

Lamentations 5:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Princes are hanged up by their hand: the faces of elders were not honoured.

Analysis

The Degradation of Leaders

This verse depicts the horrific humiliation of Jerusalem's leadership following the Babylonian conquest. The phrase "princes are hanged up by their hand" (sarim be-yadam talu) describes public execution or display of bodies—a practice used by conquerors to demonstrate total subjugation. The Hebrew talah (תָּלָה, "to hang") often refers to corpses displayed after execution, serving as warnings against rebellion. The phrase "by their hand" may indicate hanging by the princes' own hands, or possibly that enemies did this "by their hand" (instrumentally).

The second half intensifies the tragedy: "the faces of elders were not honoured" (penei zeqenim lo nehdar). In Hebrew culture, elders (zeqenim) represented wisdom, authority, and communal memory. Honoring them was a cornerstone of societal stability (Leviticus 19:32). The verb hadar means "to honor, glorify, or show respect." Its negation indicates not merely lack of honor but active dishonor—public humiliation of those who deserved reverence.

Together, these images show complete social inversion: those who should rule are executed; those who should be honored are shamed. This represents the full unraveling of covenant society under divine judgment. When a nation rejects God's order, He removes the protection that preserves social hierarchies, leaving chaos in righteousness' place.

Historical Context

Jerusalem's Fall and Babylonian Brutality

Lamentations 5 functions as a communal lament following Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC. After an 18-month siege causing horrific famine, Babylonian forces breached the walls, burned the temple, and systematically destroyed the city. King Zedekiah's sons were executed before his eyes, then he was blinded and taken to Babylon in chains (2 Kings 25:7)—a fate representing the degradation described in this verse.

Babylonian conquerors routinely displayed executed leaders' bodies as psychological warfare, deterring future rebellion. The public hanging of Jerusalem's princes served this purpose while fulfilling Deuteronomy's covenant curses (Deuteronomy 28:25-26). The dishonoring of elders reflects the chaos of military occupation, where age and wisdom provided no protection. Occupying forces showed no respect for Jewish customs or social structures.

This verse captures the nadir of Judah's history: total political collapse, social disintegration, and covenantal judgment. The people who had once walked in covenant privilege now experienced covenant curse. Yet Lamentations also contains seeds of hope (3:22-23), pointing toward eventual restoration based on God's unchanging mercies.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What does the public degradation of leaders teach about the comprehensive nature of divine judgment on a rebellious nation?

2. How should we understand God allowing such brutality as part of covenant judgment, while still affirming His love and justice?
3. In what ways might modern societies dishonor their elders, and what consequences might follow?
4. How does the social inversion described here (leaders hanged, elders shamed) illustrate the fruit of rejecting God's ordained order?
5. What hope remains when a community has experienced complete social and political collapse due to sin?

Interlinear Text

ל א זלְקִנְיָם שְׁרִים
 Princes by their hand are hanged up the faces of elders H3808
 H8269 H3027 H8518 H6440 H2205

נִהְקְרָא:
 were not honoured
 H1921

Additional Cross-References

Lamentations 4:16 (Parallel theme): The anger of the LORD hath divided them; he will no more regard them: they respected not the persons of the priests, they favoured not the elders.

Isaiah 47:6 (Parallel theme): I was wroth with my people, I have polluted mine inheritance, and given them into thine hand: thou didst shew them no mercy; upon the ancient hast thou very heavily laid thy yoke.