

# The *SBJT* Sermon: When God's Arrows Fall Beyond Us: God's Strange Providence

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## God's Strange Providence

David stood waiting and watching by the stone Ezel. It was his stone of destiny. His dear friend Jonathan was to determine whether King Saul still harbored murderous intentions toward David. If so, David would have to flee. If not, he would be able to return to normal living.

David and Jonathan had agreed upon a signal. If it were safe for him to return, Jonathan would shoot three arrows and cry to the lad with him, "Look, the arrows are on this side of you; get them and come..." (v. 21). But if Saul still harbored malice toward David, Jonathan would shoot the arrows and cry to the lad, "Look, the arrows are beyond you..." (v. 22). In that case David would know he must flee.

In either case it was important that David not be seen in the field with Jonathan. If the king still harbored hatred toward David, Saul would not have hesitated to send someone to follow Jonathan to David's hiding place with orders to seize him. Even if Saul were ready to forgive and forget, there was another problem. David and Jonathan had contrived a lie about David's whereabouts, saying he was in Bethlehem (v. 6). If his presence in the field was reported to Saul, the latter would resent the deception, probably forget his new resolve, and return to his old hostility towards David.

The hours must have passed slowly for David as he waited by the stone Ezel. There was nothing he wanted more fervently than to return to his wife and to his service of his nation and his king. Yes, he had been anointed to be king of Israel, but he harbored no evil intent towards Saul. He was quite content to wait for the throne to become his and to serve Saul while he waited. How he hoped Jonathan's message would be, "the arrows are on this side of you"!

But what if that was not the message? What if Jonathan cried, "The arrows are beyond you"? Jonathan had made it clear that this message would mean David must flee. Jonathan had added to his warning seven disturbing words that David could not possibly pry out of his mind — "for the Lord has sent you away" (v. 22). In other words, if the arrows were shot beyond the lad, it would mean God's plan was for David to flee and to be pursued as a fugitive.

What a life! Living with constant pressure, never knowing when he might be sighted and reported to Saul, separated from his wife and from his friend Jonathan, forced to stay in isolated, desolate places — all this and more would be David's lot if those arrows dictated that he flee.

David's hours of waiting finally came to an end. He could hear the voices of

Jonathan and the lad in the distance. It would not be long now until he had his answer. Hope welled up within him. The message would surely be favorable. If so, he would slip back to Bethlehem, be seen there, and report to Saul. God surely did not want him to go through the hardship and suffering of a fugitive!

David could hear the whizzing of the arrows. Then it came. "Is not the arrow beyond you?" (v. 37). Could this be God's plan for his life? Why? Why would God, who had selected him to be king and so signally blessed him with the victory over Goliath, now consign him to such a terrible life? Why should a child of God face hardship and disappointment? God had the power to simply remove Saul! With one stroke He could spare David much hardship and fulfill His promise to bring him to the throne. Why did God not do the one thing that seemed to make so much sense? Why would He allow something that made no sense at all, namely, permitting Saul to reign and David to live as a fugitive?

Today, we know about this stone Ezel. We all spend a good bit of our time there, waiting, watching, and hoping. Like David, so often we find that the arrows of God's providence fall beyond us, beyond our ability to understand, beyond our prayers for a different direction, beyond our desire to simply serve the Lord in the peaceful pattern of normal living.

Sometimes the arrow that goes whizzing by has the words "serious illness" written on it, and we wonder why the Lord would send us into a life like that. Sometimes that whizzing arrow carries the phrase "loss of a loved one" on it and we again wonder why. It may have the words "financial hardship," "loss of career," "misunderstanding of friends," or

"relocation in a community far from family and friends" inscribed on its shaft.

### **God's Constant Providence**

What are we to understand when God's arrows fall beyond us? First, Scripture would have us to understand that God's heart has not changed.

As he made his way from the stone, David may very well have been tempted to think that God had turned against him. He knew God was for him when he stood calmly before the snarling Goliath. That calm was produced by the inward confidence of the smile of God. Now that smile now seemed to have given way to a frown, and David must have wondered if God's heart of love for him had been replaced by a heart of hatred.

The people of God in every age have grappled with this question. It is very easy to believe that God loves us when our lives are bubbling happily along like a little stream. But what about those times when that little stream is changed into a raging torrent that threatens to sweep away life as we know it? What does it all mean? Does it mean God has turned on us? Does it mean, as David himself once suggested, that God has forgotten to be gracious (Ps 77:9)?

What are we to do when such questions arise to mock and torment us? We must firmly remind ourselves of this biblical principle: God's strange providence flows from the same heart of love that sends forth the happy providence. God's providence is never random. He always has a very definite and distinct purpose, and that purpose always flows from a heart of love.

As far as David was concerned, he did not need to experience life as a fugitive, but God did not see things as David did. It was true, of course, that God had al-

ready anointed David to be Saul's successor, but that did not mean David was ready to take the throne. David had already given ample proof that he needed time to mature. His faith, so strong when he stood before Goliath, had faltered under Saul's relentless pursuit. As this chapter opens, David is filled with fear. God has just miraculously protected him by sending Saul sprawling in a fit of prophecy (19:18-24). That in itself should have been enough to convince David that he had nothing to fear, that he could trust God to preserve him in one way or another, but David's response was to flee to Jonathan (20:1).

His conversation with Jonathan graphically depicts the slippage in his faith. He had little to say about God, but talked rather about being very close to death (20:3). Evidently David had reached the point where he was no longer sure God could be trusted to keep His promises.

So it was off to the wilderness with David. There God would break him of relying on his own wisdom and teach him to rely wholly on the word of the Lord. The promise that David would become king would be fulfilled despite all the machinations of Saul and all the deprivations of the wilderness. Those who saw David during his months as a fugitive would probably have laughed at the suggestion that he would some day rise to the throne of Israel, but the power of the word of God is such that it will prevail no matter how unlikely its triumph may seem.

We may be sure David did not want to become a fugitive, but he learned to appreciate the experience. That strange providence worked for his good. He was not very far into this life as a fugitive until he was able to say to the Lord, "You number my wanderings; put my tears into

your bottle; are they not in your book? When I cry out to you, then my enemies will turn back; this I know, because God is for me" (Ps 56:8-9). The strange providence did not mean that God's love for him had changed. It was rather just another manifestation of that love.

David's experience of purposeful providence is by no means an isolated instance. We might say that strange providence is not strange. Yes, it seems strange to the ones experiencing it, but it is not strange as far as God is concerned. He frequently brings hardship into the lives of His children in order to bring them to a higher level of maturity and usefulness.

For example, Joseph was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery. In Egypt he was falsely accused and imprisoned. Why would a God of love send one of His children through such searing adversity? In all likelihood, Joseph asked himself that very question many a time, but there came a time when he was able to see that God was preparing him to assume a position of authority that enabled him to save his people from certain death. Joseph himself explained God's strange providence to his brothers in these words: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people" (Ge 50:20).

The apostle Paul spent a good bit of time anguishing over a physical malady that he referred to as his "thorn in the flesh." It seemed to be such a hindrance to his ministry. Why would God allow him to be burdened in such a way? Three times Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn. But that strange providence, that piercing thorn, remained. Why? God had a purpose in it. It was to keep Paul from being "exalted above measure," and to be a daily reminder of the

need to rely on the sufficiency of God's grace (2 Co 12:7-11).

Job is, of course, the classic example of a child of God suffering severe hardship. His suffering seems to us a strange providence indeed because he was such an upright man. Why would God allow such a faithful man to endure crushing difficulty? Was there a purpose in Job's suffering? The Bible assures us that there was. Through that suffering Job came to a fuller understanding of the majesty and glory of God, majesty and glory so great that man can only stand in awe (Job 42:1-6).

The apostle Paul emphatically affirms that what was true for David, Joseph, Job, and himself is true for God's children in every age: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Ro 8:28).

This verse troubles many saints. They take the "good" to mean their comfort and pleasure, so when hardship of any sort arises they find themselves wondering how it could possibly be for their good. But Paul defines the "good" toward which God works in the very next verse. There we find that "good" is achieved through conformity to the image of His Son (Ro 8:29). To accomplish this purpose, God often sends circumstances and trials that are anything but pleasurable. Such circumstances are not good, but they produce the highest good imaginable, which is conformity to Christ. Difficult as it is for us to believe, we will finally discover that true happiness lies in that conformity.

When the arrows of strange providence fall beyond us, we may take comfort in knowing they were shot from heaven's bow with a loving hand. In this life we will never completely be able to understand God's dealings with us, but we can

know those dealings have our best interests at heart. We cannot always trace the hand of God, but we can always trust the heart of God, a heart that is filled with immeasurable love for His people. If we find ourselves doubting that love, we need only to journey back to the cross of Christ and stand there in amazed wonder at the sight of the Lord Jesus taking the place of guilty sinners and receiving the wrath due their sins. If God went to that extent to save us, we may rest assured that He will never deal with us except in kindness (Ro 8:32).

### **Life's Constant Priorities**

Second, Scripture would draw from us an affirmation that when God's arrows fall beyond us life's priorities remain the same.

God, as we have noted, always has a benevolent and kind purpose in sending a strange providence upon His children. While the purpose behind it is kind, the strange providence always brings with it the danger that we can become occupied with the providence rather than with the One who sent it. In other words, we can allow it to so disorient us that we lose sight of the priority to which we are called.

What is this priority? "The chief end of man," says the Westminster Confession, "is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." That sounds good when our circumstances are good, but when they are not so good we often forget it. Before we realize what has happened, the providence has become our priority and we have put serving and glorifying the Lord on the shelf. Every pastor can give testimony of Christian people laying aside their spiritual responsibilities because of the difficulties they are experiencing. They fail to realize that in doing so they are depriving themselves. The strange providences

of life become much easier to handle when we are focused on God rather than on circumstances. In other words, God is always to be our priority in every situation of life. We are to love Him and serve Him when times are good and when times are bad.

It is obvious that David failed to understand this principle at first. The arrow of God's providence disconcerted and disrupted him. It caused him to be a torn man. On one hand, he had the promise that he would be the king of Israel, but on the other hand, it looked as if he would die at the hand of Saul. The providence of God seemed, therefore, to be at odds with His promise. We can visualize a war raging in David. Faith argued that the promise of God was secure, that David must simply continue to seek God's face and do whatever God led him to do. Fear rushed in to tell David he had been a fool to believe that God intended for him to be king.

When fear won, David went into a spiritual swoon. From the stone Ezel he hurried to the priestly village of Nob where he practiced deception and precipitated the cruel slaughter of almost all those dwelling there (21:1-9, 22:6-23).

After leaving Nob, David made his way to Gath in the land of the Philistines (21:1-15). Realizing that he was in danger there, David feigned madness. The man who stood calmly before Goliath because he was possessed by faith now acts like a maniac because he is possessed by fear. What unseemly, unsavory behavior for the future king of Israel!

It is clear that David did not respond to God's strange providence by occupying himself with God at first, but he learned to do so. After he left Gath he went to the cave of Adullam (22:1). This cave near his boyhood home not only provided David a hid-

ing place from Saul but also a seeking place, a place to occupy himself with God again. David penned Psalms 57 and 142 there. In the former, he writes, "I will cry out to God Most High who performs all things for me. He shall send from heaven and save me..." (vv. 2-3). In that same psalm he also writes, "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise" (v. 7). In Psalm 142:5, David cries to the Lord, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

During his fugitive days David also reached the point where he could say, "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh longs for you in a dry and thirsty land, where there is no water.... Because your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise you. Thus I will bless you while I live" (Ps 63:1, 3-4a).

## Conclusion

The Holy Spirit has given us these insights into the life of David so we can learn his lessons without having to go through something similar. David's experiences at this point are recorded in Scripture so that we may see what he finally saw: God is the important one no matter if our circumstances are calm and peaceful or boisterous and turbulent. They are here to get us to the point where we can say with Paul that "for me to live is Christ" (Php 1:21). When we do get to the point that we occupy ourselves with God and His glory instead of with our trials we find the trials much easier to bear.

Are the arrows of God's strange providence falling beyond your ability to understand? Don't try to read the book of His providence. He will read that to you later in heaven. Instead read the Bible in which He declares His love for you, and

know He has a loving purpose for the trials that come your way. When the trial comes, seek to occupy yourself with Him.