

Judges 1:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued after him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes.

Analysis

But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued after him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes.

Adoni-bezek's flight represents the typical pattern of ancient warfare: defeated kings attempted escape when battle turned against them, hoping to regroup forces or flee to allied territories. However, Judah's pursuit ensured complete victory—the Hebrew *vayyirdephu acharav* (וַיִּרְדְּפוּ אַחֲרָיו, "and they pursued after him") uses the same verb (*radaf*, רָדַף) employed throughout conquest narratives for relentless pursuit of fleeing enemies (Joshua 10:19, 2 Samuel 18:16). This demonstrates obedience to Deuteronomy 20:1-4's command to trust God and fight courageously.

The mutilation—cutting off thumbs and great toes—was a deliberate act rendering Adoni-bezek permanently unable to wield weapons or run in battle. Ancient Near Eastern warfare occasionally employed such mutilations to neutralize captured enemies without execution. In the Assyrian annals, for example, kings sometimes blinded or cut off the hands of captured rulers to prevent future rebellion while keeping them alive as examples. The thumbs and great toes were essential for gripping weapons and maintaining balance in combat, making this mutilation strategically effective.

Critically, verse 7 reveals this practice echoed Adoni-bezek's own treatment of conquered kings—"as I have done, so God hath requited me." The Hebrew *gemul* (גְּמוּלָה, "requited/recompensed") indicates divine retributive justice, the *lex talionis*

(law of retaliation) principle embedded in Mosaic law (Exodus 21:23-25). This isn't arbitrary cruelty but measured justice—Adoni-bezek received precisely what he had inflicted on others. Reformed theology recognizes this as common grace manifestation: God's justice operates even through pagan recognition of moral law written on human conscience (Romans 2:14-15). However, believers must distinguish between divinely ordained judicial punishment and personal vengeance forbidden by Christ (Matthew 5:38-42, Romans 12:19).

Historical Context

Mutilation of captives, while shocking to modern sensibilities, was documented across the ancient Near East. The Assyrian annals frequently describe punishments inflicted on rebel kings including blinding, cutting off hands, noses, or ears, and impalement. Egyptian reliefs show captives with severed hands presented to Pharaoh as evidence of victory. However, such practices were typically reserved for particularly troublesome enemies or as examples to deter rebellion—they were not routine treatment of all prisoners.

The specific targeting of thumbs and great toes reflects practical military considerations. A warrior's grip on sword, spear, or bow required functional thumbs, while balance and mobility in combat depended on intact feet. This selective mutilation created a living trophy—a defeated king who could never again pose military threat but would serve as permanent testimony to the victor's power. The number of mutilated kings under Adoni-bezek's table (seventy, v. 7) indicates this was his systematic practice, not an isolated incident.

Archaeological evidence provides context for treatment of captives during this period. Mass graves at Late Bronze Age sites sometimes show evidence of violence, while others suggest captives were enslaved rather than executed. The biblical law, however, commanded complete destruction (*herem*, חֵרֶם) of Canaanite populations (Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 20:16-18) to prevent religious syncretism, making Adoni-bezek's survival and transport to Jerusalem problematic from a strict application of the law. This hints at the incomplete obedience that characterizes Judges and creates ongoing spiritual problems for Israel.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does Adoni-bezek's recognition of divine justice demonstrate that conscience awareness of moral law is universal, even among pagans?
2. What is the difference between recognizing God's justice in judgment (like Adoni-bezek) and experiencing redemptive grace through faith in Christ?
3. How should Christians balance pursuit of earthly justice with Christ's command to love enemies and forgo personal vengeance?

Interlinear Text

וַיִּנָּס	אֲדֹנִי	בְּזֶקֶן	וַיִּדְרֹפּוּ	אַחֲרָיו	וַיֹּאמְרוּ
fled	H0	But Adonibezek	and they pursued	after	him and caught
H5127		H137	H7291	H310	H270
אוֹתוֹ	וַיִּקְצָצוּ	אֶת	בְּהֵנָּה	וְיָדָיו	וּבְגָדָיו:
H853	him and cut off	H853	his thumbs	H3027	and his great toes
	H7112		H931		H7272

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