

Psalms 32:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.

Analysis

Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee. After experiencing God's instruction (v. 8), David warns against stubbornness resisting divine guidance. This contrasts rational, willing obedience with forced compliance characteristic of unreasoning animals, establishing that believers should respond to God's instruction with understanding and willingness.

Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule introduces animal analogy. Hebrew *sus* (horse) and *pered* (mule) represent powerful animals useful for work but lacking rational understanding. Horses and mules possess physical strength but no moral comprehension or volitional obedience. Don't understand reasons for commands; only respond to physical compulsion. David warns against approaching God with similar irrationality.

Which have no understanding identifies key deficit. Hebrew *bin* means to understand, discern, perceive with insight. Animals lack rational capacity for moral reasoning and relational obedience. Cannot comprehend why or evaluate purposes; only react to stimuli or force. Reformed theology emphasizes humans, made in God's image, possess rational capacity for understanding God's ways, making voluntary obedience possible and expected.

Whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle (Hebrew *meteg*—bit and *resen*—

bridle) describes forced control. These are restraints inserted in mouth and over head to control animals' movements. Because horses and mules don't rationally understand directions, physical force becomes necessary to guide them. Implication is that God must sometimes use circumstances like bit and bridle to force stubborn people in right directions—painful, humiliating alternative to willing obedience.

Lest they come near unto thee presents interpretive challenge. Some translations render it lest they come near unto thee; others lest they should come near. Hebrew suggests that without restraint, these animals won't approach or may approach incorrectly. Applied spiritually, stubborn people who resist God's gentle instruction require harsh circumstances to bring them into proper relationship. God prefers willing obedience from understanding hearts but will use painful compulsion when necessary. This is severe mercy of divine discipline—breaking stubborn wills that refuse gentle guidance.

Historical Context

Analogy of bit and bridle appears elsewhere in Scripture. James uses it to illustrate tongue control: We put bits in horses' mouths to make them obey us (James 3:3). Proverbs mentions rod and reproof for those refusing instruction (Proverbs 29:1,15). Imagery would be immediately understood in agricultural society where horses and mules required constant control through physical means.

God's people frequently demonstrated mule-like stubbornness. Israel in wilderness repeatedly resisted God's leading despite miraculous provision, requiring judgmental discipline to humble them. Prophets condemned Israel's stubborn refusal to heed warning (Isaiah 48:4, Jeremiah 5:3, Zechariah 7:11-12). History of redemption includes both gentle instruction and severe correction—God employing whatever means necessary to guide His people.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. In what areas are you tempted to respond to God like stubborn mule rather than with understanding obedience?
2. How does recognizing your rational capacity (made in God's image) motivate voluntary obedience versus forced compliance?
3. What circumstances has God used as bit and bridle when you resisted gentle instruction?
4. Why is willing obedience from understanding superior to mere behavioral compliance?
5. How can you cultivate greater sensitivity to God's gentle guidance so severe discipline becomes unnecessary?

Interlinear Text

אַל	תְּהִי וְ	כִּסּוּס	כִּפְּרֹד	אֵינְ	
H408	H1961			H369	
		Be ye not as the horse	or as the mule		
		H5483	H6505		
	הֵם בְּיָן	בְּמִתְגַּ	וְרֶסֶן	עֲדֵי וְ	לִבָּל וְ
	which have no understanding	in with bit	and bridle	whose mouth	must be held
	H995	H4964	H7448	H5716	H1102
לֵ	בִּ	קֵרְבִּ	אֵלֵינוּ:		
lest	they come near				
H1077	H7126	H413			

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 26:3 (Parallel theme): A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back.

Jeremiah 4:22 (Parallel theme): For my people is foolish, they have not known me; they are sottish children, and they have none understanding: they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.

Job 35:11 (Parallel theme): Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven?

James 3:3 (Parallel theme): Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

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