

A Pastor's Perspective: On Judges 8:31

“Reflecting on Biblical Names and Hidden Motives”

Readers of Scripture have often recognized that names in the Bible sometimes hold great significance. They may convey deeper spiritual truths about a person. For example, God changed Abram (‘exalted father’) to Abraham (‘father of a multitude’); Jesus changed Cephas to Peter. Thus, it’s important to consider whether a person’s name is significant to a biblical story.

Such is the case in the story of Gideon. Many are familiar with the successful military campaign Gideon led against the massive Midianite army with only 300 soldiers armed with torches and trumpets. The later years of Gideon’s life are not as familiar. In Judges 8:22, the Israelites respond to Gideon’s success by insisting he and his descendants become kings in Israel. Gideon appears to give a good answer, saying, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you” (v. 23, ESV). However, the rest of the narrative raises serious questions. Gideon requests that Israel give him earrings from the spoil with which he makes a golden ephod. This eventually becomes an object of idolatry for the people. Furthermore, we read that Gideon had 70 sons, many wives, and a concubine. These don’t seem to be characteristic of a godly leader. What’s going on?

There’s an important detail in verse 31. We’re told that Gideon named his son Abimelech. A brief Hebrew lesson may help. The Hebrew word *Ab* in Hebrew means “father.” To make a noun singularly possessive in Hebrew, an “i” is added to the end of the word. Thus, *abi* means “my father.” Finally, *melech* means, “king.” Thus, Abimelech means, “my father *is* a king.” This is ironic considering earlier, Gideon refused to accept the title of king. It would appear he viewed himself as Israel’s king nonetheless. This may explain why Gideon had a harem. It may also explain why Gideon wanted his own ephod. In the Old Testament, the ephod was worn by the priests and used to discern God’s will. It’s possible Gideon wanted people to come to him to discern God’s will as their ruling judge. Finally, it may explain the murderous grasp for power carried out by Abimelech years later.

Abimelech becomes a tragic ending to the promising start of Gideon’s life. This has-been “mighty warrior” highlights a truth later expressed by the Apostle Paul: God’s strength shines in our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9-10). When Gideon recognized his weakness, he relied on God’s might, accomplishing one of Scripture’s most improbable of victories. However, when he trusted in his earlier successes, Gideon acted independent of the Lord, leading ultimately to his downfall.

This story serves as a warning to those who feel strong due to past success, natural talents, Spirit-giftedness, or the compliments of others. We are wise to heed Paul’s warning: the one who thinks he stands tall, ought to be beware, lest he fall. Similarly, for those who are weak, what a great reminder that lacking strength can be one of the greatest blessings. It keeps us from the failure resulting from pride, and pushes us to lean on God—our only true Victor and King.

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