

Jotham's Parable



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(Judges 9:8)

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Jotham's Parable, recorded in the ninth chapter of the Book of Judges, is the lesson, but before considering the parable itself, we will read earlier verses for some background information.

“And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem unto his mother's brethren, and communed with them, and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying,

“Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you? remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.

“And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem all these words: and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech; for they said, He is our brother.

“And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him.

“And he went unto his father's house at Ophrah, and slew his brethren the sons of Jerubbaal, being threescore and ten persons, upon one stone:

notwithstanding yet Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left; for he hid himself.

“And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Millo, and went, and made Abimelech king, by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem.

“And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you.” (Judges 9:1-7)

Jerubbaal was another name for Gideon, whom God raised up as a judge to rescue the nation of Israel from servitude to the Midianites (Judges 6:11,14; 7:1). After Gideon's death, one of his sons, Abimelech, plotted the assassination of the seventy other children or offspring of Gideon. Abimelech reasoned from a practical standpoint that it would be much better for one son of Gideon to reign over the nation than for seventy sons to do so. In addition, there was a relationship through the mother with the men of the Shechem region in northern Israel, and Abimelech threw in a word of dissension, knowing that they might rally to his cause and thus make him king instead of the seventy other sons. The butchery of Abimelech was manifest in his slaying of

the seventy sons on one stone, which he used as a guillotine or slaughter block. Jotham, the youngest son and the only survivor of the seventy sons, then issued a parable from the top of a mountain, shouting down to those below. The parable began with the trees going to the olive tree, as follows:

“The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us.

**“But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?”
(Judges 9:8,9)**

Then the trees went to the fig tree.

“And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us.

“But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?” (Judges 9:10,11)

Next the trees approached the vine.

“Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us.

“And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?” (Judges 9:12,13)

Finally, the trees went to the bramble.

“Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us.

“And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

“Now therefore, if ye have done truly and sincerely, in that ye have made Abimelech king, and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands;

“(For my father fought for you, and adventured his life far, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian:

“And ye are risen up against my father’s house this day, and have slain his sons, threescore and ten persons, upon one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother;)

“If ye then have dealt truly and sincerely with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you:

“But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech.

**“And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beer, and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.”
(Judges 9:14-21)**

Jotham’s Parable contains many valuable lessons for the Christian. Of course there was also a local lesson in the days of the judges, when the parable was first uttered, but the parable has a deeper signification when it is applied in a spiritual sense.

The trees in the parable first approached the olive tree and requested that it take a leadership role. The trees said to the olive tree, “Come and reign over us.” But the olive tree responded, “Should I leave my fatness by which God and men are honored?” In other words, the olive tree felt that it was not capable of assuming the leadership role, which would mean guiding the affairs of the other trees. The olive tree would be taken out of its field into another area for which it was not peculiarly suited or adapted. Therefore, the olive tree wisely and humbly preferred to stay in the area where, by nature, it was best adapted to help

man. The fig tree gave the same kind of response by calling attention to the sweetness of its good fruit. Because the fig tree felt inadequate to assume a leadership role and judge the other trees, it said that to leave its area of expertise would be unwise. The humble vine likewise turned down the request to reign, but with the bramble, the response was quite different.

The bramble made very clear the terms upon which it would accept the honor; that is, the bramble would require great subservience from its subjects. If the trees wanted him to be king, then they would have to accept the responsibilities of servants and put their complete trust in the shadow of the bramble, giving blind obedience, as it were.

How does Jotham's Parable apply to the Christian life? Individual Christians manifest different characteristics, and among very noble and loving Christians, some who have leadership ability decline to be put into positions of prominence because they feel inadequate. They are unaccustomed to the role, and their native humility keeps them from accepting the honor. Nevertheless, the parable shows that in the areas where the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine functioned, they brought forth

constructive fruit that was a blessing to mankind. With the bramble, however, the situation was otherwise. And so we frequently find that many of those who aspire to and eventually occupy positions of prominence in both religious and political areas are not really capable by nature of functioning in that capacity. In other words, those individuals are of a bramble nature, which we will discuss in some depth.

In the parable, the bramble said that judgment would come down on anyone who accepted its role of leadership but did not comply with the terms of that leadership; that is, judgment would come on anyone who was wayward in obedience. The bramble said in effect, “Let fire come down out of heaven upon my enemies.” And that is what Abimelech did. When he presented his proposition to his kin in northern Israel and they suggested he take a leadership role, he implied that if they did not obey, he would punish them for not listening to his advice.

A study of the bramble is profitable for the Christian—not pleasant but constructive. The bramble aptly portrays certain characteristics of the Adversary and those underneath his control. Satan uses three primary avenues to beguile, influence, and

control the human race. The three avenues reveal the insidiousness of his character.

The first characteristic pertains to the name *Satanas*, which means “adversary,” and Satan operates as an *open* opponent or adversary, as an accuser of the brethren. In Christian fellowship, we must be careful not to become an accuser of the brethren. Life is full of problems and hardships, and it is very easy to focus our time and attention on accusing, blaspheming, and finding fault with others, that is, to have a spirit of maliciousness. This characteristic is described as “the way of Cain” (Jude 11). The Scriptures delineate Cain as an accuser and a murderer. In fact, the expression “raise Cain,” which means to cause confusion, trouble, and problems, is based on this thought. Being a troublemaker is characteristic of the spirit of Satan, whereas the Christian should have the opposite disposition by nature, being generous and tolerant toward others. While the Christian honestly discusses differences of opinion and thought, the discussion is to be done in the spirit of love. Brotherly love should predominate as long as principle is not compromised. The point is that unless we resist the wrong spirit, it would be very easy to devote our whole life to the poisonous attitude of accusation toward others.

The Adversary's tactic of open opposition is well depicted by the bramble. His opposition is obvious, for it is sharp like the thorns and thistles of a bramble. Those who have this "open adversary" characteristic are troublemakers wherever they are.

The second tactic of Satan is described as "the gainsaying of Core [Korah]" (Jude 11; see also Numbers chapters 16 and 17). In the Wilderness of Sinai, Korah questioned the leadership of Moses and Aaron over the nation of Israel. As a result, a test was set whereby rods from each of the twelve tribes were laid up in the Holy of the Tabernacle, and the rod that budded overnight was to indicate whom God favored to lead the people. Of course the rod that budded was Aaron's, and therefore, Moses and Aaron represent the true servants of God.

A condition sometimes exists where brethren do not realize God is using certain ones in a leadership role. Then, going to the opposite extreme, brethren may espouse the cause of equality to such an extent that it becomes false, and that false equality constitutes a basis upon which their own pride can feed and develop.

In this role, Satan is given the name "devil," from the Greek word *diabolos*, which means deceiver. As an angel of light but like

a serpent with the venom of asps under his tongue, Satan befriends God's people but is actually their enemy in the final result. Satan has been more successful in his role as an angel of light than as an open opponent or adversary of God. An example is Jesus' personal experience at the First Advent when he was in the wilderness for forty days without food or water following his baptism in the Jordan River (Matt. 4:1-11). Satan suggested that Jesus use his power to turn the stones into bread to nourish his body and thus be able to successfully continue his mission. The suggestion was put forth in the guise of a friend: "If [since] thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." Satan's words were not uttered with sarcasm or as a sneering challenge, for certainly he was not questioning whether Jesus had that ability. Rather, Satan was saying, "Because you have the ability and the prerogatives and miraculous powers, and because you are the Son of God, why not use them for your own benefit?" Satan even cleverly quoted Scripture. Therefore, when we are looking for direction or leadership, we must make sure that it is based not only on a "thus saith the LORD" and on more than one Scripture but also on the *whole* teaching of the Bible on that particular subject.

The third area in which Satan has been especially successful is called “the error of Balaam for reward,” that is, doing things for reward (Jude 11). Satan caters to greed and avariciousness. Since we are all fallen and have weaknesses and proclivities to a greater or lesser degree, the Adversary capitalizes on these various appetites and inflames them—whether the weakness is greed for money, the satisfaction of the flesh along various lines, or something else. The weakness can even be greed for a position of honor in the Church. As long as the Christian is subverted and sidetracked from his labor of love in connection with God’s Word and from his personal interest in and devotion to Jesus Christ, his true Lord and Savior—as long as the Christian lusts after evil things—then Satan has accomplished his task.

We are engaged in a continuous warfare against the Adversary and his three primary tactics or methods, just described. Because of the open thornlike effects of the bramble—because of the open opposition and punishment inflicted on those who do not comply with Satan’s terms—some are afraid to serve Christ. Such individuals fear opposition from their family members, coworkers, neighbors, and the world. They never take a stand for Christ because of fear that the thorns and thistles of life might

penetrate and hurt them. The open opposition of the world is a tactic Satan has used to discourage many from espousing the cause of Christ.

In Jotham's Parable, the bramble also demanded that trust be put in its shadow, that is, that complete confidence be put in its leadership. And so many blindly trust in other personalities or systems and accept religious instruction without questioning whether it is based on God's Word. Putting trust in the shadow of a bramble-like personality is very unwise. Some mistakenly think they are proving their own humility, but another human being is not to be honored in that capacity. Our trust must be in *Jesus* and in *his leadership and light*.

The most notable characteristic of the bramble is its briars and thorns. To the contrary, the influence of a Christian should be unctuous like oil. It should be a soothing relationship that is a blessing to both brethren and fellowman. Unfortunately, the lifelong ministry of some is nothing but trouble. Their conversation is disquieting and not constructive. Of course like Jesus, the Christian may utter hard sayings and penetrating truths and make sharp observations, but the *overall effect* of the Master's

ministry was summed up with the words, “Never man spake like this man” (John 7:46). Grace poured forth from his lips, and those who knew him recognized his true demeanor as one of *peace, love, and fellowship*—of unction.

The bramble-like Christian is likened to clouds without water (Jude 12). The purpose of a cloud is twofold: to produce water (rain, snow, etc.) and to create shade from the noonday sun, thus figuratively refreshing the Christian in the hard walk of life. However, the shadow that the bramble cast over its subjects blotted out the sunlight altogether. To give complete blind trust, obedience, and subservience to an individual or an organization is not proper, for we have only one Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who died for us. In *him* we are to put our trust, and we are to look for leadership in life where God, in *His* providence, can reach us based upon a “thus saith the LORD.”

The clouds without water, spoken of by the Apostle Jude, are a Second Death class who have no refreshment for themselves or others (Rev. 20:6; 21:8). In time of drought, a cloud that does not distill or drop water arouses false hopes and brings discouragement. Those who follow bramble-like leaders do not get

the real refreshing waters of truth. Such leaders are not carriers of blessing in this sense of the word.

Jude also described this Second Death class of leaders as being “carried about of winds” (Jude 12). The description applies as well to those under their influence. These Christians are unstable because their beliefs are based not on the Word of God but on the whims and ideas of men.

Jude continued to describe this class, calling them “wandering stars” who “despise dominion” (Jude 8,13). The Lord’s people are not to despise dominion but are to look to Jesus Christ for leadership, and in their various experiences in life, they are to seek God’s leadership through the Word. Likened to “raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame,” those of this Second Death class are compared with the debris and garbage that wash up and are deposited on the beach by the waves. Accordingly, if Christians, in observing the works of others, see this characteristic where garbage is continually being cast out, they should know how to react. Christians are to look for still waters and green pastures with lasting fruit and refreshment (Psa. 23:2).

What else did Jude say about this Second Death class? They are “trees whose fruit withereth” and “murmurers, complainers” whose “mouth speaketh great swelling words” (Jude 12,16). Moreover, they “separate themselves” by urging through teachings or actions, implied or expressed, that Christians have to belong to them rather than to the Lord in order to obtain salvation (Jude 19).

Let us return to the trees in Jotham’s Parable. The olive tree had many favorable characteristics. It was used for light, as a lubricant, as an unguent, as oil of gladness, as anointing oil (picturing the Holy Spirit), and as a food. The fig tree also had food value. The sweet figs represent a pleasing disposition in the Christian. There is no spirit of contentiousness or bitterness. The vine brought gladness of heart, representing the Christian who speaks with Psalms, hymns of praise, and the joy of the truth (Eph. 5:19). Therefore, we must be careful lest we lose the joy and the enthusiasm of the truth. One of Jesus’ miracles at his Second Advent was portrayed by the first miracle performed at his First Advent: the changing of water to wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). When six pots of water were placed before the Master, he converted them into six jars of most precious wine.

Now, in the days of Jesus' Second Advent, six messages are available to God's people whereby the water of truth becomes especially joyous and thrilling to the interested Christian.

As a matter of interest—and perhaps even concern—we wish to state that in the “Church” of Scripture, there is neither an organization to join nor an earthly membership, for the names of Christians “are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). The chief interest of the Christian should be to promote a deeper understanding and knowledge of God, His Word, and His Son. We believe that true Christians are not found in any one organization or fellowship but that they constitute a minority in all denominations.

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