

Jeremiah 17:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, nor receive instruction.

Analysis

This verse chronicles Israel's historical rebellion: "But they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear." The phrase "inclined their ear" is a Hebrew idiom for attentive listening with intent to obey. The absence of both obedience and attentive listening indicates total rejection of God's word. "Made their neck stiff" (hiqshu et-arfam, מִקְשָׁו אֶת-עָרָפָם) employs livestock imagery—like a stubborn ox that refuses to bear the yoke (cf. Ex 32:9, Deut 9:6, 31:27).

"That they might not hear, nor receive instruction" reveals the deliberate, willful nature of rebellion. This wasn't innocent ignorance but active resistance to divine truth. The Hebrew musar (מִצְרָא, instruction/discipline) includes both teaching and corrective discipline. Refusing instruction demonstrates the hardness of heart that provokes God's judgment.

This verse illustrates the Reformed doctrine of human depravity—the natural state of rebellion against God (Rom 1:28, 8:7). The stiff neck metaphor appears throughout Scripture as characteristic of unrepentant sinners (Acts 7:51). Only divine grace can soften hard hearts and grant repentance (Ezek 36:26, Acts 11:18). Christ came to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), offering the new covenant that transforms stubborn rebels into willing servants.

Historical Context

Israel's pattern of disobedience stretches from the exodus wilderness rebellion through the judges period and divided monarchy. Despite repeated warnings, reformations, and divine patience, the people persistently violated covenant stipulations. This chronic rebellion culminated in exile—the ultimate covenant curse. Deuteronomy 28-30 predicted precisely this pattern of disobedience leading to exile, which Jeremiah witnessed being fulfilled.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. In what areas are you tempted to stiffen your neck against God's clear instruction?
2. How does deliberate refusal to hear God's word differ from genuine struggle to understand or obey?
3. What evidences of a softened heart versus a stiff neck do you see in your life?

Interlinear Text

וְלֹא	שֶׁנֶּא	וְלֹא	הַתִּזְעַזֵּעַ	אַתָּה	אַצְעָם	וְלֹא
H3808	But they obeyed	H3808	not neither inclined	H853	their ear	stiff
	H8085		H5186		H241	H7185

אָתָּה	עָרָפָה	לְבָלָת	שְׁוֹמָעָה	וְלְבָלָת	קְחָתָה
H853	but made their neck	H1115	But they obeyed	H1115	nor receive

מוסר:

instruction

H4148

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 29:1 (Parallel theme): He, that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

Jeremiah 11:10 (Creation): They are turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, which refused to hear my words; and they went after other gods to serve them: the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers.

Jeremiah 19:15 (Parallel theme): Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring upon this city and upon all her towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have hardened their necks, that they might not hear my words.

Isaiah 48:4 (Parallel theme): Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass;

Acts 7:51 (Parallel theme): Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

Jeremiah 32:33 (Parallel theme): And they have turned unto me the back, and not the face: though I taught them, rising up early and teaching them, yet they have not hearkened to receive instruction.

Ezekiel 20:21 (Parallel theme): Notwithstanding the children rebelled against me: they walked not in my statutes, neither kept my judgments to do them, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; they polluted my sabbaths: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the wilderness.

Zephaniah 3:7 (Parallel theme): I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.

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