

# A Bow at a Venture

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“And a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the harness” (1 Kings 22:34).

Reading the Bible, we are sometimes amazed at what it reveals. Like the Psalmist we speak of God showing us "wondrous things" out of His Word (Psalm 119:18). This not only applies to the contents, but even to the manner it records these for us. Take, for instance, the way the Scriptures give us different perspectives on events. One minute we can be reading a wide sweep of history, hundreds of years, a panoramic view of God's dealings. The next moment, they zoom in on a single event, so ordinary, and yet so crucial to what God is doing.

## **Commonplace**

Such a homing in on one event occurs here in the above-mentioned verse. What could be more commonplace than this? In a battle, an unknown, unnamed Bowman fires his arrow at random. Yet this proves, in God's providence, as important as anything we read in the Bible. It is said that "huge doors turn on small hinges," and it was so here.

## **Background**

Before we consider the encouragement here, let us step back and remind ourselves of the background to this event. Ahab, king of Israel, is desperate to recapture the town of Ramoth-gilead from his enemy, Ben-hadad, king of Syria. This is a border town, very strategic, and has changed hands between Israel and the Syrians several times. Ahab has made friends with the godly but naïve Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. They form an alliance against the Syrians to retake Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22:3,4).

## **Blessing**

However, before they go, Jehoshaphat wants to know whether God's blessing will be upon the endeavour (1 Kings 22:5). He should, of course, have realised that God's approval was not upon his friendship with Ahab in the first place (1 Chronicles 18:1; Psalm 1:1). No divine favour, therefore, could rest upon this now (1 Chronicles 19:2,3). Ahab, though, is willing to satisfy his friend's scruples, and brings on four hundred (false) prophets, who are primed to assure the two kings that victory will be theirs.

## **Uncomfortable**

By now Jehoshaphat is feeling uncomfortable. He realises Ahab has trapped him, but he is too weak to do anything about it. His lame request ("Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we may enquire of him?" 1 Kings 22:7) expresses the poor man's desire for help from his own kind. A faithful prophet did exist: Micaiah, whom they fetched from prison, the last man Ahab wanted this time.

## **Prophecy**

Micaiah's prophecy was like a bombshell, for it predicted disaster for the venture, and the death of Ahab (1 Kings 22:17,19-23). However, it made Ahab more determined to go through with the battle and prove Micaiah wrong. It amounted to a direct challenge

to the word of the Most High: "until I come in peace," compare Micaiah's "If thou return at all in peace, the Lord hath not spoken by me" (verses 27,28).

### **Disguise**

Although contemptuous of God's word through His prophet, Ahab thinks he must protect himself in the battle, just in case. He suggests to Jehoshaphat (flatteringly) that his ally go against the Syrians in his royal robes, while he (modestly) will go in disguise. This proved a shrewd move, as the enemy had determined to make Ahab their target (1 Kings 22:31).

At first, it seemed to work. The Syrians went for Jehoshaphat, thinking he was the king of Israel (verses 31,32). He only now did what he should have done when in Ahab's court: he cried to the Lord for help, and was delivered (verses 32,33). Meanwhile, Ahab is secure behind the disguise of an ordinary Israelite soldier. It seems that the Word of the Lord through Micah will fall to the ground.

### **Reputation**

Then comes the little incident mentioned earlier: "And a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the harness" (verse 34). It led to Ahab's death and the fulfilment of Micaiah's prophecy (verses 35,36). If it had not been for this, Ahab may have survived, won the battle, and God would not have fulfilled His Word. God's name and reputation rested upon this 'chance' occurrence. God will ensure that what He speaks with His mouth He will make good with His hand.

What did the Lord do to ensure that He fulfilled His word on this occasion? How is this an encouragement for us at this time? The answer lies in the action of this Syrian archer.

### **God inclined the man to do this**

He may have come to his last arrow. Being too far from the enemy, he thought he would simply discharge it in their direction. So, he let fly. And we know the result.

The Lord can operate on the mind and will of men like this, inclining them to do what He wants them to do. We read that "God hath put it in their hearts to fulfil his will" (Revelation 17:17). He has total access to the inner faculties of men. People are free agents only within God's secret providence.

When it comes to situations that seem dependent upon human decisions, let us believe that God's is the only one that is sovereign in this world. "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand" (Proverbs 19:21). This encourages us to pray in those situations where man is having his way.

### **This seemed pure chance**

Maybe this man had fired an arrow at random in the past. Perhaps his position in the battle made him decide to do it again now. A worldly observer would say that he did the right thing, in the right place, at the right time. It was blind chance, very lucky, just one of those things.

However, the Lord was in this. It was to fulfil His word and vindicate His servant

Micaiah. In a universe governed by God no such thing as chance exists. Ultimately we cannot speak of 'accidents,' only incidents. The most casual action (to us) can be the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. The Ishmaelites passing by where Joseph is down the pit (Genesis 37:25); Pharaoh's daughter coming to bathe, right where baby Moses lies in his ark (Exodus 2:5); Ruth commencing her gleaning in the field belonging to Boaz (Ruth 2:3) are all reminders that He "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11).

Let us have a God-centred view of all human situations. The Lord can use whomever, wherever and whenever, to ripen His purposes, either for judgment or mercy. Never be discouraged, fearing the worst. We may never know what God is doing and where it is all leading. "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22).

### **The minuteness of God's government**

We see here such small things: one man, his whim, a single arrow, the joint of Ahab's armour. Yet, in such matters God works His sovereign will. He is in the small things as much as the vast things. Remember, one sparrow's death is not outside the providence of our Father (Matthew 10:29). The story is told of a group of men in conversation one day.

"Would you believe," said one, "that a thing like a pair of socks changed the course of my entire life?" The others were curious. "Well, it's true! Once I planned to take a trip with some of my friends on a canal boat, but two days before we intended to leave, I injured my foot while chopping wood. It was only a small cut, but the blue dye in the home-made socks I wore poisoned the wound, and I was compelled to stay at home. While my friends were on their journey, a preacher came to our town to hold Gospel meetings. Since I didn't have anything else to do, I decided to attend. The message touched me deeply, and as a result, I was brought to faith in Christ. Afterwards, new desires and purposes took hold of me. I determined also to seek an education, for I believed that this would enable me to live more usefully for my Lord."

The man who made these comments was none other than the former President of the United States, James A. Garfield (1831-1881). We should not think lightly of 'little things', as Augustus Toplady once wrote:

The fictitious power of chance  
And fortune I defy;  
My life's minutest circumstance  
Is subject to His eye.

### **The man did not realise what he did**

The margin rendering of "at a venture" has "in his simplicity." He just pointed his bow and shot the arrow randomly, not knowing who the target might be, if anyone. However, the Lord was in it. The arrow had Ahab's name on it. The man was His servant. God is the God of human whims and fancies, and is pleased to make them His instruments. What amazing condescension, that the Most High should be pleased to work in this way!

An anecdote comes down to us from history that illustrates a similar providence. In 1199, King Richard I ("The Lionheart") was besieging a castle in France. Those

inside offered to surrender upon promise of mercy. Richard refused, and threatened to hang every one of them. "Upon this, a certain soldier on the ramparts charged his bow with a square arrow, and, praying that God would vouchsafe to direct the shot, and deliver the innocent from oppression, he discharged the shaft upon the ranks of the besiegers. The arrow struck the king himself, inflicting a wound of which he soon afterwards died, and the objects of his vengeance were thus delivered."

This was a case of a man who prayerfully drew his bow at a venture. The Lord evidently honoured the man's pious act. Here though, amazing providence has appointed and directed a heathen man's action. The Lord can work through whom He pleases, and is not limited to using His willing servants.

### **Notice the accuracy here**

The text tells us that the arrow "smote the king of Israel between the joints of the harness." Ahab wore pieces of body armour, fitted and strapped together. "Joints" or tiny gaps were the only possible places where something could penetrate and harm him. Yet the arrow sped right to one of these and entered his body, eventually killing him.

Almighty God directed the flight of this arrow. This was His unerring work. There is never any 'hit and miss' with God. He does it right first time and needs no second try. A sovereign providence hit the tiny target. So it will be in all that the Lord does for us. Even the smallest of matters is subject to divine accuracy: "His work is perfect" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

### **This can be understood figuratively**

God's arrow here was for temporal judgment upon Ahab. However, Scripture tells us that the Gospel is like arrows. Psalm 45:5 is about our Lord Jesus: "Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; whereby the people fall under thee." This encourages us when we think of the furtherance of that Gospel.

It is for the Lord's enemies. The unconverted are called "enemies in your mind by wicked works" (Colossians 1:21). The Lord has His arrow for them, and the good news of Christ slays sinners to make them alive again. When hit, they "fall under him," and rise to newness of life.

This Gospel must hit and pierce. When first the bad news of sin hits home, then conviction and compunction for sin takes hold. Sinners are brought down at Christ's feet and the treason ends. Those on the day of Pentecost were "pricked in their heart" and cried out "what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Christ wounds them for sin that they might treasure His wounds for sinners.

Sinners, like Ahab, try to protect themselves. They try to hide behind various pieces of armour. Nominal attachment to the Church, self-righteousness, false religion, apathy, brazen unbelief, arrogant rejection of the truth. How secure they sometimes feel, and it seems they are impervious to God's grace.

The Lord knows them, and He reaches them. Our responsibility is to preach the Gospel. We often do so at random, because we do not know our hearers. We draw our bow at a venture, but the Lord directs the arrow to its target: "As many as were

ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48) - notice: "as many," not "as few." We should see the doctrine of election, not so much as shutting people out as shutting countless multitudes in. When Dr. Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel, after the service, individuals could be seen making their way to his vestry "like wounded birds," seeking spiritual help.

We never know when a word from the Lord will strike and stick. It could be a random word at an open air meeting, a gospel tract, a verse on a poster, verbal witness by some Christian, in all these there is the bow drawn at a venture. The Lord is pleased to use such, and when He does, the work will be sure. As we pray for unsaved individuals, what encouragement this gives us! We never know where the Lord has His "bowmen" ready. Let us hope in Him, and have confidence in the Word He as ordained to be the instrument of saving grace.

May the sovereignty of God's government in providence and grace fill us with faith and expectation now, and for the coming days!