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Bullying in the Bible?

Isaiah 51:7-8 (GNB) **Do not be afraid when people taunt and insult you; they will vanish like moth-eaten clothing!**

Interesting verse. In all of the times that I have read Isaiah, this verse slipped by without catching my attention. Is this Isaiah's way of being part of the It Gets Better movement?

This text in Isaiah certainly sounds like bullying. Taunting and insulting people is a form of bullying. The advice given is not to fear the bullies, because eventually go away.

I know that bullying is an ugly gift that can continue to hurt people many years after the bullying stopped. I do not discount the hurt by saying it is going to get better. As a middle-aged gay man, I have the advantage of being able to look back and put the pain in perspective.

In school, the school-yard bully can terrorize, humiliate and make life miserable. But there is a tendency for school-yard bullies to cease to be a factor in your life after you leave school. I have not seen a single person who bullied me when I was in either high school or college since I graduated. I now have the liberty to look back at the bullies and to realize that they were small people, doing small people things, because they were not able to deal with the issues in their lives. Insults, threats and violence were all they had in their hearts. I choose to no longer let the opinions they expressed determine my value, my worth, my future and my identity. I am a God carrier and that trumps everything else.

The Oil of Love

by Gary Simpson

The book of James was written to the Jewish Believers who were living outside of Israel. These Jewish Believers in Jesus were facing persecution.¹ As sexual minority people, we share a common experience of oppression, persecution and discrimination with the Jewish Believers for whom the book of James was written. In some respects, James is very much a book for our community and for any other oppressed community. These early Christians were descendants of slaves and freed slaves living in the Roman Empire. Jewish people have traditionally struggled to maintain their language, culture and religion. Rabbi Hayim Donin describes Israel as a tiny nation struggling against absorption and assimilation.² I suspect that few other groups of Christians faced a more difficult struggle to maintain their language, culture and faith than these early Jewish Believers in Jesus of Nazareth.

Members of minority groups adopt the values of the larger society. Because society may look down on a minority group, members of that minority group may come to look down upon themselves too.³ In some cases, we are looking at internalized societal self-hate. That means some people actually come to hate themselves, because society hates them. As members of sexual minority groups and their allies, you can imagine how unhealthy self-hate is. We have been there as a community and as individuals. On the Internet, I read examples of what might be internalize self-hate among some Jewish people that deeply disturbed me.

While I don't think I need to describe this for trans, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and queer Christians, reviewing this information might be of help to people

who are visiting today. The feeling can develop that one either deserves all the bad things that happened or that one does not deserve good things. People who have internalized self-hate may be

¹ Luder Whitlock, Jr., et. al., eds. *New Geneva Study Bible*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1995), 1958.

² Hayim Donin. *To be a Jew*. n.p.: Basic Books, 1991.

³ "Self-Hating Jews, Self-Hatred." *The Peace Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.yahoodi.com/peace/selfhatred.html>>.

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Bathrooms and Trans Students

People around the world who were alive when American President John F. Kennedy was murdered remember where they were and what they were doing when they learned of his murder. Many people also know exactly where they were when they learned Princess Diana died in a tragic car accident. The 9/11 terrorist attack on New York City, which resulted in the death of hundreds of innocent civilians, is another world event that is clearly etched in the memories of people around the world.

I can remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I learned Matthew Shepard, a young 21 year-old gay college student had been savagely beaten and was clinging to life in a Fort Collins, Colorado hospital. The brutal level of violence permanently engraved the memory in my mind.

The brutality of Matthew Shepard's murder was and remains staggering. The very sad reality is that the level of savagery in Matthew Shepard's murder is mild compared to the murders of a few Trans people. I recall a case of one Trans person being stabbed over 200 times.

The first time I attended a Trans Day of Remembrance service was powerful. Most of the service consisted of people reading the names of Trans people who were murdered during the year and the cause of death. I know some amazing Trans people and a few Trans people made a major impact on my life. Even if I did not know any Trans people, the service would have been very sobering.

Believe me, the Trans community is very aware of how scary and potentially dangerous it can be for people to discover that you are Trans. Going to a public restroom can be dangerous for Trans people who do not easily pass as the gender that usually uses that bathroom. Public restrooms do not routinely have security guards or police officers stationed in them to ensure all people in the restroom are safe. The last thing a Trans person wants to do is to attract attention and anger when going to the restroom. Cisgender people have little reason to fear what a Trans person might do in a restroom, because Trans people use public restrooms to urinate and to have a bowel movement. The reality is that Trans people have more reason to fear Cisgender people than the other way around.

So relax. That Trans person you met in the bathroom just wants to safely tinkle and that go on with his or her day.

prepared to settle for second or third best, because they have such low self-esteem.

The book of James was written to Jewish believers. Some of those early Christians may have been struggling with self-hate, because they knew their families had been carried off into slavery. They might have even come to think of themselves as deserving to be slaves.

James is a valuable book. In the Talmud, the story is told of Rabbi Judah. The emperor sent him a valuable diamond and asked for "a token of friendship." The emperor received a Mezuzah, which is a very decorative container that holds a short verse from the Torah. Jewish people often have a Mezuzah on the doorway of their homes.

The emperor complained to the Rabbi that the value of the gift he received in return from the Rabbi was not much compared to the value of the diamond. Rabbi Judah responded, "There is a difference between my gift and thine. That which thou gavest to me I must watch and guard lest it be stolen from me; but this which I send will watch and guard over thee, even as it is written, 'When thou walkest it will lead thee, and when thou liest down it will watch over thee.'"⁴

There is no need to fear the book of James. Like the piece

⁴ H. Polano (translator) *The Talmud*. (London: Frederick Wayne, n.d.).

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Good ministers preach to touch lives, mediocre ministers preach to get more offerings and to get more people to attend church, terrible ministers preach to condemn sin and to damn LGBT people to cover their own sins. But outstanding ministers preach continually, frequently preaching without using words.

What kind of minister are you?

of the Torah found in the Mezuzah, James guards us and keeps us. The book of James when understood in the context of God's love, does not condemn.

James 2:14-26 (KJV) What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

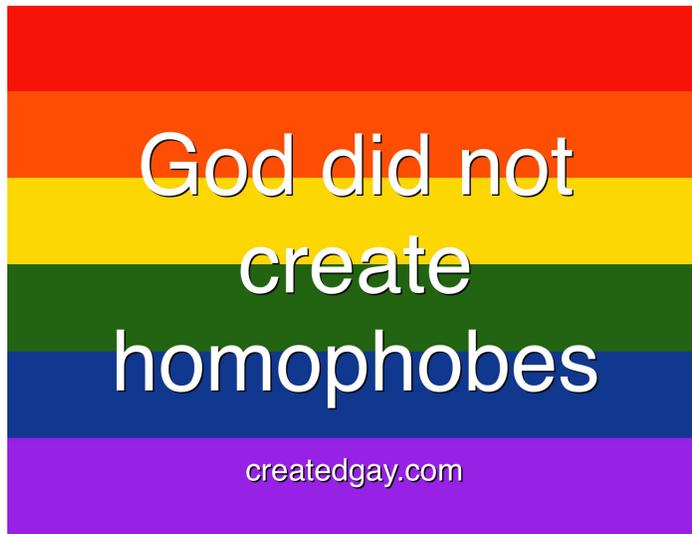
There are people who believe that these verses tell us how we are saved. Some people might not feel comfortable looking at the passage, until we discuss that. So, we will start by discussing verses 21 to 26.

Verses 21 to 23 do not say that we can somehow earn salvation. God is not petty. The Eternal Companion cannot be purchased by our cheap works. Verse 23 is about Genesis Chapter 15. In Genesis Chapter 15, God makes a deal with Abraham. In that contract, God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a nation. By faith in God, Abraham is justified. **Genesis 15:6** And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness. Before humanity, Abraham was justified when he offered Isaac as a sacrifice. There are some who claim that Abraham's faith is proven or "justified by his outward obedience." But his works were not what earned his salvation.⁵

⁵ Whitlock, et. al., 1961.

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John McNeill describes an ancient application of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. He says Augustine made the point that chastity does not get anybody into heaven. The wise and the foolish virgins were equally virgins. Only the wise virgins had oil in their lamps. To Augustine, the oil symbolized "warm human love." The foolish virgins were not able to get into heaven, because they were "cold and distant" and thought moral perfection could get them into heaven. Augustine felt there was only one way to get into heaven and that was through love.⁶ The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and God's love in our lives is what gives us

the "warm human love" that Augustine discusses. In the context of God's love, we can discuss the rest of the passage.

Verses 14 to 17 show that our faith does not touch the world, unless we put faith into action. Today, there are people in the city who have no home and who do not have enough food to eat. Our having a double portion of potluck and eating our hearts out is a sign of faith, but it does nothing to show those who do not know that God cares about them.

Spiritual piety does not touch the hearts and souls of people, unless it is demonstrated in a practical way. The young man who contacted me with a broken heart does not care about my theological understanding. The broken-hearted man only wanted someone to sit with him, in silence, as he ached. Some day, that practical act may open the door for spiritual discussions. We cannot teach the head when the heart is hurting.

As a church, we study the Word. To the core of our beings, Protestant Christians are people of the Word. Our study of the Bible needs to go hand-in-hand with practical service for God and with social justice.

Any congregation that wants to grow and to make a difference in the world needs to focus on something bigger than the local church, something outside of itself. Study alone and inward focusing only on our needs results in us seeing only our own personal and congregational flaws. Like some teenagers who spend a lot of time looking at themselves in the mirror, we may find it difficult to find anything nice in our own reflection.

⁶ John J. McNeill. *Taking a Chance on God*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 123-124.

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Study of the Bible and of theologians that never shows its fruit in practical ways is dead faith. Focusing only on study of the Bible and theology can result in congregations becoming divided along feel logical lines. But congregations that have a strong focus and serving humanity do not pick at them sells very much. When we are partners in service, partners and sharing the Word in practical ways we tend to be more united.

I wonder what James would say to a queer church. I wonder if it go like this.

- What good does it do when an LGBT teenager is homeless and we say, "Chin up. It will get better"? Our words do not house or feed the teen.
- What good does it do when unarmed Black men are killed by the police and we say, "Just at the wrong place, at the wrong time"? Our sentiments do not carry a #BlackLivesMatter sign to a peaceful protest.
- What good does it do when indigenous women go missing and are found murdered and we chalk it up to "life style"?

The call of this passage of James is for us to be the kind of Christians who can both articulate the faith with our hands, with the things we do that change the world, and with our theological statements. To God's queer tribe, the challenge James gives us is to be the hands and feet of Jesus, by working to reduce all forms of prejudice, discrimination, powerlessness and poverty.

**Know racism.
Know bigotry.
Know homophobia.
Know hate.
Know violence.
No peace.**

**No racism. No bigotry.
No homophobia.
No hate. No violence.
Know peace.**