

Isaiah 51:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But I will put it into the hand of them that afflict thee; which have said to thy soul, Bow down, that we may go over: and thou hast laid thy body as the ground, and as the street, to them that went over.

Analysis

But I will put it into the hand of them that afflict thee; which have said to thy soul, Bow down, that we may go over: and thou hast laid thy body as the ground, and as the street, to them that went over. The cup removed from Israel is now placed in her oppressors' hands—divine justice doesn't eliminate judgment but redirects it. The phrase "them that afflict thee" (moyagayikh, מוֹיָגַיִךְ) identifies those who tormented Israel. Their mocking command, "Bow down, that we may go over," reflects ancient practice where conquerors literally walked on defeated enemies' prostrate bodies as ultimate humiliation.

The image of laying one's body "as the ground, and as the street" for enemies to trample depicts total degradation. Archaeological evidence and ancient Near Eastern texts confirm victorious armies performed such rituals. Isaiah promises reversal—those who humiliated will themselves be humiliated; the cup they forced others to drink they will now consume themselves.

From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates divine justice and vindication of God's people. While believers suffer temporarily, God promises ultimate reversal where oppressors face judgment they inflicted (Revelation 18:6—"double unto her double"). This doesn't sanction vengeance in believers (Romans 12:19) but assures God's justice will prevail. The church faces persecution, but God will vindicate His people (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7). This verse warns against persecuting God's people

—what you do to them, God will do to you. It also comforts believers that present humiliation isn't final; God sees and will act justly.

Historical Context

The practice of walking on defeated enemies appears in Joshua 10:24 where Israelite commanders placed feet on Canaanite kings' necks. Egyptian and Assyrian reliefs depict similar victory rituals. Babylon itself practiced this—Psalm 66:12 describes enemies going over heads. Isaiah promises that Babylon would experience identical humiliation, fulfilled when Medo-Persia conquered them in 539 BCE.

The cup metaphor transfers to Babylon in Isaiah 51:23 and to eschatological judgment in Revelation 14:10, 16:19, 18:6. Church history demonstrates this pattern: Rome persecuted Christians then fell; Islamic empires conquered then fragmented; Soviet communism oppressed believers then collapsed. While the church endures, oppressing powers crumble. Ultimate fulfillment awaits final judgment when all who persecuted God's people face the cup of divine wrath they previously forced on others.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does knowing God will judge your oppressors affect your response to mistreatment?
2. In what ways does this promise challenge desires for personal vengeance?
3. How should the certainty of God's justice shape the church's patience during persecution?

Interlinear Text

אָמַר וְ	אֲשֶׁר	מוֹגֵ יָם	בְּיָד	וַתֵּשׁ יָמִי
thee which have said	H834	of them that afflict	it into the hand	But I will put
H559		H3013	H3027	H7760
גַּם הָאָרֶץ	כָּאֵרֶץ	וַתֵּשׁ יָמִי	לְעֹבְרִים:	שָׁח יָ
thy body	as the ground	But I will put	that we may go over	Bow down
H1460	H776	H7760	H5674	H7812
			לְעֹבְרִים:	וְכַח וְ
			that we may go over	and as the street
			H5674	H2351

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 10:24 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, when they brought out those kings unto Joshua, that Joshua called for all the men of Israel, and said unto the captains of the men of war which went with him, Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings. And they came near, and put their feet upon the necks of them.

Zechariah 12:2 (Parallel theme): Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem.