

Don't be Cruel!

On one memorable day in September of 2009, 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 that 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; then 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 vet. After some unbelievably expensive blood tests and other diagnostics, they gave me the bad news that she was suffering from severe, untreatable heart and kidney conditions which are not, they told me, uncommon for a cat of her advanced age. After some consultation as to the options, we finally made one of the most unpleasant decisions a pet owner ever has to face and, finally, in that vet's office on the Wednesday afternoon, poor old Syd fell painlessly asleep in my lap.

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 done during her long life? And if not, were we guilty of some level of cruelty?”

I would like, in this article, to do a mini-Bible study on the subject of cruelty.

Don't be Cruel!

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 very negative – even a wicked – characteristic and that, if we have pets or other animals, we should look after them in the very best way we can:

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

Here Job was inspired to equate cruelty with wickedness. When we read or hear 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 UK has an organization called the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). And there are many organizations nowadays that help deal with victims of spousal abuse and violence.

Word Study

The words “cruel,” “cruelty” and “cruelly” do appear in the Bible, but I was surprised to find only twenty-five occurrences, including only one in the New Testament. 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 and does not actually appear in the original Greek. So we are left with twenty-four occurrences – all in the Old Testament. They are translated from nine different Hebrew words. Let us take a quick look at these words and, while we do so, let us 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 labour* (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 Akzariyuwth are three related words which simply mean *cruel, cruelty, fierce, or fierceness*.

Chamets is an interesting word which might be somewhat familiar to some. It means *cruel, leavened, sour, embittered, grieved, oppress, or to be 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, rigour, harshness, or severity*.

Osheq can mean *cruelly, oppression, extortion, and injury*.

A 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 will not look at all twenty-five in this article; but let us look at a few of the main ones in order to get an idea of cruelty in God's sight:

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 brethren; instruments of *cruelty* {*chamac*} are in their habitations. Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honour 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 was fierce; and their wrath, for it was *cruel* {*qashah*}: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. (Genesis 49:1, 5-7)

Here in Jacob's last words to his sons, we read of two of them – Simeon and Levi – being singled out as being cruel. They had proved themselves cruel both to animals and to humans, and were here warned by God through their father Jacob that, as well as bringing about His twin punishments of division and scattering, this trait would likely be passed down to their descendents.

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).

It is also possible that, although God softened him with His Holy Spirit and made him the meekest of men (Numbers 12:3), Moses, who was a Levite (Exodus 2:1), inherited some of his tribe's proclivity towards cruelty. Did he not murder an Egyptian whom he caught beating one of his fellow-Israelite countryman (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 this was relative to the circumcision of their son; but was there perhaps more to her outburst than just this?

Here is another possible example: After Moses had delivered God's initial demand for Pharaoh to free the children of Israel from Egypt, life grew worse for them; not better. After Pharaoh took away their brick-making straw, the Israelites would no longer even listen to God's promises when relayed by Moses:

And Moses spoke so unto the children of Israel: but they hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage... And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying, “The children of Israel have not heeded me. How then shall Pharaoh heed me?” (Exodus 6:9, 12)

Yes, the bondage of the Egyptians was cruel. But is it possible that, after his worldly wisdom and might as an Egyptian prince (Acts 7:22), initially in his inexperience with the Israelites, Moses may have been somewhat overly harsh and strict on them? Did he not also strike the rock at Meribah in impatience, anger and frustration because of their murmuring (Numbers 20:10-11)?

Is God Cruel?

If it surprised you to learn the possibility of a cruel streak in Moses, you may also be surprised that God was more than once accused of cruelty – once by another of His favourite 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 into the English word “cruel” is “Azkar” which, in this case, is better rendered “fierce.” If we read the entire thirtieth chapter of the book of Job, we will see that this twenty-first verse is among those often applied in a dual 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 those of men. 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.

What about us? Do we ever feel that God is cruel or fierce toward us? For example, when we don’t 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?”

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

Cruelty is of God's Adversaries

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) and as we saw earlier, cruelty and wickedness go hand-in-hand. Satan 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 would like to 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:

Consider my enemies; for they are many; and they hate me with *cruel* hatred. (Psalms 25:19)

Deliver me not over unto the will of my enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out *cruelty*. (Psalms 27:12)

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

Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of *cruelty*. (Psalms 74:20)

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 go back and 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 upon us.

But if we look after our spouses, our children, our livestock and 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!

John Plunkett
Building Bridges, The Church of God Canada
Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada
March 18, 2011