

Hebrews 11:37

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted,
were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins
and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

Analysis

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; This verse intensifies the catalog of suffering. 'Stoned' references martyrdoms like Zechariah son of Jehoiada, stoned by royal command for rebuking idolatry (2 Chronicles 24:20-22)—Jesus references this martyr (Matthew 23:35). Stephen became first Christian martyr by stoning (Acts 7:58-60). 'Sawn asunder' likely references tradition that Isaiah was killed this way during Manasseh's persecution, recorded in extra-biblical sources familiar to first-century Jews.

'Were tempted' (epeirasthēsan, ἐπειράσθησαν) could mean 'tested' or specifically tempted to renounce faith under torture. 'Slain with the sword' describes violent death like Urijah the prophet murdered by Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:20-23). These martyrdoms demonstrate the world's ultimate hostility to faithful witnesses—when mockery and imprisonment fail to silence truth, the world resorts to killing God's messengers.

'Wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented' describes prophets like Elijah who fled persecution, living as fugitives in wilderness. The rough garments indicate poverty and contrast with false prophets who profited from their office. These faithful witnesses endured homelessness,

poverty, and constant hardship for proclaiming God's word. Their suffering wasn't punishment for sin but consequence of righteousness in an unrighteous world.

Historical Context

Prophetic martyrdom features throughout Israel's history. During Jezebel's reign, she killed YHWH's prophets while Obadiah hid 100 in caves (1 Kings 18:4, 13). Elijah fled to wilderness, living in caves and fed by ravens (1 Kings 17:2-6; 19:9). The intertestamental period saw intense persecution, including Antiochus Epiphanes' campaign against Torah-observant Jews (167-160 BC). Jewish tradition recorded many martyrdoms not detailed in canonical Scripture but known through oral tradition and writings like 2 Maccabees. These accounts formed collective memory of suffering for faith, preparing readers to understand their own persecution as continuation of historical pattern rather than aberration.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does this catalog of suffering challenge any expectation that faithfulness guarantees earthly comfort and safety?
2. What does the world's violent hostility to God's faithful witnesses teach about the nature of spiritual warfare?
3. In what ways should remembering martyrs' sacrifices strengthen your own willingness to suffer smaller discomforts for faith?

Interlinear Text

ἐλιθάσθησαν ἐπρίσθησαν ἐπειράσθησαν, ἐν φόνῳ
They were stoned **they were sawn asunder** **were tempted** **and** **the sword**
G3034 G4249 G3985 G1722 G5408

μαχαίρας ἀπέθανον περιῆλθον ἐν μηλωταῖς ἐν
G3162 **were slain** **they wandered about** **and** **sheepskins** **and**
G599 G4022 G1722 G3374 G1722

αἰγείοις δέρμασιν ὑστερούμενοι θλιβόμενοι κακουχούμενοι
goatskins G1192 **being destitute** **afflicted** **tormented**
G122 G5302 G2346 G2558

Additional Cross-References

2 Chronicles 24:21 (Word): And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the LORD.

Jeremiah 26:23 (Word): And they fetched forth Urijah out of Egypt, and brought him unto Jehoiakim the king; who slew him with the sword, and cast his dead body into the graves of the common people.

1 Kings 19:10 (Word): And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

2 Kings 1:8 (Parallel theme): And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite.