

JEREMIAH 41

THE MURDER OF GEDALIAH

It is a very tragic story that is related in this chapter, and it goes to show that evil does indeed pursue sinners. The black cloud that was gathering in the foregoing chapter now bursts in a dreadful storm. The few Jews who had escaped captivity were surely very happy to still be in their own land, where they could harvest their summer-fruits, and where they were secure under Gedaliah's leadership.

For a brief interval, all went well. Gedaliah, the new governor, had taken up his residence at Mizpah – an old fort which King Asa of Judah had built 300 years before, in order to hinder the invasion of Baasha from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Toward this place, the scattered remnant of the Jews had begun to look with hope. The captains of the Jewish forces which had been in the fields – who had still been holding out, as roving bands of soldiers, against the victorious King Nebuchadnezzar – had hastened to swear allegiance to Gedaliah. And the Jews who had fled to Moab, Edom, and other surrounding nations had now returned to Mizpah from all places where they had been driven. How glad Jeremiah must have been to see this nucleus of order, spreading its influence throughout the surrounding chaos and confusion!

But sadly, the fair dream was rudely dissipated. For alas! Johanan's report concerning the traitorous Ishmael was only too true. And the crafty manner in which he committed his villainous crime rendered it all the more diabolical and wicked. No more than a month or two after Gedaliah had been appointed as governor, Ishmael came to Mizpah with ten men; and Gedaliah – still free from all suspicion – received him into his house and set before him a splendid feast. The dinner was a private one, and this was the perfect opportunity for Ishmael to secretly murder Gedaliah and all his attendants. Never was a more treacherous deed committed under the pretense of friendship! In that region of the world, the rights of hospitality are always held sacred; and any violation of them is stamped with peculiar hatred. David said of Ahithophel, "He which did eat bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me." And these words were quoted by our Lord Jesus Himself, as applicable to the treacherous conduct of Judas. Infamy and disgrace have been attached to these men's names to all posterity, and yet they have still had their imitators; the pages of history are stained with narratives of plots, conspiracies, and murders, which are a shame to humanity.

Ishmael had executed his wicked plans so secretly that even after two whole days, no one knew about them. But it came to pass that 80 men were passing by Mizpah from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria. These men were descend-

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ Ishmael treacherously murders Gedaliah and many other persons with him, and then he carries the rest of the people in Mizpah away as captives – verses 1-10
- ❖ Johanan recovers the captives and becomes their commander – verses 11-16
- ❖ He intends to take the remnant of the people into the land of Egypt – verses 17-18



ants of the remnant of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; and although they lived among the heathen colonists who had been planted in the country by the Assyrian conqueror, Esarhaddon, they had continued to worship the Lord and attend His feasts in Jerusalem. And now that the city was in ruins, they were coming to the sacred spot with all the signs of deep sorrow for the destruction of the Temple. The assassin of Gedaliah went out to meet these men, weeping crocodile-tears of deceitful hy-

pocrisy, as if he shared their sorrow for the Temple; and he lured them to enter Mizpah, where he slew all of them except for ten, and tossed their bodies into a pit. As for the ten men that Ishmael spared, he only did so upon the condition that they would lead him to their hidden treasures of wheat, barley, oil, and honey. Having committed these wholesale murders, Ishmael fled from Mizpah; but he did not leave alone. He carried away captive all the rest of the people, including the young daughters of King Zedekiah, who had been left under the care of Gedaliah. Ishmael's intention was to go back to the land of Ammon, whose king had sent him on this evil errand in the first place.

But when Johanan and the captains who were with him heard of these atrocities, they marched forward with all the men they could muster! To the great joy of the captives, the brave pursuers overtook Ishmael by "the great waters" of Gibeon, about two miles north of Mizpah. A fight ensued, in which Ishmael lost two of his men; but he himself and the remaining eight escaped back to the Ammonites. What became of this evil traitor, we are never told. He passed into the obscurity from which it would have been good if he had never emerged. But from that obscurity, he and all others who have been like him will emerge one day, to stand before the bar of the Righteous Judge, where He will pass a just sentence upon every unrepentant murderer.

Johanan now took charge of the people whom he had rescued from Ishmael. But instead of returning to Mizpah, he marched with them in the direction of Bethlehem, and stopped at the inn of Chimham – probably built by Chimham, the son of Barzillai, a rich Gileadite in David's time. It seems that Johanan was afraid that the Babylonians would avenge the murder of Gedaliah upon those who had not been able to prevent the assassin from escaping. Neither he nor the captives whom he had rescued dared to return to Mizpah. Rather, like shepherdless sheep, they resolved to quit their land entirely and go to Egypt; and Johanan simply halted outside Bethlehem until other refugees could join them. Surely this whole turn of affairs was a bitter disappointment, especially to Jeremiah!

Lord, we confess that we, by nature, are just as evil as Ishmael and the rest of the rebellious Israelites; but we thank You that You have chosen us to be recipients of the amazing grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.