

Jeremiah 13:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?
then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

Analysis

This verse uses powerful imagery for sin's fixedness: 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?' Two rhetorical questions expect negative answer: the Ethiopian (Cushite) cannot change his dark skin; the leopard cannot remove its spots. These are fixed, inherent characteristics. 'Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.' The Hebrew limudei hara (לִמּוּדֵי חֶרֶב) means 'taught/trained in evil'—habituated to wickedness. Sin has become as fixed as skin color, as inherent as leopard markings. Apart from divine transformation, Israel cannot change their established patterns.

Historical Context

Cush (Ethiopia/Nubia) represented dark-skinned peoples south of Egypt. The observation about unchangeable characteristics was simple fact, not racial judgment. The theological point concerns sin's entrenchment—generations of evil practice created moral inability. This verse anticipates New Covenant theology of heart transformation (31:31-34)—only divine action can change what human effort cannot.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What does comparing sin's fixedness to inherent physical characteristics teach about the power of habitual wickedness?
2. How does acknowledging inability to change open the way for divine transformation?

Interlinear Text

גַם	שְׁבֶרֶבֶרֶת	וְ	וְגַם	רַקְבָּת	וְ	גַם
change	Can the Ethiopian	his skin	or the leopard	his spots		H1571
H2015	H3569	H5785	H5246	H2272		
אָתָם	לְמַד	בְּ	לְהִיטְבָּדֵל	לְמַדְדֵן	רְעֵבָן	
H859	then may	ye also do good	that are accustomed	to do evil		H7489
	H3201	H3190	H3928			

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 2:22 (Parallel theme): For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much sope, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord GOD.

Jeremiah 9:5 (Parallel theme): And they will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth: they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity.

Jeremiah 2:30 (Parallel theme): In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction: your own sword hath devoured your prophets, like a destroying lion.

Jeremiah 5:3 (Parallel theme): O LORD, are not thine eyes upon the truth? thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they

have refused to receive correction: they have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return.

Jeremiah 17:9 (Evil): The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

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