

Don't Be Cruel!

by Staff

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," March-April 2009

"A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." —Proverbs 12:10

Last September, Sydney died!

Sydney was our old cat, and she had been an inseparable part of our family for many years. A fine female specimen of the lovely Maine Coon breed, Syd was a first-rate mouser, a good pet, and great company. She used to jump up on the couch next to me and watch TV with me every evening.

We cannot remember exactly how old she was when she died, but she was at least fifteen years old and probably more. She had been with us since she was a kitten when our youngest daughter, Katie, was a very little girl.

But we failed to take note of the passing years and the fact that old Syd was aging. Her symptoms worsened throughout the early months of last summer, but we just put it down to our recent house move and the resultant change in her environment—from the country acreage of our previous home to the fifties-plus subdivision of our new one.

As the summer months wore on, Syd's condition gradually deteriorated. August turned into September, and she was noticeably off her food and losing weight fast. Eventually, we could hardly get her to drink any water. So late one Tuesday evening, when she was looking especially rough and her eyes were rolling in her head, I took her to see a local veterinarian.

After some unbelievably expensive blood tests and other diagnostics, the vet gave me the bad news that Syd was suffering from severe, untreatable heart and kidney conditions, which are not, she told me, uncommon for a cat of her advanced age. After some consultation about our options, we finally made one of the most unpleasant decisions a pet owner ever has to face. In that vet's office on the Wednesday afternoon, poor old Syd fell painlessly asleep on my knee.

In the days and weeks following Syd's death, I began having some feelings of latent guilt, asking myself questions such as: "Did Sydney really *have* to die?" "Could we have done anything to save her life?" "Was the food we gave her of adequate quality?" "Should we have taken her to see the vet more often?" "Did we treat her as well as we *could* have during her long life? And if not, were we guilty of some level of cruelty?"

Perhaps it is time to take a good, biblical look at the subject of cruelty.

The King of Cruelty

Elvis Presley's first big hit was titled, "Don't Be Cruel!" and on this point, Elvis was absolutely right! God's Word tells us clearly that cruelty is a negative—even a wicked—thing, and that, if we have pets or other animals, we should look after them in the very best way we can. Proverbs 12:10 informs us, "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."

When reading or hearing the word "cruel," we usually think of cruelty to animals, sometimes to children, and occasionally to spouses. Most North American cities have branch offices of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). The United Kingdom has an organization called the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). In addition, there are many organizations that help deal with victims of spousal abuse and violence.

The words "cruel," "cruelty" and "cruelly" do appear in the Bible, yet surprisingly, they appear only twenty-five times in Scripture, including only once in the New Testament—and not really even that. The word "cruel" that appears in some of the more common English translations of Hebrews 11:36 is an implied addition, meaning that its Greek equivalent does not appear in the original text.

We are left, then, with just twenty-four occurrences, all in the Old Testament. They are translated from nine different Hebrew words. In taking a quick look at them, we should ask ourselves if we could be guilty of any of these:

- » *Qashah* can mean cruel, hard, stiff-necked, grievous, severe, fierce, harsh, difficult, ill-treat, hard press, severe labor (especially of women), make burdensome, stubborn, and obstinacy.
- » *Qasheh* is a similar word to *qashah*, and can mean cruel, stiff-necked, hard, rough, grievous, sore, churlish, hardhearted, heavy, severe, obstinate, difficult, fierce, intense, vehement, stubborn, and rigorous.
- » *'Akzar*, *'akzariy* and *'akzeriyuwth* are three related words which simply mean cruel, cruelty, fierce, or fierceness.
- » *Chamets* is an interesting word that some may be familiar with because of its relationship to leavening. It means cruel, leavened, sour, embittered, grieved, oppress, or ruthless.
- » *Chamac* is a word which may be related to *chamets* and means cruel, cruelty, violence, wrong, false, damage, injustice, oppressor, and unrighteous.
- » *Perek* means cruelty, rigor, harshness, or severity.
- » *'Osheq* can mean cruelly, oppression, extortion, and injury.

Serious consideration of these words will give us a good overview of God's opinion of cruelty in all of its various stripes. It is obvious that He frowns upon it.

Early Cruelty Scriptures

Now let us look at some of the scriptures that mention cruelty. We do not have space to look at all twenty-four, but a few of the main ones will give us an idea of cruelty as God sees it. The concept first appears late in the Bible's first book, Genesis 49:1, 5-7:

And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days: . . . Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty [*chamac*] are in their dwelling place. Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor

be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel [*qashah*]! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

Here in Jacob's last words to his sons, we read of two of them, Simeon and Levi, being singled out as cruel. By their actions, they had proved themselves cruel both to animals and to humans. God warns them through their father Jacob that this trait would likely be passed down to their descendants. Because of it, He would be forced to scatter them throughout the other tribes of Israel, diluting its ill effects within the larger nation.

It is interesting that, despite its inherent leanings toward cruelty, the family of Levi was chosen by God to serve Him in His Tabernacle, Temple, and through the Aaronic priesthood (Numbers 1:50). Perhaps by concentrating the members of this tribe on His work, God transferred their aggressive tendencies to a far better purpose.

Is it also possible that, although God softened him with His Holy Spirit and made him the meekest of men (Numbers 12:3), Moses—a Levite—inherited some his tribe's proclivity towards cruelty? Did he not murder an Egyptian whom he caught beating one of his fellow-Israelite countrymen (Exodus 2: 11-12)? Did not Moses' wife, Zipporah, call him a "bloody husband" or a "bridegroom of blood" (Exodus 4:25-26)? Yes, we know that she says this relative to the circumcision of their son, but was there perhaps more to her outburst than just this?

Later, after Moses had been on Mount Sinai for almost forty days, the Israelites persuaded Aaron to make an idol, the infamous Golden Calf, for them to worship. Seeing the idolatrous rites and perversions happening in the camp, God sent Moses down to deal with the situation. Not only did he break the two tablets on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32:19), "he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it" (verse 20)! Incidentally, he afterward called for all those who were on the Lord's side to go throughout the camp to kill their idolatrous fellow Israelites—and the tribe of Levi rallied to him (verses 25-28)!

It seems that Moses had to keep his anger in check throughout his life. After he had brought Israel to Kadesh, just before the final push into the Promised Land, the children of Israel murmured due to the lack of water. In his impatience, anger, and frustration, Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it as God had commanded (Numbers 20:7-11). Doing so destroyed his chance to enter the Promised Land with the people.

Is God Cruel?

If it is surprising to learn of the cruel streak in Moses, it may also be surprising to realize that God was accused of cruelty more than once—even by another of His favorite servants, Job: "You have become cruel to me; with the strength of your hand you oppose me" (Job 30:21).

The Hebrew word translated here as "cruel" is *'azkar*, and in this case, it is better rendered "fierce." If we read Job 30 in its entirety, we will see that verse 21 is among those often applied in a dual, prophetic sense to the last hours of Jesus' human life. In another dual prophecy, Isaiah 53:10, we learn that it actually *pleased* God to bruise His own beloved Son, to put Him to grief, and even to make Him the ultimate sin offering!

It begins to become clear that God's standards of cruelty, fierceness, and even pleasure are not the same as man's. In a similar way as the Father's "fierceness" concerning Jesus' trials was necessary for the salvation of mankind, Job's afflictions were likewise necessary for his own ultimate benefit, as we find out later in Job's account (see Job 42:1-6).

What about us? Do we ever feel that God is cruel or fierce toward us? For example, when we do not get what we want just when we want it? Or when we or a loved one are not healed right away? Or when a loved one dies? Do we cry out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

Neither God the Father nor the Lord Jesus Christ is inherently cruel. On the contrary, they are endlessly loving, longsuffering, patient, and merciful. They have solemnly and repeatedly promised never to leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6; Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5).

Cruelty is assuredly not part of God's "way of give." It is, however, part of Satan's "way of get," which he has foisted on mankind for six thousand years. Satan is the wicked one (Matthew 13:19, 38; I John 2:13-14; 3:12; 5:18). He is the chief adversary against God and His children (I Peter 5:8). He is the chief of our wicked, unrighteous, lying enemies; and as such, he is the instigator of all the cruelty that our enemies commit against us.

With these titles in mind, let us look at what some of the psalmists had to write about the subject of cruelty:

» **Psalm 25:19:** Consider my enemies, for they are many; and they hate me with cruel hatred.

» **Psalm 27:12:** Do not deliver me to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses are risen against me, and such as breathe out violence [*cruelty*, KJV].

» **Psalm 71:4:** Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man.

» **Psalm 74:20:** Have respect to the covenant; for the dark places of the earth are full of the haunts of cruelty.

Again, cruelty to both humans and to animals is an evil trait that was—and still is—passed on to mankind by Satan. Let us end where we began, with one of the proverbs of Solomon: "The merciful man does good for his own soul, but he who is cruel troubles his own flesh" (Proverbs 11:17).

If we are guilty of the sin of cruelty, we will automatically bring trouble upon ourselves; and we can expect punishment and retribution to come back on us. However, if we look after our spouses, our children, and yes, even our pets with love, mercy, and compassion, just as God does with us, we will automatically be doing good to ourselves. We will be rewarded, and good things will come back on us.

Don't be cruel!