

Psalm 33:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength.

Analysis

An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Continuing from v. 16, David specifically addresses trust in war horses—ancient world's supreme military technology. Even elite cavalry cannot provide true salvation; great strength proves vain. This further dismantles military confidence, preparing for positive declaration of true security (v. 18).

An horse is a vain thing for safety (Hebrew sus—horse; sheqer—vain, false, deceptive; teshuah—safety, salvation, deliverance) targets trust in military superiority. Horses were ancient equivalent of modern tanks or warplanes—decisive military advantage. Nations without cavalry feared those with it; kings invested heavily in chariot forces. Yet David calls this confidence vain (sheqer)—false, illusory, deceptive. Safety (teshuah from yasha', to save) that horse seems to provide proves false.

Neither shall he deliver any by his great strength (Hebrew malat—escape, deliver; rob koach—great strength, much power) emphasizes horse's inadequacy despite impressive power. War horses were bred for size, speed, endurance. Their strength was formidable. Yet this great strength cannot deliver. The parallelism (vain for safety/not deliver) and repetition of strength theme hammer home one point: military might is insufficient security.

This verse has specific covenant background. Deuteronomy 17:16 commanded Israel's future king: he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause people to

return to Egypt to multiply horses. God's king must not trust military power but depend on God. Solomon violated this (1 Kings 10:26-29), and later kings followed, trusting alliances and horses rather than God. David, in contrast, declares God's perspective: horses are vain; trust Me.

Spiritually, this addresses all false refuges. Whatever people trust for security apart from God—wealth, intelligence, relationships, reputation—proves vain. Horse represents anything that seems powerful and reliable but ultimately cannot save. Only God delivers; all else is sheqer (vain).

Historical Context

Israel's history with horses is instructive. God delivered them from Egypt's horses and chariots by drowning them in Red Sea. Joshua hamstrung captured horses to prevent Israel trusting them (Joshua 11:6,9). Yet later kings accumulated horses despite divine prohibition. Solomon had 40,000 stalls of horses (2 Chronicles 9:25). This represented both military ambition and spiritual declension—trusting human strength rather than divine power.

Prophets condemned trust in horses. Isaiah 31:1 warns against going to Egypt for horses and trusting in chariots. Hosea 14:3 repudiates Asshur (military power) and horses as false saviors. Psalm 20:7 contrasts: Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD. This theme pervades Scripture—human strength fails; divine power saves.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What modern 'horses'—impressive technologies or resources—do people trust for security instead of God?

2. How does recognizing horses as vain thing for safety affect your evaluation of military power, national security, or personal protections?
3. In what ways have you observed that great strength (whether military, personal, financial) fails to deliver as expected?
4. Why did God specifically prohibit Israel's kings from multiplying horses, and what principle does this establish?
5. How can you guard against trusting vain securities instead of depending on God for true deliverance?

Interlinear Text

שׁ קָר	לְתַשְׁועַ הַ סִס	וְבָרֵב	לְאַחֲלָנוּ	strength
is a vain thing	An horse	for safety	any by his great	
H8267	H5483	H8668	H7230	H3808

מִלְטָה:

neither shall he deliver

H4422

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 21:31 (Parallel theme): The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the LORD.

Psalms 20:7 (Parallel theme): Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.

Psalms 147:10 (Parallel theme): He delighteth not in the strength of the horse: he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man.

Isaiah 30:16 (Parallel theme): But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift.

Hosea 14:3 (Parallel theme): Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.

