

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

(Judges 8:33-9:57)

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DIVINE LEVEL. Whereas the course of events may seem to be determined by the free decisions and stratagems of the characters in the story, this is not the case. Through a few well-placed evaluative comments, the narrator makes clear that God is in charge. He is in sovereign control whether the Israelites acknowledge him or not. If Shechem is torn by civil war and Abimelech himself is slain, the narrator attributes this to God, whose hand may be hidden to those involved in the story but in retrospect is obvious to the biblical perspective. Thus the events in the story move unswervingly toward God's intended outcome.

In the larger context of the whole Gideon/Abimelech cycle, God demonstrates his kingship in spite of the Israelites' rejection of him and worship of Baal, whether before Gideon or after him. At the end of Judges 8 and the beginning of Judges 9, it may appear as though Yahweh has lost, with Gideon making his ephod and the Israelites returning to the worship of the Baals as soon as Gideon is dead. But Yahweh has not abdicated his throne.

After the death of Gideon, the Israelites do not show covenant loyalty or faithfulness to God or other humans. They demonstrate disregard for God's covenant and for the house of the leader whom the Lord raised up on their behalf. Humanity's tendency is to quickly forget all the good that others (human or divine) may do for them. When the Israelites make Baal/El-Berith their god, breaking their covenant with Yahweh to enter into a covenant with a Canaanite deity, they become spiritually Canaanites. In such a situation, with the enemy being within rather than external, God withdraws his gracious hand. God gives the Israelites the king they deserve, and he gives Abimelech the people he deserves. What characterized the Israelites in general characterizes their leader, Abimelech, who manifests no regard for familial loyalty and certainly none for God. Certainly the culture in which we live today does not encourage loyalty to either family or God.

Sometimes it may appear as though evil is in control and that God has taken a vacation. Injustice dominates and wicked people, morally empty and reckless like Abimelech's hirelings, seem to prevail. Anyone living at the time of Abimelech's rule must have felt this way. Certainly many Christians living in Nazi Germany felt this way, as does anyone living in a similar totalitarian state. And when believers forget the Lord and live according to the world's dictates, this only intensifies the power of the wicked. When believers choose this path, becoming functionally unbelievers, they may find that God allows them to get what they deserve, just as the Israelites experienced in the Abimelech story.

Believers' apostasy can never negate God's sovereignty. He is in control whether they acknowledge him or not, just as he is in control whether unbelievers acknowledge him or not. The Lord moves things to his intended outcome, and whatever gods have been used to replace him will prove to be worthless in the day of trouble, just as Baa El-Berith proved to be for the Shechemites, who took refuge in his temple from Abimelech.



HUMAN LEVEL. On the human level, Abimelech's problems run much deeper. His problem is not simply a disregard of or an apathy toward human and heavenly fathers. Rather, it is a profound hatred of both. Rooted in hatred for his father, Gideon, he is dominated by a ruthless craving to change his marginal existence. His total disdain for the fifth commandment ("honor your father and mother") motivates him to plot the demise of all seventy of his half-brothers on his father's side. He attempts to compensate for his marginality through the seizing of power. Thus anyone who opposes him becomes the focus of his anger and hatred. But as much as he despises and hates his father, he is nevertheless the son of Jerub-Baal and his personal, unbridled revenge will only increase until he is slain by the "one woman."

Abimelech's appeal to the "citizens/lords" of Shechem in 9:2—"Remember, I am your flesh and blood" ('sm + bśr)—has an ironic parallel in the Israelites' appeal to David to be their king in 2 Samuel 5:1: "We are your own flesh and blood" ('sm + bśr). Clearly in the case of Abimelech kinship is not a good principle to act on politically (well-illustrated by Jotham's fable). A far better principle is that of God's election, which David had and Abimelech did not.

While the Israelites are guilty of covenant disloyalty and act without integrity in their siding with Abimelech (who is the embodiment of guile), Yahweh appears blameless, having utter integrity in his dealings with human beings. Even in his sovereign opposition to Abimelech this is true. As an adversary to the wicked, God raises up opponents to wicked people.

It is important to remember that all of the slaughters and destructions that are described in chapter 9 are the result of Gideon's sins in 8:27-32.

What a comment on how destructive sin is! Gideon's sins have impacted his own family in the generation immediately after him in ways that he could not have remotely predicted. Serious reflection on this chapter of the book of Judges alone ought to encourage us to lay aside our sin.

This story clearly demonstrates that any leader who raises himself or herself up through evil processes can expect that the Lord will eventually bring retribution. This may be much sooner than later; but whatever the case, it will take place.

Our society today is indoctrinated to quickly forget all the good things that may have been done for them. The entertainment business and the sports industry in particular create an environment where hard work and subsequent achievement are short-lived. This has even crept into the church pulpit, where one outstanding sermon after another may be the expectation, and good overall ministry may be devalued. This is serious, but how much more dangerous it can be when a leader quickly forgets the good done for him or her. What characterizes the society in general often characterizes its leaders.

When individuals today act without loyalty and integrity, they may side with a leader who acts without loyalty or integrity. But the Lord, who is blameless and always acts with utter integrity in his dealings with human beings, will raise up sovereign opposition to such individuals. As an adversary to the wicked, God raises up opponents.

This text certainly underscores the results of sin. Our sins cannot be measured in a lifetime. They have an impact on the next generation and beyond. Whether it is our families or our communities or our nation, the impact will be felt. The harvest of the seeds of sin may not necessarily come in our generation but in innumerable ones beyond us.