

Isaiah 49:24

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered?

Analysis

Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered?

This rhetorical question expresses human doubt about God's ability to reverse impossible situations. The "mighty" (gibbor, גִּבּוֹר) refers to powerful warriors; "lawful captive" (shevi tsaddiq, שְׁבִי צַדִּיק) suggests prisoners held by legitimate right, perhaps through conquest or legal claim. The question assumes a negative answer—normally, no one can rescue prey from the strong or free captives held justly.

The question articulates Zion's despair from verse 14 in concrete terms. How can exiled Israel be freed from Babylon's grip? The Babylonians are "mighty" militarily, and Israel's exile is "lawful" in that God Himself decreed it as judgment for sin (Jeremiah 25:8-12). This creates a theological and practical impossibility from human perspective—who can overrule God's own judgment?

From a Reformed perspective, this question frames the gospel paradox: How can sinners enslaved to sin and under righteous divine judgment be delivered? The answer (verse 25) reveals that God Himself provides deliverance, satisfying both justice and mercy through Christ's substitutionary atonement. The question teaches that redemption requires divine intervention, not human effort. Like Israel in Babylon, sinners are captive to powers they cannot overcome—only God's mighty arm can save (Isaiah 59:16).

Historical Context

This question reflects ancient warfare realities. Victorious armies claimed prisoners and plunder as spoils of war—attempting to recover them risked military conflict. Babylonian power seemed unassailable in the 6th century BCE; they had defeated Egypt, Assyria, and numerous smaller nations. From human perspective, their captives were unrecoverable.

Additionally, international law of the time recognized conquest rights. Babylon's claim to Jewish captives was "lawful" by ancient standards—they had conquered Judah militarily. Daniel 1:1-2 states that "the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand," indicating divine decree behind the exile. This made deliverance seem doubly impossible—against both Babylonian might and divine judgment. Yet God accomplished both through Cyrus's decree, foreshadowing Christ's greater deliverance from sin's bondage.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What "impossible" situations in your life need God's intervention beyond human solutions?
2. How does recognizing the gospel paradox (God satisfying His own justice to save sinners) deepen your appreciation for salvation?
3. Where do you need to shift from self-reliant problem-solving to dependent waiting on God's deliverance?

Interlinear Text

הִיָּקָח	מִגִּבּוֹר	מֶלֶךְ וְ	וְאֵם	שָׁבִי	צִדִּיק	יִמְלֹט:
be taken	from the mighty	Shall the prey	H518	captive	or the lawful	delivered
H3947	H1368	H4455		H7628	H6662	H4422

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 12:29 (Parallel theme): Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.

Ezekiel 37:3 (Parallel theme): And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.

Isaiah 42:22 (Parallel theme): But this is a people robbed and spoiled; they are all of them snared in holes, and they are hid in prison houses: they are for a prey, and none delivereth; for a spoil, and none saith, Restore.

Ezra 9:13 (Parallel theme): And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this;

Ezra 9:9 (Parallel theme): For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Isaiah 53:12 (Parallel theme): Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Nehemiah 9:37 (Parallel theme): And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

Ezekiel 37:11 (Parallel theme): Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.

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