

Luke 23:31

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

Analysis

For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

This proverbial saying employs agricultural imagery to teach a profound theological principle. The "green tree" (hygro xýlo, ὑγρὸ ξύλω, "moist/living wood") represents Jesus—innocent, righteous, full of spiritual life. The "dry" tree (xēro, ξηρὸ, "dried/dead wood") represents guilty Jerusalem—spiritually dead, covenant-breaking, ripe for judgment.

The principle: if Romans crucify the innocent (green wood), how much more severe will judgment be upon the guilty (dry wood)? If the sinless Son of God suffers such agony, what will befall sinners who reject Him? This echoes 1 Peter 4:17-18: "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"

The imagery also suggests combustibility—green wood resists fire, dry wood burns readily. Jesus, the green tree, endured the fire of God's wrath against sin and extinguished it through His sacrifice. But dry wood (unrepentant sinners) will be consumed by that same fire. The saying warns: if God's judgment strikes the righteous substitute, how terrifying will judgment be for the guilty who have no substitute? This is the heart of penal substitutionary atonement—Christ bore judgment meant for others.

Historical Context

Proverbial wisdom using agricultural imagery was common in Jewish teaching. The green/dry tree metaphor appears in Ezekiel 20:47 and Ezekiel 21:3-4, where God declares He will kindle fire that burns both green and dry trees—comprehensive judgment sparing none. Jesus inverts this image: because the green tree (Himself) bears the fire of judgment, dry trees (repentant sinners) can be spared if they hide in Him.

The historical context clarifies the prophecy. Within forty years of Christ's crucifixion, Jerusalem burned—literally. Roman soldiers set fire to the temple despite Titus's orders to preserve it. Josephus describes the inferno consuming the city, with thousands perishing in flames or smoke. If Romans treated innocent Jesus with such brutality, their treatment of rebellious Jerusalem would be incomparably worse. History confirmed Jesus' warning—the dry wood of unrepentant Israel burned catastrophically in AD 70.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the green tree/dry tree imagery illuminate the doctrine of penal substitution—Christ bearing judgment meant for sinners?
2. If the innocent Christ suffered such agony bearing our sins, what does this reveal about the severity of sin and the wrath it deserves?
3. How should understanding that we are "dry wood" deserving judgment, yet finding refuge in Christ the "green tree," shape our worship and gratitude?

Interlinear Text

ὅτι	εἰ	ἐν	τῷ	ύγρῳ	ξύλῳ	ταῦτα	ποιοῦσιν	ἐν	τῷ	
For	if	in	<small>G3754</small>	<small>G3588</small>	a green	tree	these things	they do	in	<small>G3588</small>
<small>G3754</small>	<small>G1487</small>	<small>G1722</small>		<small>G5200</small>	<small>G3586</small>	<small>G5023</small>	<small>G4160</small>	<small>G1722</small>		

ξηρῷ	τί	γένηται
the dry	what	shall be done
<small>G3584</small>	<small>G5101</small>	<small>G1096</small>

Additional Cross-References

John 15:6 (Parallel theme): If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

Proverbs 11:31 (Parallel theme): Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner.

Matthew 3:12 (Parallel theme): Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.