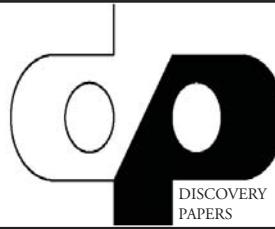


# SOWING AND REAPING

**SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING**



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Judges 9:22-57  
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Scott Grant  
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In the musical *Les Miserables*, the wicked Thenardier, picking through corpses for gold and silver in the sewers of Paris, sings:

It's a world where the dog eats the dog  
Where they kill for bones in the street  
And God in his heaven  
He don't interfere  
'Cause he's dead as the stiff's at my feet  
I raise my eyes to see the heavens  
And only the moon looks down  
The harvest moon shines down!<sup>1</sup>

Some people, like Thenardier, think that they can mostly get away with anything and that God, who presumably doesn't exist, won't interfere. Others wouldn't put it quite that way but still think that they can mostly do whatever they want because God sort of winks at sin. The story of Abimelek in the book of Judges teaches us otherwise. Abimelek, the offspring of his father's relationship with a concubine, became king of the city of Shechem, but Jotham, Abimelek's half-brother, condemned the relationship between Abimelek and Shechem.

## God intervenes

Judges 9:22-25:

**<sup>22</sup>After Abimelek had governed Israel three years, <sup>23</sup>God stirred up animosity between Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelek. <sup>24</sup>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 Abimelek and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers. <sup>25</sup>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 Abimelek.**

Jotham had more or less predicted that Abimelek and the Shechemites would destroy each other, and God endorses the prediction by turning the two parties against each other. It's not as if God corrupted them, though; both

Abimelek and the Shechemites were already corrupt. God simply gave them the push their corrupt natures craved so that both Abimelek and the Shechemites would pay for their parts in the murder of Abimelek's brothers. With or without God's help, evil tends to turn in on itself. In this case, God accelerated the process to hasten judgment. In the beginning of biblical history, God cursed Cain from the ground for killing his brother Abel, whose blood was crying out from the ground (Genesis 4:10-11). Here, Jotham cursed both Abimelek, who shed his brothers' blood, and his accomplices, and God will see to it that justice is served.

The Shechemites' first move is to commission highway robbers, depriving Abimelek of dues and exposing his rule as incapable of maintaining order.

## Enslaved to sin

Thank God he judges sin. If he didn't, if he were not a God who judges sin, then we'd be stuck with evil forever. One of the ways that God judges sin, not only in the case of Abimelek and Shechem but also in cases today, is to hand men and women over to the custody of their own sin (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). And what does sin do to you? It makes you want to sin more. If you sin more, you will become increasingly enslaved to sin. Or, to put it another way, the punishment for sin is sin: you become increasingly attached to self-destructive, dehumanizing habits of thinking and acting. God gives men and women over to what they want: sin. In this way, God both honors human choice and judges sin.

The apostle Paul says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8).

In John Grisham's novel, *The Rainmaker*, a young lawyer, Rudy Baylor, who has just defeated a ruthless insurance company, observes: "Every lawyer, at least once in every case, feels himself crossing a line he doesn't really mean to cross. It just happens. If you cross it enough times, it disappears forever. And then you're nothing but another lawyer joke, another shark in the dirty water."<sup>2</sup> In other

words, you become enslaved to sin.

Abimelek had won over the Shechemites, but while he's away, a rival surfaces.

## Gaal's rebellion

Judges 9:26-29:

**<sup>26</sup>Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his clan into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him. <sup>27</sup>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 Abimelek. <sup>28</sup>Then Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelek, and why should we Shechemites be subject to him? Isn't he Jerub-Baal's son, and isn't Zebul his deputy? Serve the family of Hamor, Shechem's father! Why should we serve Abimelek? <sup>29</sup>If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelek, 'Call out your whole army!'"**

Gaal won over the Shechemites in the same manner that Abimelek won them over: by playing the ethnic card. The Shechemites chose Abimelek to rule over them because his mother, unlike the mothers of Abimelek's half-brothers, was one of them. Gaal, however, traces his lineage not to a Shechemite concubine but to Hamor, the founder of Shechem (Genesis 33:9). Abimelek's posturing comes back to bite him. For good measure, Gaal also berates Zebul, the governor of the city, as nothing more than Abimelek's lackey. Finally, Gaal rattles some sabers and challenges Abimelek to a showdown.

## Different kind of showdown

Judges 9:30-33:

**<sup>30</sup>When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry. <sup>31</sup>Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelek, saying, "Gaal son of Ebed and his clan have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you. <sup>32</sup>Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields. <sup>33</sup>In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, seize the opportunity to attack them."**

A showdown there will be, but not on Gaal's terms. Zebul may be a lackey, but he's no dummy. He sends word to Abimelek and urges him to mount a sneak attack against Gaal and his men.

## Sneak attack

Judges 9:34-41:

**<sup>34</sup>So Abimelek and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies. <sup>35</sup>Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance of the city gate just as Abimelek and his troops came out from their hiding place.**

**<sup>36</sup>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."**

**<sup>37</sup>But Gaal spoke up again: "Look, people are coming down from the central hill, and a company is coming from the direction of the diviners' tree."**

**<sup>38</sup>Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your big talk now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelek that we should be subject to him?' Aren't these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!"**

**<sup>39</sup>So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelek. <sup>40</sup>Abimelek chased him all the way to the entrance of the gate, and many were killed as they fled. <sup>41</sup>Then Abimelek stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his clan out of Shechem.**

Abimelek acts on Gaal's suggestion and positions his troops near Shechem for an attack at dawn. Abimelek catches Gaal unaware, for when Gaal sees troops advancing against him, he doesn't even know that they are troops. At first, Zebul stalls Gaal by telling him he's seeing things. Finally, Zebul can't resist taunting Gaal and challenging him to put his manhood where his mouth is. Gaal's troops and Abimelek's troops face off outside the city, but Abimelek gets the better of it, and Gaal turns tail and runs. Abimelek then moves his base of operations to a nearby city.

## Abimelek isn't satisfied

Judges 9:42-45:

**<sup>42</sup>The next day the people of Shechem went**

out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelek. <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>44</sup>Abimelek and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance of the city gate. Then two companies attacked those in the fields and struck them down. <sup>45</sup>All that day Abimelek 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.

Abimelek, though he put down the rebellion, isn't satisfied. He ambushes unarmed civilians who were tending their fields, sacks the city, and kills everyone in sight. By scattering salt over Shechem, he symbolically declares it barren (Deuteronomy 29:23, Psalm 107:34, Jeremiah 17:16, Zephaniah 2:9). Similarly, Abimelek had consigned his father's family to barrenness by slaughtering his brothers.

## Torching a tower

Judges 9:46-49:

<sup>46</sup>On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. <sup>47</sup>When Abimelek heard that they had assembled there, <sup>48</sup>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!" <sup>49</sup>So all the men cut branches and followed Abimelek. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire with the people still inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.

Having destroyed the city of Shechem, Abimelek still isn't satisfied. Some Shechemites managed to escape and hole up in a tower that was apparently part of the temple of their god. In Gideon's finest hour, on the verge of engaging the far superior Midianites, he divided his men into three companies and told them, "Watch me. Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do" (Judges 7:16-17). Now Abimelek, like his father, having divided his men into three companies, urges them to imitate him, but in an ungodly endeavor. Abimelek not only adopts and intensifies his father's ungodly ways, he also perverts his godly ways.

When Gideon took revenge on the city of Peniel, he tore down the city's tower and killed the men of the city (Judges 8:17). Abimelek, again, does his father one better (or worse): he torches a tower and kills not just men but women also, about a thousand in all.

In the movie *Casablanca*, when Rick Blaine is asked what kind of man his friend Captain Renault is, he answers, "Oh, he's like any other man, only more so."<sup>3</sup> What sort of man is Abimelek? He's like his father, only more so.

The Shechemites fled to the temple of their god, but their god did not help them. The temple where Gaal and the Shechemites partied had become a death trap. Idolatry functions in a similar way today: the worship of false gods becomes a death trap.

What about the rest of Jotham's prediction? Yes, fire came out of Abimelek—more or less literally—to destroy Shechem. But Jotham also predicted that fire would come out of Shechem to destroy Abimelek. There's little or nothing left of Shechem for fire to come out of, and Abimelek is still on the loose. Note that the next sentence begins with the word "next." For Abimelek, there's always a next. Will it ever end?

## Judgment at Thebez

Judges 9:50-55:

<sup>50</sup>Next Abimelek went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. <sup>51</sup>Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—had fled. They had locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. <sup>52</sup>Abimelek went to the tower and attacked it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, <sup>53</sup>a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.

<sup>54</sup>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. <sup>55</sup>When the Israelites saw that Abimelek was dead, they went home.

Abimelek captures another city, Thebez. Why Thebez? The narrator doesn't say. In any event, for Abimelek, there's always one more city to ravage. Why not Thebez? Why does a man climb a mountain? Why does Abimelek attack another city? Because it's there. Abimelek, like Kurtz, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, becomes increasingly maniacal. The men and women, like the people of

Shechem, flee to a tower. Abimelek is about to torch this tower, too, and we have no reason to expect different results this time—except that the narrator’s buildup differs ever so slightly. He specifically notes that the men and women of Thebez climbed up to the roof of the tower. When Abimelek approaches the tower—BAM!—a woman from the roof drops a millstone on his head. Abimelek goes to the well—rather, the torch—one too many times, and judgment falls from the sky.

Abimelek, recognizing his wound as fatal and hoping to avoid the ignominy of being killed by a woman, orders his armor bearer to finish him off. After the stone fell on his head, the best Abimelek could hope for was that people would not say that he was killed by a woman—a woman who wielded not a weapon but an agricultural implement, a grinding stone. His last wish, though, went unrealized, for when the writer of 2 Samuel recounted Abimelek’s death, he mentioned the woman but not the armor bearer (2 Samuel 11:21).

The pagan-style dynasty of Gideon and his son was a disaster. God’s people, who wanted a dynasty, needed to be saved from their own desires, and in the end, the Lord rescues them by putting an end to Abimelek. With the death of Abimelek, the Israelites go home, free from the tyranny of the ruler they had craved.

In Judges 9:56-57, the narrator summarizes the story of Abimelek and Shechem from God’s point of view.

## Poetic justice

Judges 9:56-57:

**<sup>56</sup>Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. <sup>57</sup>God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.**

Abimelek, who killed his seventy brothers on one stone, is himself killed by one stone. Abimelek, who drew on his heritage as the son of a Shechemite woman to rise to power, is brought down by a woman. Abimelek, who convinced the Shechemites that it was better for one man to rule over them instead of seventy men, is done in literally by “one” woman. The Proverbs warn that those who practice evil may fall into their own traps (Proverbs 28:10). Indeed, as the narrator notes in his summary, “Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers” (v. 56).

The Shechemites also pay for their part in murdering the sons of Gideon. Indeed, the prediction of Jotham—the narrator now calls it a curse—comes to pass. Clearly, Abimelek destroyed Shechem, as Jotham predicted. But how can it be said that Shechem destroyed Abimelek when a woman from Thebez dropped the stone on his head? Abimelek’s successful torching of Shechem fueled his thirst for blood and took him to the next city, where the same approach backfired. Fire came out of Abimelek, more or less literally, to destroy Shechem, and fire came out of Shechem, in the form of a millstone from Thebez, to destroy Abimelek.

And what of Abimelek’s father? Gideon, who gave in to his lust for revenge, ruled like a pagan king, and sired a son by a pagan concubine, also has his comeuppance. Abimelek, his son by the concubine, killed all of the other sons, gave in to lust for revenge, and ruled like a pagan king. And one more thing: Gideon ordered his firstborn son to do his dirty work and exact revenge against two pagan kings who had killed his brothers, but the young man refused to draw his sword (Judges 8:20). Finally, Gideon’s son by a pagan concubine issues a similar order to his armor bearer, a young man—only this time the one issuing the execution order has to issue it against himself. The young man in this case complies and runs Abimelek through.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. What a man sows, his children reap.

## A man reaps what he sows

The story of Abimelek is a cautionary tale. He assumed that he could take out his brothers and that God wouldn’t do anything about it. What he assumed seemed to be true: he killed his brothers and got away with it. Therefore, he continued in his wicked ways and even became increasingly wicked in his actions. Now, none of us will likely do anything like what Abimelek did. But how many of us think like Abimelek thought? How many of us assume that we can do whatever we want and that God won’t do anything about it? How many of us think, in so many words, that only the moon looks down? For when we defy the will of God, the same thing often happens to us that happened to Abimelek: nothing. God’s apparent inaction tends to validate our assumption that we can do whatever we want with impunity.

Abimelek assumed that he could take out his brothers and that God wouldn’t do anything about it, but he assumed wrongly. In fact, God did something about it immediately after Abimelek did it. God stirred up animosity between Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem.



Therefore, Abimelek became obsessed with killing the Shechemites and became increasingly risky in his pursuit of them. All along, he assumed that he was getting away with it, but all along, he wasn't. His obsession was a sign of God's judgment. Once you do something and believe you've gotten away with it, you're more likely to do it again—and worse. If you do it again, you're not getting away with it; you're becoming enslaved to it. If you're becoming enslaved to it, God is judging it.

God's judgment against Abimelek was also evident when his actions came back to bite him: the ethnic card he played was played against him, and the posturing he did was done against him.

Billy Joel sings of having his fill of fancy food and wine but discovering that there will be "hell to pay," of lighting up but realizing that his cigarettes have been "eating up inside me for some time," of sleeping around but concluding that you "pay for your satisfaction": "Somewhere along the line / Well I know it's just a matter of time / When the fun falls through and the rent comes due / Somewhere along the line."<sup>4</sup> In other words, a man reaps what he sows.

## **What a parent sows, his children will reap**

The story of Gideon, like the story of his son, is also a cautionary tale. He talked a good game ("The Lord will rule over you") but lived like a pagan king nevertheless, succumbing to money, sex, and power. Gideon was a hypocrite: he said one thing and did another. For Abimelek, it didn't matter what his father said; it mattered what his father did. He learned not by listening to his father but by watching him. Gideon exhibited no awareness that his children might be watching. Inadvertently, Gideon created a monster.

Humans learn from other humans. Humans, especially children, are sponges; they soak up what they come in contact with. We are therefore having an influence on other humans, not only by what we say but also, and especially, by what we do. Children will learn about money, sex, and power, for example, not so much by what their parents say about such subjects but by how they live with money, sex, and power.

One of the most haunting popular songs ever written is "Cat's in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin. He sings in the voice of a father who constantly puts off his son, but his son nevertheless says, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad / You know I'm gonna be like you." Later, when the boy grows up, the tables are turned. The father says of his son:

Well, he came from college just the other day,  
So much like a man I just had to say,  
"Son, I'm proud of you. Can you sit for a while?"  
He shook his head, and he said with a smile,  
"What I'd really like, Dad, is to borrow the  
car keys.  
See you later. Can I have them please?"

And later still:

I've long since retired and my son's moved away.  
I called him up just the other day.  
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."  
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I could find the  
time.  
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kids  
have the flu,  
But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad.  
It's been sure nice talking to you."  
And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,  
He'd grown up just like me.  
My boy was just like me.<sup>5</sup>

Let me tell you, for about a month in 1974, when that song hit the airwaves, it was great to be a kid in the United States, because fathers heard that song and treated their children differently. I was a teenager at the time, and several of my friends and I detected changes in our fathers. Now, though, I'm on the other end of it: I am the father of two girls, and the distant echo of Harry Chapin's song rings in my ears.

My eight-year-old daughter is an especially observant child. Sometimes, I just watch her take in a scene. Her eyes dart back and forth, and I know that the wheels are turning. She readily scopes out the relational dynamics in a room. She intuitively knows when something important is being discussed and stops whatever she's doing to listen in. If she doesn't understand the dynamics or the developments, she will usually pepper her mother or me with a series of questions. It's almost as if nothing escapes her notice. I can't get away with anything!

It's the truth: I can't get away with anything. And God has blessed me with a daughter who, simply by virtue of who she is, reminds me that what I do affects her, my other daughter, and other people. My children will reap what I sow.

My greatest desire as a father is for my daughters to follow Jesus. I want the spiritual line of my family to continue and flourish in the lives of my daughters and in ensuing generations. I cannot guarantee its continuance, but I can give my daughters every good reason to follow Jesus, not only by what I say, but especially by what I do.

God is watching, and so are our children.

## Setting the captives free

If enslavement to sin is indicative of God's judgment against sin, then enslavement to sin can make us aware of God. Enslavement to sin can make us aware that we're not getting away with it, that God is in fact doing something about it. Furthermore, if our sins come back to bite us in a poetic way, then we're not getting away with it, and God is doing something about it. He's holding up a mirror so that we might see ourselves, especially what we have done to others. If justice is found to be poetic, then the divine poet is plying his craft. By judging sin before the final day—by exacerbating our enslavement to sin and by haunting us with poetic justice—God is reaching out to us before the point of no return, before we go to the well once too often, before the stone falls from the sky.

If on the one hand God intensifies enslavement to sin to get our attention, he also sent his Son to set the captives free (Luke 4:18). Those who believe in his Son have been united with Christ so that they might be liberated from slavery to sin and serve God as his children (Romans 6). The Holy Spirit cries out from within us, "Abba, Father" in order to nurture our relationship with God and help us sow seeds to the Spirit (Galatians 4:6).

At a recent men's seminar at our church, Doug Goins, a former pastor of our church, recounted sitting on a panel with his wife, Candy, who was asked, "When are you most honored by your husband?" She answered, "When he's pursuing the Lord." The Spirit, more than anything else, helps us pursue the Lord.

Another speaker at the seminar, Jeff Farrar, another former pastor, recounted some of his father's failures with finances but also noted that he prayed every morning at 5:40 a.m. "My father's prayers shaped us as a family," he said. His father pursued the Lord, and that left a lasting impression on his son.

Therefore, pursue the Lord with everything within you, and sow your seeds as best you can.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Dog Eats Dog" (London: Cameron Mackintosh Ltd/HD Thames, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>John Grisham, *The Rainmaker* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1996).

<sup>3</sup>*Casablanca* (Warner Brothers, 1942).

<sup>4</sup>Billy Joel, "Somewhere Along the Line" (1973).

<sup>5</sup>Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle" (1974).