him to be their king. But Gideon refused to be king, saying the Lord alone should rule over Israel. After Gideon died, his illegitimate son, Abimelech, seized power. Securing funds from his mother's relatives, the men of Shechem, Abimelech hired a band of ruffians to follow him. First he killed all of Gideon's legitimate sons and declared himself king. One brother, Jotham, (whose name means "the Lord is perfect") escaped. Jotham went up Mount Gerizim, which looked down over Shechem, and called out the parable of the trees. Three noble trees, representing heavenly loves, refused to rule over others. But the bramble, symbolizing the love of self and worldly things, was willing to rule. Jotham foretold the consequences of Shechem's dreadful choice. Three years later, the Lord sent a spirit of ill-will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem, and they fought each other. When Abimelech managed to retake Shechem, he demolished it, and burned its citizens who had taken refuge in a tower. He then moved on to Thebez and was about to set light to a tower of refuge there when a woman dropped a millstone on him, severely wounding him. Not wishing to suffer the shame of dying at the hands of a woman, Abimelech asked his armor-bearer to kill him with his sword.

Jotham's parable shows what happens if self-love rules over us instead of the loves of heaven.

### Key Ideas

- Abimelech pictures a choice to make selfish and worldly loves the ruler of our lives.
- Jotham is like conscience, which warns us of the dangers of choosing selfishness as a ruler.
- The noble olive tree, fig tree and grape vine picture heavenly loves in our lives.

### From the Writings

'The olive tree' means the internal good of the celestial Church, 'the fig tree' the external good of that Church, 'the vine' the good of the spiritual Church, but 'the thorn bush' spurious good.\* The things that are said therefore imply that the people, who are 'the trees' here, did not want celestial good or spiritual good to 'reign over them', but spurious good, and that the people chose the spurious in preference to celestial or spiritual good. The 'fire' coming out of the spurious good is the harmfulness of evil cravings, 'the cedars of Lebanon' which it would devour being the truths of good. See *Arcana Coelestia* 9277.4.

"These words of Jotham signify that the citizens of Shechem were not willing to have celestial good, which is the 'olive tree,' nor the truth of that good, which is the "vine," nor moral good, that is, external celestial and spiritual good, which is the 'fig tree,' to reign over them, but the evil of falsity, which appeared to them as good, which is the "thorn bush;" the fire from this is the evil of lust; the 'cedars of Lebanon' are things rational which are from truths." *Apocalypse Explained* 638.23

\*spurious good=good that is not genuine

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### Vocabulary

**shekel**—a unit of money based on a weight of metal

**sincerity**—being truthful, not pretending

**ambush**—a suddenly and unexpected attack

**refuge**—shelter from danger

**sway**—rule or control

The Lord raised up Gideon to judge Israel when people were starving because the Midianites were stealing their food. The people were so grateful for Gideon's help that they wanted him to be their king. But Gideon refused to become their king. He said his sons would not rule over Israel either. He knew that only the Lord should rule.

### Gideon's Son, Abimelech

Gideon had seventy sons. After Gideon died his son Abimelech wanted to be king. Abimelech's mother was from the town of Shechem. So Abimelech went to Shechem and persuaded his "flesh and bone" (relatives) to help him become their king. They gave Abimelech seventy shekels of silver from the temple of their false god, Baal-Berith. Abimelech used the money to pay some worthless bullies to follow him and help him do whatever he wanted.

Abimelech led the trouble makers to his father's house. The men killed all his brothers. Only the youngest brother, Jotham, hid and escaped. The men of Shechem thought nothing of Abimelech's terrible crime and made him their king.

Read Judges 9:1-6.

### Jotham's Parable of the Trees

Jotham was a good man. He wanted to warn the people of Shechem of the cruelty and hatred Abimelech would bring as their king. His warning was like a warning our conscience might give us if we are thinking of making a bad choice. Jotham climbed up Gerizim, a mountain that towered over the town of Shechem. He shouted out for people to listen to a parable.

Read Judges 9:7-15.



Jotham's parable was about some trees that wanted a king. The Word often compares different kinds of people with trees. The fruitful olive tree, the fig tree and the grapevine correspond to good and noble qualities. None of them wanted to rule over others. What kind of tree was happy to rule?

The olive tree would not give up being useful by producing its precious oil just to rule over the other trees. It said,

“Should I cease giving my oil  
With which they honor God and men,  
And go to sway over trees?”

The fig tree also refused. It would not give up producing its sweet fruit just to rule over the other trees.

“Should I cease my sweetness and my  
good fruit, and go to sway over trees?”

The grapevine refused. It would not give up producing its grapes and wine to rule over the other trees.

“Should I cease my new wine,  
Which cheers both God and men,  
And go to sway over the trees?”

The fruitful trees wanted only to serve others, not to rule over them. Their fruits picture three heavenly loves —loving the Lord, loving others, and doing what is right.

Then the trees asked the bramble if it would be king over them. A bramble is full of thorns. It has no fruit. The bramble was happy to be king! Did it talk about doing something special and useful? No! Instead, it threatened to do evil if the trees did not make it their king! The bramble pictures loving ourselves and worldly things. These loves are meant to serve the loves of heaven, not to rule over them.

Jotham warned the people of Shechem that they had chosen a bad and dangerous man to rule over them. He warned that fire would come from Abimelech and destroy them and that fire would come from Shechem and destroy Abimelech! They would each destroy the other.

Read Judges 9:16-21.

### Fire from Abimelech

Jotham was right. Three years after Abimelech became king there was hatred between him and the men of Shechem. The hatred led Abimelech to do terrible things. He attacked, ambushed and killed people. Eventually, he burned down a tower where people had gone for safety.



Read Judges 9:22-49.

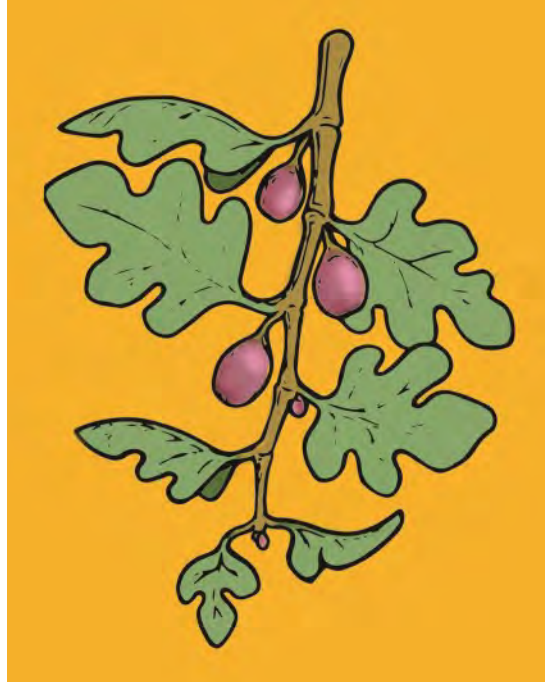
### The Downfall of Abimelech

Next, Abimelech attacked the city of Thebez, and tried to burn down another strong tower where people had taken refuge. As Abimelech came to the tower to set it on fire, a woman threw a heavy millstone down. It hit Abimelech on the head and broke his skull. He begged his armor-bearer to kill him with his sword so people would not be able to say that a woman had killed him. People thought it was disgraceful for a soldier to be killed by a woman.

Read Judges 9:50-55.

Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech...and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham.  
(Judges 9:56-57)

Jotham's parable came true. Jotham's name means "the Lord is perfect." So it was really the Lord who spoke by the mouth of Jotham.



### Discussion Questions

- What did Gideon say when the people asked him to be king?
- What would be a good reason for someone wanting to be a ruler? What would be a bad reason?
- What kinds of people make good leaders?
- Describe the qualities of a good leader.
- When might people "kill" or silence good and true ideas in their minds, as Abimelech killed his brothers? Why might they do it?
- Why did Abimelech want to rule over others? Was it because he loved them and wanted to help them? Or was it because he wanted everyone to do what he wanted?
- Jotham climbed up a mountain to speak to the men of Shechem. How might we "climb a mountain" when we think about the choices we are making?
- How did Jotham's warning come true?
- What consequences do selfish choices bring in our lives?

# Activity Overview | Abimelech and Jotham's Parable of the Trees

## Recitation

Learn the recitation by heart.

I am the vine, you are the branches.  
He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit;  
For without Me you can do nothing. John 15:5

## Projects

Choose one or two activities.

- Jotham vs. Abimelech
- Parable Tree Triangle
- Coloring page—Abimelech's Death (Judges 9)

## Additional Activity Ideas

- Sequence the story of Abimelech and the trees. This activity available at <https://www.newchurchvineyard.org/file/activity-sequence-the-story-of-abimelech-judges09.pdf>.

## Activity 1 | Jotham vs. Abimelech

Abimelech hired a worthless men to kill his brothers and make himself “king”. Abimelech is like the selfish loves we have from birth that try to rule over our lives. Selfish loves find support from selfish ideas. For example, if we want something badly we may make up reasons why it’s okay to have it. Jotham, Abimelech’s brother who spoke the parable of the trees is like conscience. Conscience is the noble truths from the Word that guide our actions.



Selfish feelings and thoughts try to overthrow true ideas, just as Abimelech got rid of his brothers. They may suggest that a true idea is not true, or that we should trust our gut-instincts and not think too much. This activity explores the conflict between conscience and selfish impulses.

### Materials Needed

*Jotham vs. Abimelech Scenarios*

### Directions

1. Choose one student to be Jotham (conscience) and one to be Abimelech (selfishness).
2. A parent or teacher chooses one *Jotham vs. Abimelech Scenario* to read aloud, e.g. You see a cookie sitting on a counter.
3. Invite “Abimelech” to give a selfish response to a question, e.g. “Nobody will know if I eat this cookie.”
4. Invite “Jotham” to counter with a response from truth, e.g. “That cookie does not belong to me, I should leave it where it is.”
5. Encourage “Jotham” and “Abimelech” to give at least 3 different selfish and true responses to each scenario. Discuss as a group.
6. Select a different scenario and repeat the activity. If you are working with a group, choose different students to be “Jotham” and “Abimelech”.
7. *Option:* For active students, try playing this as an arm or thumb-wrestling activity. The idea would not be to wrestle based on strength, as is usually the case, but based on whichever idea is uppermost in the conversation at that time. When “Jotham” is talking, he is “winning”. When “Abimelech” is talking, he is “winning”. This will help bring home the inner struggle we experience in our minds during these situations.



## Activity 1 | Jotham vs. Abimelech Scenarios

These scenarios are examples of common situations people face. A teacher or student will choose one scenario to read aloud. A student acting as “Jotham” (conscience) and a student acting as “Abimelech” (selfishness) will give a response to the situation. Continue to give responses at least three times for each scenario. Not all situations are clear-cut. To think more deeply, ask the questions conscience helps us answer—“Is this true, kind and useful?”

1. You see a cookie sitting on the counter. Nobody is around.
2. You find a lot of money in a public place.
3. You're out for a walk and feel too lazy to put your apple core in the trash.
4. You've run out of time to write a required poem for homework. You see a poem in a book you could copy and hand in.
5. You are in a rush to get to school. Your mother insists you brush your teeth before going. You put toothpaste in your mouth so if your mom checks she will smell the toothpaste.
6. You accidentally let a dog outside. An adult asks angrily who let the dog escape.
7. Your parent asks if you've done all your homework. You haven't, but you're doing something fun and don't want to stop.
8. A friend has done something stupid that he's embarrassed about. You think it's funny and want to tell your other friends.
9. You are told to clean up a mess in your room. A friend invites you to do something.
10. Something exciting happened. You want to tell your friends. They are too loud and won't let you talk.
11. Someone took something of yours without asking.
12. You are first in line. Someone cuts in front of you.
13. It's your turn to help with the dishes.
14. You forgot to do your homework. Your teacher asks you where it is.



## Activity 2 | Parable Tree Triangle

Jotham spoke a parable to the men of Shechem. Some trees who went to anoint a king over them. The noble trees, the olive, the fig and the vine, refused to stop being useful to rule others. But the lowly thorn bush, a picture of selfishness, happily agreed to become king. Make a Parable Tree Triangle. Fold the triangles down, one over another, placing the loves of heaven over the love of self, on the bottom.



### Materials Needed

*Parable Tree Triangle Template*

scissors

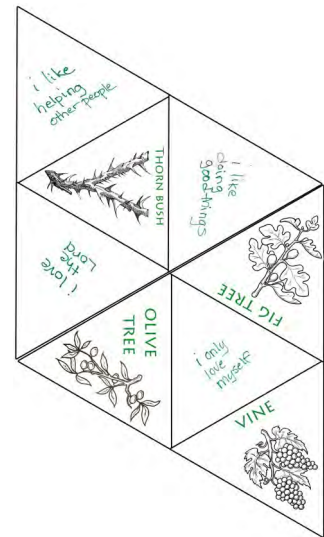
colored pencils or markers

pencil

tape

### Directions

1. Color the pictures of the trees and the thorn bush on the *Parable Tree Triangle Template*.
2. Cut around the outside of the *Parable Tree Triangle Template*. When done, you will have a parallelogram.
3. Fold the parallelogram in half along the double middle line to form a triangle. The Olive, Fig and Vine should be on one side; the Thorn bush on the other side.
4. Write the meaning of each tree on the back of its picture as follows:
  - Olive tree—I love the Lord
  - Fig tree—I like doing good things
  - Vine—I like helping other people
  - Thorn bush—I love myself



5. The Lord gives us all of these loves. He lets us choose which love we will make the most important. Fold the triangles along the black lines. Position the triangles to show the loves of heaven—with love for the Lord on top of the other loves.

6. Now turn the triangle over. What happens when we put the love of self on top? What happens to the other loves when the love of self “rules” other loves? Putting the love of self on top is a picture of how devils in hell choose to live.

Parable Tree Triangle Template

