

A Hardened Neck

Proverbs 29:1

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“He that being often reprov'd and hardens his neck; shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.”

As is many times the case in Solomon’s writing here in Proverbs, the short passage in 28:28 through 29:1 has what is called an “*inclusion*” (the formal word for what can be understood as literary “bookends”). It addresses the idea of how a society thrives or suffers when, respectively, success comes to the righteous or to the wicked (28:28 and 29:2). Also, 28:28 ends with **the righteous increase** and 29:2 begins with **when the righteous increase**, leading us to see that the latter verse (29:2) complements the former (28:28). Only one proverb (29:1) is between these two; that would seem to indicate that people who obstinately refuse to turn from evil and folly will be ruined. Why is it placed here? It may serve to reassure the reader that eventually the wicked will fall. It seems to clearly say that the man who is **often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck** may be standing for Israelite society as a whole; the whole population can be warned to repent and can suffer for not doing so. We might conclude then, that Solomon say his nation as “hardening” their necks as a unit!

He that being often reprov'd and hardens his neck (29:1a)

“He that” (or “He who”) is a form used by Solomon to speak to a group both general and definitely existing. Solomon is thinking of a group of Israelites that he knows, of a certainty, exists in His audience. Likewise, it speaks of a group that he wishes to speak of the nation as a whole and does not intend to be speaking of any particular person.

Note he uses the term “that” in the more modern English version. In the KJV (and the NKJV) it is given as “who”; a common noun that is given in the singular form and is what is called a “construct”, which would seem to tell us that Solomon, though not necessarily speaking of a specific person, want us to take what he is saying and make it personal in our own lives.

We’ll note that the idea put forth is not merely that the “one” in view is one who is “rebuked”; but “he” (not speaking of men only, but of all people) is one rebuked multiple times with the implication that these rebukes have do with the same or perhaps similar causes. It is not a matter of failing or doing different wrong things and being rebuked for multiple things that this one might have avoided. The word used is one that specifically speaks of multiple rebukes, though, as we have said, it is not pointing to the same failing or error.

The word given as “and” is actually only implied in the connection of the first and second phrase in the verse. The word used here is a fascinating word. The root “qāšā” apparently arose from an agricultural milieu. It emphasizes,

first, the subjective effect exerted by an overly heavy yoke, which is hard to bear, and secondarily, the rebellious resistance of oxen to the yoke.

Synonyms speak of

- That which is heavy, emphasizing the weight of the thing bearing down),
- The word ḥāzaq (A stronger thing, emphasizing the pressure exerted),
- The Hebrew word ḥāmaś (violent, cruel),
- The word akzār (speaking of a fierce thing).

Interestingly, we ought to note that the word “qāṣaḥ” with the same variant spelling in Arabic has similar meaning to qāšâ in Hebrew. Our root (with the derivatives here listed) occurs 64 times.

A number of passages use the metaphor of a yoke (‘ôl)

- which is hard (and, therefore, cruel and oppressive)
- to bear: the servitude in Egypt (Ex 1:14),
- Solomon’s rule (I Kgs 12:4, hyperbolically?), and
- the Babylonian exile (Isa 14:3).
- We’re told that Christ’s yoke, however, is easy (Mt 11:29–30), although it too requires submission (Phil 4:3) and discipline (2 Cor 6:15).

Other situations emphasize only the idea “hard to bear” (Gen 35:16; Gen 42:7; Ps 60:3 [H 5]); cf. the meaning “difficult” (Deut 1:17; 15:18). The other side of the word (cruel and oppressive) develops the meaning fierce (Gen 49:7; Isa 27:8).

A frequent use of the word relates to the stubborn (stiff-necked) subjects of the Lord. Like rebellious oxen, calf-worshipping Israel quickly turned aside from the Lord’s service (Ex 32:9). The spirit of Israel remained (for the most part) stubborn, intractable., and non-responsive to the guiding of their God (Deut 10:16; Jud 2:19; II Kgs 17:14; Neh 9:16) and of his Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 7:51). Pharaoh stubbornly refused divine leading (Ex 13:15) in accordance with divine counsel (Ex 7:3). Hannah used this word to describe her impassiveness created by great vexation (I Sam 1:15).

And so we can see here that Solomon is using the idiom “*to harden the neck*” speaking of the idea of resisting the rebukes and persisting in obstinacy (e.g., Exod 32:9). We should note that the opposite of a “stiff neck” would be the bending back, i.e., submission.

Noting just in restatement – the interpretation of what Solomon is saying... obstinate sinners are often compared in Holy Scripture to the intractable ox (Exod. 32:9). Here it is spoken of as “*the man of reproofs*” (in a number of Bible version margins) - the man who, in spite of reproof and correction often administered at the hands of both man and of God, persists in his own wrong ways - whose ultimate fate is declared. He shall suddenly be “*broken without remedy*” (Cf. 6:15). Stress is laid on the suddenness of the long-delayed retribution. But its most awful feature is its being “*without remedy.*”

As always, there a number of Biblical illustrations –

- Pharaoh is an instance of a man who “*hardened his heart*” against reiterated corrections, in which he himself recognized “*the finger of God.*” At last, suddenly, just when his obstinacy seemed on the point of succeeding, he was overwhelmed, and “*sunk*” with his hosts into “*the depths,*” “*like a stone*” (Exod. 15:4, 5).
- Hophni and Phinehas would not hear with patience their father’s reproving voice (1 Sam. 2:22, 25), and they perished miserably, both in one day.
- Worst of all, did not Judas, slighting alike the warnings and the gracious words of Jesus - even that last appealing compellation, “*Friend*” - rush headlong, like a wild and reckless animal, “*to his own place*”?

By way of application it is an old and true saying that no one all at once becomes exceedingly wicked. The reason is that God’s restraining grace hinders. Not till all means have been tried is the case pronounced hopeless. But alas! there are those who will neither be wooed by mercies nor awed by judgments. They persist in their evil doing; they will not bow their necks to God’s law. They have not, indeed, determined to be always thus, they mean some day to submit, but not just yet. There is a limit, however, even to the forbearance of God. His Spirit will not always strive. If men “*despise the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering,*” surely the time will come when He will say, “*Let them alone.*” And this word, “*Let alone,*” is the sure precursor of destruction. Oh, have I not seen men “*suddenly consume, perish, and come to a fearful end*” (Ps. 73:18)? And has it not often transpired afterwards that they have been guilty of such abuse of mercy as ripens for judgment? Let me be warned by their fate and by the threatening words of the text. Now, salvation is offered, but against the indurating effects of sin the gospel itself will one day be powerless. Now there is “*balm in Gilead,*” and the Good Physician there. But who shall heal when God Himself inflicts the deadly wound, - or, rather, decrees that the moral disease has become incurable?