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The Final Defeat of the Midianites

8: 4-21

The final defeat of the Midianites DIG: Why did the leaders of Succoth and Peniel refuse to feed Gideon's tired troops? What did it mean to tear their flesh with the thorns and briers of the wilderness? What change was seen in Gideon? Why was the capture and execution so important to Gideon?

REFLECT: How does pride affect those around us? How can we overcome pride (Proverbs 18:12; Matthew 11:28-30, 23:11-12; Philippians 2:3-4; Colossians 3:12). A gentile word (Proverbs 15:1) is always better than wrath. But sometimes a gentile word is impossible. Given that reality, what can you do instead?

The pursuit of the fleeing Midianites was temporarily interrupted by the parenthetical interlude of Gideon's problem with Ephraim (to see link click [Be - Gideon's Problem with Ephraim](#)). But, quite unexpectedly, Judges 8:4 will pick up where Judges 7:23 left off.

If the story had ended with **8:3, Gideon** would be considered one of the heroic **judges** of ancient **Isra'el**, notwithstanding **his** problem with fear and lack of faith. However, as the narrative continues, the portrayal of **Gideon** becomes more and more bleak. The moment that **he** and **his men** cross over into **the Transjordan**, a whole new **Gideon** emerges. In contrast to the "first" **Gideon**, who was timid and who succeeded by the grace of **God**, this "second" **Gideon** is a forceful avenger, whose very success breeds even more failure.¹⁸⁸

Restoration: ADONAI's work of restoration involved more than defeating external **enemies**. **Isra'el** needed renewed faith, unity, and justice within the nation. Unfortunately, **Gideon** wasn't the man for that job. Not only did **he** turn into a tyrant, but the disintegration of the nation would continue under **his judgship**. And like King Sha'ul, **he** became a tragic figure.

The Mockery of Succoth (8:4-7): Gideon and his three-hundred men,

exhausted, yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan River and crossed it into the Transjordan (8:4 NIV). They were tired from the battle (to see [link click Bd - Gideon's Victory Over the Midianites](#)) and the pursuit, but they were still moving. The lack of an effective rearguard action by the Midianites allowed Gideon's small force to forge ahead as fast as possible, while the hastily-assembled, allied supporting coalition made its way in pursuit of the widely-separated stragglers. When they reached Succoth, Gideon asked the leaders of the town, "Please give my warriors some food. They are very tired. I am chasing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian (8:5 NLT). The army of Gideon had been equipped for a surprise attack, not a lengthy pursuit of a routed army, but he doubtless expected to obtain supplies from the Israelite tribes on the eastern part of the Jordan River.¹⁸⁹

However, as far as the leaders of Sukkoth were concerned, this was a very dangerous request, even though Gideon's men needed strength for the pursuit ahead. So the officials of Sukkoth replied: Catch Zebah and Zalmunna first! And then we'll feed your army (8:6 NLT). The leaders of Sukkoth were skeptical of Gideon's ability to defeat the fleeing Midianite army and capture the two kings. If Sukkoth helped Gideon and Gideon failed, then the Midianites would come back to Sukkoth and retaliate without mercy. It wasn't like the men of Sukkoth didn't think feeding their hungry brothers was an opportunity to show love, but it was a risk they didn't want to take . . . and more to the point, they were rather disrespectful in the way they spoke to Gideon.¹⁹⁰ This showed that the cohesiveness of the tribes west of the Jordan River and the tribes east of it found in the book of Joshua had broken down. They didn't see themselves as one people anymore.

So instead of responding with a gentle word (8:2), Gideon's timidity completely evaporated, and throwing diplomacy to the wind, he answered the leaders of Sukkoth with a threat. Glibly invoking the name of ADONAI, he threatened to take matters into his own hands. Gideon's personal resourcefulness, which in his initial victory over the Midianites had been submitted to God's will was now gone. Clearly, he cut YHVH out of the picture, and anything he accomplished was by his own strength and tactical skill.¹⁹¹ We can see Gideon's transformation right before our very eyes when he said: If that's your answer, then after ADONAI has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hands, I will beat (Hebrew: *thresh*) your flesh with the thorns and briars of the wilderness (8:7 Hebrew), like a man beats grain on the threshing floor.¹⁹²

The Mockery of Pen'el (8:8-9): Fuming at **his** rejection by **the people of Sukkoth**, **Gideon** moved up the Wadi Jabbok to **Pen'el** and again asked for food, but he got the same answer for the same reason (8:9 NLT). **Pen'el** (Hebrew: *the face of God*) was another town with deep roots in **Isra'el's** past, for it was there that **Jacob** had a life-changing encounter with **YHVH**, and called in **Pen'el** because of the special significance it had for **him** (see the commentary on **Genesis Hw - Jacob Wrestles with God**). But now such an encounter happens in **Gideon's** case. In fact, **ADONAI** no longer seemed to have any part of **his** actions. **So he said to the people of Pen'el, "After I return safely** (in Hebrew the root is *shalom*), **I will tear down this strong-tower" (8:9 NLT).** This is very ironic. The *shalom* (**victory**) in which **Gideon** expects to **return** will mean anything but *shalom* (**safety**) to the people of **Penial**. **The strong-tower** was supposed to form a refuge in times of danger for **the people** of an unwallled city. But **it** would not protect them from **Gideon's wrath**. One can almost hear the disdain in **his** voice: **this strong-tower he would tear down!**¹⁹³



The Capture of Zebah and Zalmunna (8:10-12): But this time **Zebah and Zalmunna** were in **Karkor**, about one hundred miles east of the Dead Sea. The remnants of the once-mighty **Midianite** army must have considered **themselves** safe when **they** reached **Karkor**, but **they** didn't count on the tenacity of **Gideon**

and **his men**, who must have secured provisions along the way. **The two Midianite kings** only had **about 15,000 men**, that was **all that remained of the allied armies of the east**, for **120,000 had already been killed**. **Gideon circled around the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah**, and once again, **they took the Midianite army by surprise** because **the Midianites** didn't expect **Isra'el's** pursuit to extend so far south, so close to **their** home territory (**8:10-11 NLT**). **Zebah and Zalmunna, the two Midianite kings, fled, but Gideon pursued after them and captured them, routing their entire army (8:12 NIV)**. All this inspired new panic among the **enemy**.¹⁹⁴ The capture of **the Midianite kings** made it difficult for the surviving **Midianites** to regroup and reassert themselves; nevertheless, **Gideon** withdrew before **his** position became vulnerable. A great and decisive victory had been won by the dogged persistence of **Gideon** and **his men**, always outnumbered by **their enemies**.¹⁹⁵ But the involvement of **ADONAI** remains silent.

The Punishment of Succoth and Pen'el (8:13-17): With the main objective achieved, it was time for **Gideon** to fulfill the threats **he** made to **the leaders of Succoth and Pen'el**, which he does with chilling ruthlessness and apparent relish. **Then Gideon, son of Joash returned from the battle by way of the Heres Pass (8:13 CJB)**. **He** is probably referred to as **Gideon son of Joash** to remind us just how far this **son of Joash** had come, and compare what **he** did at the beginning (**6:11-32**). **Gideon**, who had once **threshed wheat (6:11)**, now **beat** (Hebrew: *threshed*) **the leaders of Succoth with the thorns and briers of the wilderness (8:7)**; and **Gideon**, who once had **torn down the altar of Ba'al at Ophrah (6:25)**, now **tears down the tower of Pen'el (8:17)**. Only **Abimelech** will surpass **Gideon's** brutality in punishing **the Israelites** who displease **him**. It was the beginning of a civil war theme that will widen as the narrative of the book continues to unfold from this point on.

Gideon is quite thorough and precise as **he** approaches **his** grim task. **He captured a young man from Succoth and demanded that he write down the names of all the seventy-seven elders of the town**. **He** wanted to make sure no one escaped **his** vengeance. With **Zebah and Zalmunna** in **his hands**, **Gideon** would have **his** pound of flesh; nothing more, but also nothing less. **Then Gideon returned to Succoth and said to the elders, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna. When we were before you, you taunted me, saying: Catch them first, and then we will feed your exhausted army."** So **Gideon** took the elders of the town and taught them a lesson, punishing them with thorns

and briers from the wilderness. He also tore down the tower of Pen'el and killed all the men of the town (8:14-17 NLT).

The Execution of Zebah and Zalmunna (8:18-21): In this climactic section **killing** becomes the central motif, with reference to it in every verse. This is not **killing** that happens in the heat of battle, but the cold-blooded **murder** that happens after it (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Bq - Do Not Murder**), when **the man** who cannot be challenged uses **his** power to settle old scores. **Gideon** had **killed all the men of Pen'el**, Now **he** turned **his** attention to **Zebah and Zalmunna**.¹⁹⁶ **He** asked them, “The men you killed at Mount Tabor - what were they like?” This question shows that **the Midianites** didn't only plunder **Isra'el**, they also **murdered** members of the Jewish population. **The king's** answer would lead to **their** execution. “Like you,” they replied. “They all had the look of a king's son” (8:18 NLT). **Gideon's** response confirms the identity of **the Mount Tabor** victims. **Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. His brothers' blood** was crying out from the grave. Therefore, **Gideon** must become **the avenger of the blood (Numbers 35:19)**. **As sure as ADONAI is alive, I swear that if you had spared them, I would not kill you (8:19 CJB)**. **Gideon** first offered the chance of revenge to **his firstborn son Jether**, since it would add to **their** humiliation to be killed by a youth, inexperienced in war. **He** said: **Kill them! But Jether didn't draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid (8:20 NLT)**.¹⁹⁷ It seems that **Jether** functions as a kind of foil for **Gideon** that reinforces some of the changes in **him** that we have been observing. **Jether he was afraid**, just as **Gideon** once was once **afraid** (see **Bb - The Destruction of the Altar of Ba'al**), and **Jether** saw **himself** as too **young**, just as **Gideon** had once protested that **he was the youngest in his father's house (6:15b)**. In **Jether**, we see **Gideon** as **he** used to be, in contrast to **the Gideon** we see now, in other words, **Gideon** has changed.

As sure as ADONAI is alive, I swear that if you had spared them, I would not kill you (8:19 CJB). The oath **Gideon** swore produces the first reference to **ADONAI** since **He caused the Midianites, Amalekites, and Bedouin raiders throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords (7:21)**. In contrast to then, **ADONAI** has not been portrayed as having any involvement in **Gideon's** actions (commissioning **him**, commanding **him**, assuring **him** of victory, or giving **his enemies into his hands**). Even now, **ADONAI** doesn't enter the story as an active participant, but only as **Someone** invoked by **Gideon** in an oath of self-justification in doing what he wanted to do all along, implying that **the two**

kings brought it on **themselves**. But given **Gideon's** recent actions at **Succoth** and **Pen'el** it's difficult to see this oath as an expression of genuine holiness. Since crossing **the Jordan River**, **Gideon** has shown **himself** to be much more of a law-unto-**himself** than one who lives in dependence on **ADONAI** and does only as **he** is commanded to do.

Zebah and Zalmunna were defiant to the end, and took advantage of **Gideon's** embarrassment at **Jether's** hesitation, to taunt **him** one last time. **They** viewed **Gideon's** delegation of **their** murder to **Jether** as a sign of weakness. **They said to Gideon, "Be a man and kill us yourself!"** If **he** was strong, like a real man, let **him** prove it by **killing them himself**. So **Gideon** obliged and **killed them both, taking the royal ornaments from the necks of their camels** as trophies of war (**8:21 NLT**). More detail about those **ornaments** is given in **8:26**, where **they** take on a more sinister significance.¹⁹⁸

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for always being a wonderful and loving **Father**. No one compares with you! You are the perfect balance of power, wisdom and justice in **Your** sovereign rule! **Your arm is mighty, Your hand is strong, exalted is Your right hand. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne. Lovingkindness and truth go before You (Psalms 89:13-14).** You do have great **wrath** (**Ephesians 5:6, Colossians 3:6**); a righteous **wrath** against sin and unholiness. As **Gideon** and **the Israelites** defeated **the Midianites** in the past, they continue to empower **Isra'el** to defeat her many **enemies** today. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*