

Isaiah 51:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thy sons have fainted, they lie at the head of all the streets, as a wild bull in a net: they are full of the fury of the LORD, the rebuke of thy God.

Analysis

Thy sons have fainted, they lie at the head of all the streets, as a wild bull in a net: they are full of the fury of the LORD, the rebuke of thy God. This verse continues describing Jerusalem's desolation through vivid imagery. "Thy sons have fainted" (ulph, עַלְפָה) suggests weakness from exhaustion, hunger, or despair. Lying "at the head of all the streets" indicates public display of defeat—not private suffering but shameful exposure at city intersections where everyone passes.

The simile "as a wild bull in a net" (keto antelope bemikmar, כְּתוֹא מַכְמָר) depicts frantic, futile struggling. Wild bulls (some translate "antelope") are powerful animals, yet become helpless when ensnared. Their thrashing exhausts them, leaving them prone. This illustrates Israel's condition under divine judgment—their strength avails nothing against God's purposes.

The cause: "full of the fury of the LORD, the rebuke of thy God." The parallelism emphasizes that suffering stems from divine action, not mere military defeat. Chemah (חֵמָה, fury) and ga'arah (גָּעָרָה, rebuke) are covenant judgment terms. From a Reformed perspective, this teaches that God actively judges sin; suffering under divine wrath is not random misfortune but purposeful discipline. Yet even in judgment, the title "thy God" maintains covenant relationship—He disciplines as a father, not merely punishes as a judge. Hebrews 12:5-11 applies this principle: God's rebuke proves sonship, intending restoration, not destruction.

Historical Context

The image of bodies in streets matches Lamentations 2:11-12, 21; 4:1 descriptions of Jerusalem's siege. Babylonian siege tactics included surrounding cities, cutting off supply, waiting for starvation to force surrender. Bodies of those who died from famine or attempted escape littered streets. Archaeological evidence from similar sieges (Lachish, for example) confirms these brutal realities.

The wild bull/antelope in net may reference hunting practices where nets trapped game for capture. Job 18:8-10 uses similar imagery for the wicked being caught. The application to Israel shows divine judgment employing tools of capture and restraint. Yet Isaiah's broader context promises release—the net won't hold forever. God's discipline serves redemptive purposes (1 Corinthians 11:32), not ultimate destruction for His elect.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How do you distinguish between general suffering and God's specific discipline in your life?
2. What futile struggles (like the netted bull) do you need to cease, submitting to God's purposes?
3. How does maintaining 'thy God' (relationship) even during judgment affect your response to hardship?

Interlinear Text

כִּתְ וְאַ
חוֹצֵז וְתַ
כָּל בָּרָאשׁ שָׁכַב וְעַלְפָ וְבָנְ יְהָ
Thy sons have fainted they lie at the head H3605 of all the streets as a wild bull
H1121 H5968 H7901 H7218 H2351 H8377

אַלְפִירָה גַּעֲבָתְ אַלְפִירָה
מִכְמָתְ רָם מִכְמָתְ נְמַלְאָה יְמָם
יְהָנָה הָסְמָתְ הָסְמָתְ הָסְמָתְ
in a net they are full of the fury of the LORD the rebuke of thy God
H4364 H4392 H2534 H3068 H1606 H430

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