A SIX-WEEK MEN'S BIBLE STUDY

BIBLE STORIES AFTER DARK

From Faith to Failure:
When Religion and Reality Collide

SIX MEN. SIX STORIES. SIX HARD TRUTHS.



BY RICK MELICK

WEEK 1 · AFTER DARK

Dying to Be Somebody

Years ago I lived in Marin County, California, and I was trying to get in shape. Not stay in shape. *Get* in shape. For some reason I decided sprinting would be a great way to do it. I'm not sure why anybody would ever think that, but I did.

So I went to a running store to buy some track spikes. I didn't want to spend much, because I'd been here before and I knew I wasn't going to need them for long. The owner went to the back and came out with a box. The spikes were multicolored, silver and gold, in a very particular design. Flashy. I bought them.

I drove to the track, sat on the tailgate of my truck and started lacing them up. A car pulled up and four guys got out. It was obvious they were not there to get in shape. They looked at my shoes, and I saw recognition in their eyes. Then they asked if I wanted to warm up with them.

I should have known better. But I was flattered, so I said yes. We started running, and I quickly realized they were in a whole different class. So I did what any of you would have done. I faked a calf injury, limped over to the side of the track and sat there watching them work out.

I found out later they were training for the U.S. Olympic team. Those spikes were only given to world-class athletes. The store owner had a few pairs left over, and I'd bought them without knowing their pedigree. When those guys saw them on my feet, they figured I was one of them. I wasn't. I'd just bought the leftovers.

The shoes said one thing about me. The truth said something else. And I was willing to fake an injury rather than let anybody see what was really under the shoes.

That's funny. Mostly. This week's story isn't. Abimelek wanted to be somebody so badly that he killed his brothers to get there. And when he was dying, with his skull cracked by a rock a woman dropped from a tower, his last request was still about his image.

THE BIG IDEA

When ambition leads to abuse, God takes it personally.

START HERE

1. What's your version of the flashy spikes: something you've worn, driven, said or posted to look like more than you are?
2. What are men willing to sacrifice to be important?

> **A WORD ON NAMES**
> The NIV spells it **Abimelek**; some translations use Abimelech. It means "*my father is king*." Hold on to that. It matters.

The Story in Four Scenes

Read Judges 8:22–35 and all of Judges 9. It's long, it's violent and it's in your Bible on purpose. As you read, circle every **fire**. You'll see why.

SCENE 1 The family business *Judges 8:22–9:6*

After a huge victory, Israel begged Gideon to be their king. He said no: "The LORD will rule over you" (8:23). Good answer. Then he collected gold, lots of wives and seventy sons, and named one of them Abimelek: "my father is king." Maybe Gideon didn't want the crown. His son did.

Abimelek went to his mother's hometown, Shechem, and made a simple pitch: *Would you rather be ruled by seventy strangers or by one of your own?* They paid him seventy pieces of silver out of the temple of Baal-Berith. Seventy pieces. Seventy brothers. He hired some "reckless scoundrels," killed his brothers on one stone, and Shechem crowned him king. Only the youngest, Jotham, escaped.

1. What argument won Shechem over? Why does "one of your own" still work on people?
2. Who paid for the murders? What does that tell you about who's responsible?

SCENE 2 The warning nobody wanted *Judges 9:7–21*

Jotham climbed Mount Gerizim, right above the city, and shouted down a story. The trees wanted a king. The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine all said no. They were too busy being useful. Finally the thornbush said yes, offering "shade" it couldn't give and threatening fire if they didn't take it. Then Jotham ran for his life.

3. What does the thornbush promise that it can't deliver?
4. Why do people follow a leader they know is dangerous?

SCENE 3 The alliance burns *Judges 9:22–49*

Three years. That's how long it lasted. Then "God stirred up animosity" (9:23), and the men who'd made Abimelek king started ambushing travelers and mocking him at parties. He came back, crushed the city, scattered salt on it, and burned the stronghold where about a thousand men and women had run for safety. Jotham's fire wasn't a figure of speech anymore.

5. What did Shechem gain at first? What did it end up losing?

SCENE 4 The final blow *Judges 9:50–57*

At the next town, Thebez, Abimelek walked up to another tower to burn it too. A woman on the roof dropped an upper millstone, the stone she used every day to grind grain, and cracked his skull. His last words? "Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him'" (9:54). Dying, and still managing his image.

Then the narrator tells us what it all meant: God repaid Abimelek for murdering his brothers, and Shechem for helping him (9:56–57).

6. What does his last request tell you about him?
7. Read 9:56–57 out loud. Why do you think the writer spells it out so clearly?

WEEK 1 · DID YOU KNOW?

Behind the Story

The tower may have been found.
Archaeologists at Shechem uncovered a massive fortress-temple, about 70 by 86 feet, with stone foundations 17 feet thick. Many scholars connect it with the stronghold Abimelek burned.

One silver piece per brother.
Shechem paid seventy pieces of silver (9:4) for the death of seventy sons (9:5). The math is not an accident.

A pulpit on a mountain.
Jotham preached from Mount Gerizim, the same mountain where Israel had once spoken God's blessings over the land (Deuteronomy 27:12; Joshua 8:33).

Taken out by a kitchen tool.
An upper millstone was the hand stone a woman used every morning to grind flour. The would-be king was brought down by everyday household equipment.

Names tell the story.
Abimelek means "my father is king." *Jotham* means "the LORD is perfect." One name grabs for a crown. The other points to the real King.

Three years.
That's the whole reign (9:22). Seventy lives for three bad years. Ambition is always a bad deal.

WHAT JESUS SAID

Jesus once watched dinner guests scramble for the best seats. His advice: take the lowest place. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Abimelek grabbed the head seat and lost everything. Jesus said greatness means serving (Mark 10:43–45), and then he did it himself. One man killed his brothers to be king. The real King died for his.

WHAT THE TEXT TEACHES

Power without character destroys. Judges doesn't admire Abimelek. Compare what God wanted in a king (Deuteronomy 17:18–20) with what Jesus said about greatness: "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43).

The men who enable it share the blame. Shechem wasn't a bystander. It wrote the check. This story asks not just how we lead, but who we follow, fund and make excuses for.

Your image won't outlive the truth. Abimelek fought for his reputation to his last breath. Three thousand years later, we still know a woman killed him. Jesus did the opposite: he "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7), and God lifted him up.

God is not indifferent to injustice. The point isn't just "pride is bad." It's that God sees, and God repays (9:56–57). That's a warning to anyone climbing over people, and a comfort to anyone who's been climbed over.

Real Life

The promotion. A manager takes credit for a teammate's work. He tells himself he deserves it; he carries more responsibility. The team notices, but nobody says anything. He controls promotions.

1. Where did ambition become using people?
2. What would real repentance look like for him on Monday morning?

The family argument. A dad knows he got it wrong but won't admit it in front of his teenage son. He calls it "protecting my authority." The argument ends when his son stops talking. So does some trust.

1. What's the difference between protecting authority and protecting your ego?
2. How could an apology make him a stronger leader?

The guy who gets things done. A ministry leader gets great results and regularly humiliates volunteers. People defend him: "He gets things done."

1. How are his defenders like the leaders of Shechem?
2. What accountability does a leader need, especially an effective one?

THE PRIDE AUDIT

Just between you and God. Mark each one honestly.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I get defensive when I'm corrected.	☐	☐	☐
I need the last word.	☐	☐	☐
It's hard for me to say, "I was wrong."	☐	☐	☐
I excuse harsh behavior when it gets results.	☐	☐	☐
I want credit more than I'd admit.	☐	☐	☐
I protect people from fair criticism because they're useful to me.	☐	☐	☐

The one I need to work on this week:

Your Week

DO IT TOMORROW

Lose one argument without losing your integrity.

Listen to a criticism without defending yourself. Find the part that's true. If you've hurt someone, own it and make it right. Humility doesn't mean agreeing with a lie or letting someone mistreat you. It means you don't have to win. Ask yourself: *Who pays the price when I need to be important?*

FIVE MINUTES A DAY

Each day builds on the one before. I'll text you a reminder each morning. Check them off as you go.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI

MONDAY — NOTICE

The crown he turned down

Read Judges 8:22–35. Gideon said no to the crown, then lived like a king and named his son "my father is king."

Notice: Where do you say the right thing but live a different message?

TUESDAY — NAME IT

What a king was supposed to be

Read Deuteronomy 17:14–20 and Mark 10:42–45. God's kind of leader stays humble and serves.

Name it: Which one of your Pride Audit answers showed up today?

WEDNESDAY — COMPARE

The anti-Abimelek

Read Philippians 2:3–11. Abimelek grabbed. Jesus let go. Abimelek protected his image. Jesus "made himself nothing."

Compare: Where could you go down instead of up this week?

THURSDAY — OWN IT

Where fights come from

Read James 4:1–10. "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (4:6).

Own it: Tell God plainly where pride has cost someone else.

FRIDAY — MAKE IT RIGHT

Lose one on purpose

Read Psalm 131. A man who isn't trying to be somebody can finally rest.

Make it right: Do this week's challenge. Have the conversation. Let someone else be right.

MY SPECIFIC STEP THIS WEEK

NEXT WEEK

The Prostitute Was Right · Genesis 38