

Jeremiah 40:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But Gedaliah the son of Ahikam said unto Johanan the son of Kareah, Thou shalt not do this thing: for thou speakest falsely of Ishmael.

Analysis

Gedaliah's response—"Thou shalt not do this thing: for thou speakest falsely of Ishmael"—reveals both admirable moral conviction and tragic misjudgment. By refusing to authorize Ishmael's assassination, Gedaliah maintained ethical integrity, declining to shed blood based on unconfirmed conspiracy despite credible intelligence. His flat prohibition 'Thou shalt not do this thing' echoes covenantal language forbidding murder (Exodus 20:13). His claim 'thou speakest falsely of Ishmael' wasn't necessarily accusing Johanan of deliberate lies, but rather expressing disbelief that Ishmael could be plotting murder. This reveals Gedaliah's character: trusting, perhaps naive, unwilling to believe evil of others without conclusive proof. From one perspective, this reflects commendable grace and unwillingness to condemn without evidence. From another, it shows dangerous refusal to exercise proper discernment and act on credible threats. The tragic outcome (Ishmael's assassination of Gedaliah in 41:1-3) validates Johanan's warning and demonstrates the real consequences of failing to believe truth when presented. This passage raises profound questions about when trust becomes foolishness, when giving benefit of the doubt becomes dereliction of duty, and how leaders should balance mercy with protection of those entrusted to them. Gedaliah's error wasn't in maintaining moral standards but in refusing to believe credible testimony about Ishmael's intentions.

Historical Context

Gedaliah's refusal to believe Johanan's warning occurred approximately in September 586 BC, roughly two months before Ishmael's assassination at a feast in the seventh month (41:1), likely October 586 BC. This timing suggests Gedaliah had several weeks to investigate, take precautions, or reconsider his assessment, but apparently maintained his trust in Ishmael throughout. His response 'thou speakest falsely of Ishmael' may reflect personal relationship—perhaps Gedaliah and Ishmael had earlier positive interactions that made the accusation seem incredible. Or it may reflect Gedaliah's broader philosophy of giving people the benefit of doubt and refusing to act on suspicion rather than proof. Either way, this decision cost him his life and led to the community's collapse. The historical parallel to Jesus' interaction with Judas is instructive: Jesus knew Judas would betray Him (John 6:70-71, 13:21-27) yet didn't prevent it, instead allowing betrayal to unfold within God's sovereign purposes. The difference is that Jesus' 'failure' to stop His betrayer accomplished redemptive purposes, while Gedaliah's failure to stop his betrayer simply resulted in tragedy without redemptive outcome. The question remains whether Gedaliah should have listened to Johanan or whether his moral stance, though costing his life, maintained integrity worth preserving.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How can leaders distinguish between healthy trust that gives people the benefit of doubt and naive credulity that ignores credible warnings?
2. What responsibility do leaders have to protect communities entrusted to them even when that requires believing uncomfortable truths about people they trust?

3. In what ways does Gedaliah's refusal to believe evil of Ishmael parallel how believers sometimes ignore clear warnings about false teachers or corrupt influences in the church?

Interlinear Text

בָּן יְחִינָּם אֶל יְהוָה וְאֶל אָמֵר
the son of Ahikam unto Johanan the son
H413 H3110 H1121

בָּן קָרְאֵה שְׁלֹשֶׁלֶת
the son of Kareah falsely
H1121 H8267

לֹא תַּעֲשֶׂה כְּזֹאת כְּזֹאת
Thou shalt not do this thing
H413 H1697 H2088 H3588

לֹא תְּדַבֵּר אֶל שְׁמַעְאֵל
for thou speakest of Ishmael
H413 H3458

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