

Survival Skill #8
Let God Balance the Scales of Justice

Someone Must Pay!

(Judges 9)

Having lived for a time in East Africa, I was deeply shocked and troubled by the civil war in Rwanda in 1994. As the brutal nightmare began to unfold, the cover of *Time* magazine carried a picture showing the bodies of countless dead refugees trampled at the Rwanda/Zaire border. The lead article told of unbelievable cruelty toward these helpless people. In the midst of starvation and cholera, tribal hatreds still seethed. *Time* reported, "Early last week relief workers spotted a Hutu soldier going from tent to tent with a grenade in his hand, looking for Tutsi children to kill."¹ As humans, when we see such cruelty, we instinctively think, "Someone must pay!"

Another magazine, *Reader's Digest*, often runs an article which chronicles some of the worst injustices in the American judicial system: A convicted drunk driver who sued the city where he was arrested and was awarded \$90,000; a convicted murderer who had stabbed her boyfriend twenty-two times, but was sentenced to only five years of outpatient therapy; a convicted wife-murderer who was awarded custody of his two children after serving a mere five years of probation.² Again, our hearts cry out, "Someone must pay!"

Sometimes our outrage at injustice comes

¹Bruce Crumley, Marguerite Michaels, and Andrew Purvis, "Cry the Forsaken Country," *Time* (1 August 1994): 34.

²"Crime and Punishment (U.S.A.)" *Reader's Digest* (April 1994): 112-13.

from personal experience. Perhaps someone has lied to you, you have suffered betrayal at the hands of a friend, or you have incurred a financial loss because someone you trusted proved that he is untrustworthy. When injustices occur, we are hurt and angry. We want justice, and we want it now. "Someone must pay!"

"HOW LONG, O LORD?"

Numerous times in the Psalms, the cry for justice is expressed in heart-wrenching language:

Appoint a wicked man over him;
And let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is judged, let him come forth guilty;
And let his prayer become sin.
Let his days be few;
Let another take his office.
Let his children be fatherless,
And his wife a widow.
Let his children wander about and beg;
And let them seek sustenance far from their
ruined homes.
Let the creditor seize all that he has;
And let strangers plunder the produce of his
labor.
Let there be none to extend lovingkindness
to him,
Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children.
Let his posterity be cut off;
In a following generation let their name be
blotted out.

Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered
before the Lord,
And do not let the sin of his mother be blot-
ted out.

Let them be before the Lord continually,
That He may cut off their memory from the
earth (Psalm 109:6–15).

In writing the New Testament Book of Revelation, John was allowed to look under the altar in heaven and see the souls of those who had been martyred for their faithfulness. These souls were calling out in a loud voice, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10). It was their way of saying, “Someone must pay!” Because injustice is everywhere, everywhere there is the cry for justice. The human spirit longs for the scales to be balanced, for wickedness to be punished and for righteousness to be rewarded.

ABIMELECH, SON OF GIDEON

Although Gideon refused to be the king of Israel (8:23), he did marry and procreate like a king! His many wives bore him a total of *seventy* sons. In addition to the children of his wives, he also had a son who was born to his concubine in Shechem (8:31). A concubine was often a slave who enjoyed few legal rights and was considered inferior to a man’s other wives. The son of the concubine was named Abimelech, which, in Hebrew, means “my father” (Abi-) is “king” (-melech). Because of Gideon’s refusal to become king of Israel, it seems strange that a child of his would be given the name “my-father-is-king.” It was possibly a name given by Abimelech’s mother who held a different view of Gideon than Gideon held of himself. On the other hand, it could have carried the spiritual meaning “my father [God] is king.” Whatever the original intent of his name, Abimelech came to believe that he had the right to become a king in Israel.

The story of Abimelech differs from what we have seen up to this point in the Book of Judges, in that Israel was not seeking deliverance from any foreign oppression, and Abimelech is nowhere described as a judge. God did not initiate Abimelech’s reign of terror, but the text is clear that He was deeply involved in the resolution of this crisis.

Following the death of Gideon, Abimelech approached his kinsmen in Shechem and asked them to support him in his bid to become king

of that region (9:1). Since he was probably of Canaanite heritage, the non-Israelite population of Shechem rallied to his support and provided him with the money he needed to raise an army. With these “reckless adventurers” he went to the town of Ophrah and “killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone” (9:5). The only one to escape was Jotham, the youngest brother, who saw what was happening and hid. Basking in the glow of his triumph, Abimelech returned to Shechem, where he was crowned king. That night the town of Ophrah must have been filled with the shrieks of widows and fatherless children reeling from the slaughter they had just witnessed. Surely, many cried, “Someone must pay!”

Jotham, hearing that his half-brother was now king, climbed nearby Mount Gerizim and shouted down to the people of Shechem (9:7). His message was in the form of a parable, a story of trees which asked an olive tree to become their king. The olive tree believed that it was too valuable to become their king, so the trees turned to a fig tree. Again they were rebuffed by a tree that thought its present function was too important to give up in order to become king. After being turned down by a vine, the trees finally resorted to asking a thornbush to be their ruler, and it accepted. Jotham’s message was obvious: Abimelech was the thornbush ruler of Israel! The more valuable trees and plants in the forest had turned down the position; only the despised thornbush would be their king. When he had finished delivering his parable, Jotham escaped and hid from Abimelech.

One of the most distressing details in the story of Abimelech is that he “ruled over Israel three years” (9:22). For three long years the deaths of the sons of Gideon went unavenged. For three long years their families were left to wonder if any justice existed in their world. For three long years, evil was victorious and good was conquered. For three long years troubled souls were left to ask God, “How long?”

THE REVOLT OF SHECHEM

When Abimelech was made king, he insisted on ruling from Arumah, five miles south-

east of Shechem. At the end of three years the people of Shechem turned against Abimelech and began a guerilla campaign to topple him (9:22–25). During this time, a man named Gaal moved to town and began to stir up the people against their king. One day, during a drunken festival, some of the people dared to curse Abimelech, and Gaal responded by offering to get rid of him. When word of this uprising reached Abimelech, he assembled his troops and led them in a night march to surprise the inhabitants of Shechem. When morning came, he crushed the fledgling revolt. Intent on making an example of this disloyal city, Abimelech ambushed the people the next day as they went out to work in their fields. He killed them, destroyed their city, and scattered salt over the entire area to ensure that it would not be restored (9:45)! Then, turning his attention to a tower where one thousand people had fled for safety, he set it on fire and killed everyone inside.

Possibly sensing that the revolution of Shechem had spread, Abimelech and his men then besieged the city of Thebez. Intending to deal with it as they had Shechem, they prepared to set fire to the tower where all the people had barricaded themselves against the murderous army. Feeling invincible, Abimelech became reckless. As he moved toward the tower to set the fire, a woman dropped a rock from the tower, hitting King Abimelech on the head and cracking his skull (9:53).

To die in defeat was a tragedy, but to die at the hands of a woman was a disgrace (4:9, 21). Abimelech knew that he was dying, and he ordered his armor-bearer to kill him so it would not be said, “A woman slew him” (9:54). The man obeyed, Abimelech died, and Israel returned home.

GOD REPAID

Again, we have a story that is full of slaughter, treachery, and wickedness. Throughout the time these events were taking place, thousands of people must have been crying out for justice, all the while convinced that justice was little more than a dream. In the end, however, justice was carried out. One message that is plainly taught in this story is that it was God who balanced the scales.

After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, *God sent an evil spirit* between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. *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 Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers (9:22–24; New International Version; emphasis mine).

Thus *God repaid the wickedness* that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. *God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness.* The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them (9:56, 57; NIV; emphasis mine).

The Scriptures teach that God is just and will judge the world in righteousness. The murders in Rwanda will be punished. The abuse of children and the persecution of innocent people will be paid for. Every robbery, every rape, every betrayal, and every lie will be dealt with by God. Someone will pay!

Confidence in ultimate justice is much more than a theological nicety; it is the foundation for living with love and forgiveness in the present age. Knowing that God will balance the scales of justice in the end, we are free from the compulsion to seek our own revenge. Paul combined these two ideas, the judgment of God and the lifestyle of the Christian, in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17–21).

In a world where gangs epitomize the unending cycle of violence, revenge, and more violence, God sets His people free from the insanity of retribution by promising to establish justice Himself. It is not always immediate. Crimes sometimes go unsolved, and wicked people often go unpunished for years. Nevertheless, we can be certain that eventually someone will pay!

DO I WANT JUSTICE?

While all of this is good news for people who hate the injustice in our world, it becomes bad news when we think about our crimes against God! Do we really want to live in a world where sin is always punished? Do we want God to deal with us justly? Surely not! Dr. Jimmy Allen, my teacher in a college class on Romans, used to illustrate this by telling us of a time when he was pulled over by a state trooper for speeding. "At that point," he said, "you want mercy, not justice!" When it comes to our sins, we all want mercy, not justice. We want forgiveness, not fairness. When we stand before God, we all are guilty and in need of mercy. It is this desperate situation that leads us to the cross of Christ!

Christian missionaries have, on occasion, been shocked by Buddhists who would listen with great fascination to their presentation of the gospel only to inform the Christians that what they called "good news" is, to a Buddhist, immoral. They insist that in order to achieve real justice in this world, every sin must be paid for! To say that we do not have to pay for our sins, therefore, is offensive to them. In the search for answers to these objections, missionaries have decided that the Buddhists' rebuttals are the perfect place to begin telling the story of Jesus. Sin *was* paid for—and at an awful cost! On a world scale, justice has been accomplished! In the cross, God was not winking at sin; He was insisting

that sin be paid for in full. This is our message of justice!

People today take a different and destructive view of sin. Sin is ignored, denied, excused, explained away, and made "low-cost." To deal with sin in these ways is not to deal with sin at all. Sin is real, and it destroys—whether we acknowledge it or not! Sin must be paid for! We all deserve a death sentence. The good news is that Jesus died in our place, accepting in His own body the punishment for our sins!

Colossians 1:21–23

"And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, . . ."

CONCLUSION

Someone must pay! The tragedy of Abimelech reminds us that someone will. It may take years, and it may be in the final judgment; but someone will pay. Thanks be to God that Christians can humbly and thankfully declare to the world, "Jesus paid for our sins!" ■

"No King in Israel"

"'There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (21:25). This famous byword with which the book ends is usually thought of as a description of the state of anarchy. This is partly correct, of course, since there was neither prophet nor king to guide the nation. But the families and tribes remained intact, and the strong blood-ties continued as the people acted together within their local communities and under their elders. Times of apostasy they were, when the ways of the Canaanites were followed—years of enslavement and disaster. Yet, the tribes retained enough faith in the Lord God to pray in crises for mercy and deliverance. Not forgotten was the covenant of the Lord under Moses, and the tabernacle at Shiloh stood firm for many generations as a sign of God's promise to Israel. [God] had not failed to work on their behalf through the heroic judges, even though the spiritual power of these men was all too often diminished by their human passions or lack of understanding of the will of God.

"The times of the judges were difficult times indeed, but better days followed, . . ."

Judges/Ruth
Arthur H. Lewis