



## Lessons from the Swallow and the Ox

To achieve conviction of sin, God's Word often compares man to animals. Animals are brought forward as examples of obedience and are placed in stark contrast to man's disobedience.

### **Animals Regard God**

For instance, we read in Jeremiah 8:7,

*Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD.*

Likewise, we read in Isaiah 1:3, *The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.*

A cow or a donkey will know its master and come up to him. The swallow and the stork know the path God has appointed for them to fly and they follow this path carefully. Swallows and storks are obedient to God's ordinances. But man disobeys.

### **Man Disregards God**

Man is God's crownpiece of creation and is called to honour God, to realize His high majesty. God is the holy One, the highly exalted One! The problem with us is that we lack proper knowledge of God. We do not realize how great He is. He is the eternal and all-powerful God. We are not clearly aware of God's attributes. In addition, we also lack proper knowledge of ourselves. We do not know how sinful we are. We fail to see how far removed we are from God and of His will. We fail to feel pain because of our sins; we fail to see who God is and who we are.

We will only acknowledge our sins when we have true knowledge of who God is. The one is connected with the other. When we have a right view of the righteousness and holiness of God, we will see ourselves as vile and sinful. With our sins we break the boundaries God has set. We break His commandments and we do what He prohibits. God speaks and we hear Him not. God comes to us with His high majesty and we acknowledge Him not.

### **God's Power in Nature**

Think of how great and majestic God is! He speaks, "*Let there be light,*" and immediately light starts to shine. The light obeys His voice. When God spoke, the sun, the moon and the stars came into existence. He speaks and the sun shines by day and the sun obeys. He called the moon to shine by night and the moon does so. God called the stars to take its places in the heavens and they remain there. The Lord called the planets into their orbit and they obey God. God calls the snow and the ice to appear and they are there. God calls the wind and it blows. God calls the seasons to come and go, and it happens.

God tells a fish to swallow up Jonah and the fish obeys. The Lord calls ravens to feed Elijah with meat and bread, and they obey. The Lord sets the seas in its places and restricts their limits. The Lord calls the great mountains to be lifted up and there they stand. His voice brought this all forth.

He teaches the swallow its times. God teaches the Monarch butterflies to fly south and they obey Him. All obey the high and majestic God. All of nature respects God and obeys His commands. Even an ox knows its owner and a sheep obeys the voice of the shepherd. Creation obeys God.

## **Man's Rebellion**

Then we see man. God commands man and man says: No, I refuse, I don't want to listen. The smallest creature obeys. The ant diligently does the work God has given it to do. The salmon start running up the creek because God tells them to do so. The rain comes down to water the parched earth and the Lord tells the sun to shine on the wet soil to dry up the face of the earth. All these obey, but man says: No. Man refuses. You and I, we oppose the will of God.

Scripture sets this before us clearly. In Romans 1 and 2 the apostle sets forth the wickedness of man, first of the pagans and then of the Jews. Then in chapter 2:3 we read, *And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?* We are all guilty of rebellion against God. God's Word is very clear in stating that man rebels against God. Man disobeys the orders of the most high and eternal God!

## **Our Corrupt Nature**

This is our misery. This makes us guilty and condemnable before God. This is true of every one of us, whoever we are. The Lord says in Genesis 8:21, *the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. By nature man is corrupt from his youth onward.* You cannot blame your upbringing. You cannot blame culture either. You cannot blame your sins on someone who wronged you. You cannot blame poor education or blame society for your sins. You can only blame your own wicked heart. For it is a fact that you and I disobey God. We transgress God's commandments. Our wicked and obstinate character is the cause that our hearts are evil since our youth.

You see that already in young children when they resist you and say: No, or they say, me first. They will hit each other and throw toys at each other and take toys away from each other. This displays their nature and character. We are all inclined or prone by nature to hate God and our neighbour (*Heidelberg Catechism*, L.D., A. 5).

Nehemiah says in chapter 1:7, *We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandest thy servant Moses.* But Nehemiah is also personally involved when he says in 1:6,

*I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. He doesn't point to the other person's sins, but to his own sins. He is our example. For we have sinned. All of us have withstood the will of God. It is easy to cover up our guilt, but Nehemiah does not do that. He acknowledges his own guilt. Do we acknowledge our personal sins and guilt and the wickedness of our thoughts from our youth onward?*

Someone described it as follows. What if I would take every thought you had and every deed you committed in the totality of your heart and all that lives in it and I could put it on a DVD and play it in front of the whole congregation in church and project all your thoughts of the past and of your youth up to the present; what would you do? You would get up and you would leave the church, never to return. You could never bear the thought of having to face those to whom your thoughts were exposed. You could not bear it; you would be so ashamed.

Yet all of us have awful thoughts continually, from our youth on. All of us – and yet we are ashamed before each other. You cannot bear that fellow wicked people would look at you. But one day you will stand before God, the holy God, who cannot stand iniquity, and He will see all that you did. He will see all your wicked deeds and He will expose all your wicked thoughts. In that day you cannot hide. In that day you will have to acknowledge that the Lord is righteous in His judgments.

Nehemiah says in chapter 1:7, *We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments. Very corruptly*, he says. That counts for Nehemiah, but how much more does this corruption count for you and me.

### **Man is Worse than the Beasts**

The animals know their master and the way they must take, but man is disobedient. Man is even worse than the brute beasts. Beasts do not treat each other as man does. Beasts do not hate nor kill each other. God calls us to love one another and to love and obey Him, and we refuse! We simply don't. Our sin and rebellion rise up before God.

All of us must do as Nehemiah did: Acknowledge our faults, our depravity and our corruption from our youth onward. We also need to pray that God would let us feel these corruptions. We need God's grace that we would rightly humble ourselves before God on account of our corruptions. Too easily we assume all is well, while we have never truly seen what Nehemiah saw in chapter 1:6: *we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned*.

Conviction of sin is not a quick acknowledgment; it is to abhor and humble ourselves (*Form for the Lord's Supper*). It is loathing ourselves because of our sins. It is being greatly displeased with ourselves because of our vices. How we need to beg God for grace to own, hate and confess our sins. We stand in need of grace to be washed, to be redeemed, and to be led in a new and godly life. We must pray that it would graciously please God to reform us and to renew us. Only His mercy can lead us to grow more and more in holiness, in self-denial and in obedience to His righteousness. In His light we will see our sin. His Blood alone can cleanse us. In His strength we are enabled to fight against sin. We must prostrate ourselves before the high and holy God.

We need to pray for the Lord to be merciful and to stretch out His strong arm to redeem us and to save us. The swallow and the ox live in harmony with God's will; therefore how we must pray that the Lord will lead us to the mark He set for us! That is, to make us partakers of His glory, which He has revealed in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need His grace. We are not worthy of it and we can't claim it. We cannot press for it. It is all mercy.

We need mercy; we need God's grace. Otherwise, how can we live? How will we survive as a denomination? How can we as Free Reformed Churches live? How can we and our children be converted? How can we be saved outside of God's mercy? Therefore we need to pray that God's eyes would be open upon us, that God's ears would be attentive to us, and that God would be pleased to hear our prayers. That can only happen in the way of repentance and humility, pleading His mercies.

The only pleading ground for us is God's covenant mercies. These mercies can only flow to us through the Mediator of the covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ, and for His sake God can still answer. May the swallow and the ox show us our need of saving grace.

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