

Shocking Truth

David in a prophetic utterance makes a shocking exclamation: “O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.” (Psalm 137: 8-9).

Perhaps because of the use of the word “happy”, we may get the impression here of an angry person taking horrific vengeance on those he hates. Our horror is only increased when we realize that it is God who will do this.

For it is God who will bring about this destruction. Jeremiah elaborates: “How is Babylon become a desolation among the nations!....I am against thee, O thou most proud, saith the Lord God of hosts: for thy day is come, the time that I will visit thee” (Isaiah 50:23,31). It is as we might expect. Those who rebel against God will be vanquished, and God himself is the one who will requite evil: “Vengeance is mine...saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

Yet God claims to be merciful, and those who love him praise his great mercy:

Nehemiah exclaimed “thou art a gracious and merciful God.” (Nehemiah 9:31).

David frequently remarks on God’s mercy: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” (Psalm 103:8).

Joel pleaded with the people to return to God, “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13).

And in the New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews confirms that God is merciful even to those who do not deserve mercy: “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12).

No, it is not the destruction that makes God “happy”. In fact, God tells us quite plainly that he takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11). It is possible for sin to be broken yet the sinner saved, for the Lord is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Nor are we his children to gloat over the downfall of the wicked. “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth:”, we are told (Proverbs 24:17). Job recognized this and, hoping to justify himself before God, said “This also were an iniquity to be punished...if I rejoiced at the destruction of him that hated me” (Job 31:28-29). He claims not to have done so.

We must not rejoice at the downfall of even the wicked, but we may be “happy” in the sense of being blessed, as it is used in Matthew 5:4 “Blessed are they that mourn”. Now, mourning is the

opposite of happiness as we usually think of it. But the blessedness of this mourner is not in his rejoicing. He is blessed in his desire for righteousness, and is grieved by its absence.

Is there something more in this idea of dashing people against the stones? What people, we might ask, and what stones? In Psalm 137, the people so destroyed are those of Babylon. But Isaiah speaks of the Lord himself being a stone, and his own people broken upon it: “And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken” (Isaiah 8:14-15)

Does the Bible echo this anywhere else? We should remember that the Psalms are prophecy, foreshadowing Christ. The same writer who speaks of the utter destruction of Babylon against the rocks reminds us that “the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner” (Psalm 118:22).

Explaining that Christ is that stone, Peter says “unto you therefore which believe he is precious, but unto them which be disobedient....a stone of stumbling” (1 Peter 2:7-8). Matthew and Luke both describe the fate of those who stumble over Christ the Rock: “Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken, but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18).

That those who so stumble are God’s own people is clear: “But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness... For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” (Luke 9:31-33).

We often do stumble at God’s word, especially when confronted with such arresting images as those presented in the Psalms. But let’s pick ourselves up, shake off the dust, and recognize that the severity of the image is an accurate picture of God’s hatred for sin. If we are shocked by this, we should be. Sin is shocking.

It can also be forgiven. In fact, the very Rock on which we stumble can be the means of our forgiveness. Babylon, or God’s own people – we all stumble. Whether we are dashed against the Rock, or find reconciliation through it, depends upon how we receive God’s astounding offer of forgiveness.

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