

Judges 8:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and slew the men of the city.

Analysis

And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and slew the men of the city— Gideon's punishment of Penuel was even more severe than Succoth's torture. The verb nathats (נָתַץ, "beat down/demolished") indicates complete destruction of the city's defensive tower, eliminating their military protection. The phrase "slew the men of the city" (vayyaharog et-anshei ha'ir, וַיַּהֲרֹג אֶת-אֲנָשֵׁי הַעִיר) suggests wholesale slaughter, though whether this means all male adults or specifically the city's fighting men remains ambiguous.

Penuel, like Succoth, had refused Gideon bread (8:8-9), and their leaders responded with the same skeptical demand for proof of victory. Gideon's promise to "break down this tower" (8:9) upon his return is now fulfilled with deadly force. The escalation from torturing Succoth's elders to executing Penuel's men reveals progressive brutality—each act of vengeance emboldens further violence. This pattern mirrors Lamech's boastful murder (Genesis 4:23-24), contrasting starkly with Christ's teaching of unlimited forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22) and loving enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).

The destruction of Penuel's tower had long-term strategic consequences beyond immediate punishment. Towers served as refuge for civilians during attacks and as military strongpoints for defense. By demolishing it, Gideon left Penuel vulnerable to future raids—ironically making them more dependent on military deliverers like himself. This abuse of power foreshadows the tyranny characterizing Israel's eventual monarchy when kings would "take your fields and your vineyards" and "ye

shall cry out in that day because of your king" (1 Samuel 8:14-18). Reformed theology sees here the danger of concentrating power without proper accountability—even God-ordained leaders require institutional checks against corruption (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

Historical Context

Penuel (meaning 'face of God') was located east of the Jordan River, named for Jacob's wrestling with God there (Genesis 32:24-32). Its tower was likely a migdal—a fortified structure serving both as watchtower and refuge. Archaeological excavations in Transjordan reveal such towers were common in Israelite settlements, providing early warning of raids and temporary protection. The city's destruction by Gideon would have left the population defenseless against Midianite or Ammonite attacks. Penuel was later rebuilt and fortified by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:25), indicating its strategic importance controlling trade routes and Jordan River crossings. The severity of Gideon's punishment reflects the period's brutal warfare and limited central authority.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does power—whether military, political, economic, or spiritual—tempt even godly leaders toward increasingly harsh treatment of opposition?
2. What institutional accountability structures prevent leaders from using legitimate authority to settle personal scores?
3. In what ways does Gideon's escalating violence illustrate Jesus's warning that 'all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matthew 26:52)?

Interlinear Text

בָּעֵיר אֲנָשׁוּ אֶת תִּבְּרֵר גַּת זְנוּאָל מִתְּלֵא לְאַת
H853 the tower of Penuel And he beat down and slew H853 H2026 H376
H4026 H6439 H5422 H2026 H376 H5892

Additional Cross-References

Judges 8:9 (Parallel theme): And he spake also unto the men of Penuel, saying, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.

1 Kings 12:25 (Parallel theme): Then Jeroboam built Shechem in mount Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and went out from thence, and built Penuel.