

# *The Long, Strong Arm Of God*

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Ever had a time when you'd have hoped that those with you would be thankful, but instead they took to complaining?

You work hard to prepare a meal, say, and call everyone to the table. The food is presented - hot and steaming. Your feet ache. And as you settle into your chair, one of those ungrateful sinners pipes up, "*Oh yuk. Look at that. I don't want to eat that. Why can't we have KD instead?*"

It's one of those moments when child homicide becomes vaguely conceivable in a tired cook's mind.

Of course this is just an imaginary situation. I'm sure **none** of the children here at Calvin CRC **ever** said anything remotely like that when they sat at the table.

No. Not one of them!

Well the children of Israel **did** say it. More than once.

They're on their way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan. You'd think they would be thankful.

But instead....

Led by those that you find in every crowd -- the whiners and complainers who see every jug as half empty -- they complain about the quality of food that was available to them in the desert.

They dump their cheesed off whining on Moses' head.

And Moses?

His reaction was about the same as the frustrated cook in the kitchen.

He gets totally ticked off.

He does whatever you and I naturally do when being yelled at by 600,000 men PLUS all their wives, children and mothers-in-law.

He goes whining to the next-in-charge.

Moses spews it all out to the Lord -- full bore:

"These people - I didn't ask for them. Not my idea. I was happy being a shepherd. You didn't tell me this job included being short order BBQ cook for all these people! It's too much."

And the Lord, in all His gracious Sovereignty, allows his servant to let it out and then gives a very simple reply to his little 5 foot something shepherd turned national leader - "Is the LORD'S power limited?...." (v.23).

Other translations put it this way - "*Is the Lord's arm too short?*"

Yes, the challenge is too much for Moses -- just as much too much as asking a three year old to reach into the top cupboard above the fridge to get down the cookies. The kid's simply too short!

But now hear God speak: "Am I too short for this job, Moses? Can I not take care of what I started? Did I get in over my head here?"

Well, the remainder of Numbers 11 show how the Lord is more than able to provide -- even on short notice for those thousands of grumbling, self-centred ingrates.

And story after story through the rest of scripture provide confirming answers to those who would question the reach or the strength of the outstretched arm of God.

On this Thanksgiving weekend we're going to think about that outstretched arm of God. We're going to think about it while being very much aware that there are times in the lives of each of us when we feel like that three year old in the kitchen --

We're too small. Our arms are too short. We simply can't measure up to the challenge that life happens to throw our way -

leaving us sometimes frustrated and ready to quit;  
sometimes panicking about the future for ourselves & loved ones  
sometimes despairing  
sometimes angry and confused.

In theological terms what we are talking about is referred to as the doctrine of "PROVIDENCE" -  
How God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth meets us "too short" people and provides for us.

Divine providing -- providence.

How even our power is too small, too short, too limited, God's isn't.

For generations believers in the Reformed tradition have confessed these words about *providence*:

Providence is  
the almighty and ever present power of God  
by which he upholds, as with his hand,  
heaven  
and earth  
and all creatures,  
and so rules them that  
leaf and blade,  
rain and drought,  
fruitful and lean years,  
food and drink,  
health and sickness,  
prosperity and poverty--  
all things, in fact, come to us  
not by chance  
but from his fatherly hand.

Knowing this  
we can be  
patient when things go against us,  
thankful when things go well,  
and for the future we can have  
good confidence in our faithful God and Father  
that nothing will separate us from his love.

All creatures are so completely in his hand  
that without his will  
they can neither move nor be moved.

(Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 27-28)

That's what we believe the Bible teaches.

God's divine providing -- Providence:

Belief in and reliance on this truth is one of the key things that sets Christians apart from non-Christians in our jumbled, mixed-up, pain-scarred world.

It's a critical belief, but also one of the most difficult truths to absorb.

As one person put it, "Looking ahead we can believe it. Looking back we can see it. But at the time we need it, the knowledge must be firmly planted within us that God rules the universe, including mountains and rivers and apple trees. God rules people, from premiers and presidents to beggars and bums. Our Father is boss over the whole business because the whole business belongs to Him."

Remember the words of Psalm 104 we read earlier in the service?

Providence. We may know it to be true, but I want to suggest that somewhere along the way all Christians have trouble grasping it with enthusiasm.

There are three occasions in life that Providence teaching hits us square between the eyes; when we are forced to deal with it.

1. The easiest is the time of smooth sailing
2. More difficult is the time of trouble
3. And finally, there is the time of looking to the future.

As we get ready for Thanksgiving Day, let's consider each in turn.

### **1. WHEN THINGS GO WELL**

When things go well, Christians are called to be thankful, not arrogantly self-congratulatory.. We know that what has been given us is given by the Father and that we are accountable to Him for its proper use and care.

This is not to say that we may not take pride in a job well done, or in exercising our given talents in a careful, exquisite manner. When we do a good job, it would be wrong not to receive satisfaction from that.

What Providence does do, however, is remind us that while we may be on centre stage receiving the award, there is One off in the wings, hidden just behind the curtains, our Master, the One who painstakingly moulded our talent, groomed our skills, stuck with us when we seemed hopeless, and showed us whatever we know. We did what we could, true. But not a stitch of it would have been possible if we did not have Him around and fully involved, every step of the way.

When we gather in worship tomorrow morning for the Thanksgiving Day service, this will be a central part of what we do.

### **2. WHEN THINGS GO AGAINST US**

Then there's the time of trouble. Here the call is to be patient when things go against us.

Patient. Even thankful - if you take Ephesians 5.20 literally.

*Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Patient in whatever circumstance we happen to be.

That kind of Providence-inspired patience doesn't mean that we go through life oblivious of pain. In fact, since we know what creation once was in it's paradise state, and because the Lord has told us in His Word what it will be like someday again, I'd suggest that perhaps we feel pain more keenly, aware that death and hurt and jagged edges don't belong.

They're out of place with God's plan.

They grate.

They're cursed impostors,  
sinister aliens in God's good earth.

The problem of pain is a big one for us all; always has been, and will continue to be until Jesus returns. For some folks the problem is so big that it becomes a roadblock, at least temporarily, to them making peace with,

and surrendering to Jesus Christ. "How can there be a loving God when the world is filled with so much pain?" they ask. Fair question.

And, as John Stott points out, it would be a problem that would cause us all to run into a dead end..... were it not for the cross! Stott writes:

"We are not to see God on a deck chair, but on a cross. The God who allows us to suffer, once suffered Himself in Christ, and continues to suffer with us and for us today. He cries when we cry.

"I myself could never believe in God were it not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wretched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of His.

Oh, there is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark - the Cross, which symbolizes divine suffering."

So true!

It is the cross, and the suffering of Jesus, suffering that guarantees us a future in glorious eternity beyond the end of earthly suffering and death --

-- it is the cross that allows us to carry on when we face great darkness.

Margaret Clarkson, a Canadian hymn writer who struggled her whole life with pain and disability, once said:

"The Prince of Darkness may seek to overcome us, but God is in control of the darkness which He allows to come to His children..... Although we may experience darkness, we are not under its power, for God has promised to bring us safely through it."

God will bring us safely through.

He'll see us safely to the end.

His arm is not too short.

His power is not too weak.

One of the most well-known Christian stories is Paul Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. If you haven't done so yet, you must read this allegory of the pilgrimage through life for a believer. The central figure is named Christian. At one point along his journey to the Celestial City he is confronted by the Devil himself who is determined to destroy him in hand-to-hand combat. He shrieks his defiance of God:

"I am an enemy to this Prince. I hate His person, His laws, and people. I am come out on purpose to withstand you... I swear that thou shalt go no further: here will I spill your soul."

That's no idle threat. There IS a battle going on, and all humanity, all creation, is involved in the struggle. All corners of creation are affected by this war between the forces of Heaven and the retreating forces of Hell.

All creation suffers, and as Christians we can expect even more than normal suffering -- we will be the focus of special attacks in addition to the normal pain felt by all who live in a world covered with thorns and thistles.

But we don't face the battle alone.

The strength of God battles for us.

Later in his journey, the pilgrim Christian faces two hungry, roaring lions on each side of the path ahead of him. Someone further on encourages him to continue. "The lions are chained. Take care to stay to the centre of the path and you will not be devoured."

The lions we face in life are also chained, and our Sovereign Lord holds the end of the chain. Sometimes the chains are longer. Sometimes shorter. But never will we be devoured.

Providence - We never are promised NO suffering, but we are assured that we will never be alone in it.

Our Father who controls the hurricane winds and the tiny insects is working for us and caring for us throughout the entire journey of life.

### 3. WHEN WE LOOK TO THE FUTURE

And finally, what about the future? The bible tells us in Phil 4.6 not to worry.

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

The word "worry" as used there comes from a root word signifying lack of breathing space, suffocation. The future may sometimes seem like its threatening to crush or suffocate us.

Then look beyond the future to the God who is greater than it.

We can stare tomorrow in the face saying, "I am not alone in my present or future; Christ is in it with me. I may not know what is coming. But I do know WHO is coming!

The final hour of history belongs to Him.

And I belong to Him!

So, even when our eyes are clouded with tears, we can have hope.

Hope that provides power for endurance;

Hope that clears enough ground amidst the tangled undergrowth of our restless longing to give patience a chance to take root;

Hope that helps us live with the reality of a half-empty cup.

The future.... is God's future.

And His providence, His long strong arm, will bring us there -

Safe to the arms of Jesus; Safe to His gentle breast

There by His love o'er shadowed; Sweetly our souls shall rest.

### CLOSING PRAYER:

You know, Father in heaven, things of which we are afraid: The terrors of night and the devil's sniper fire of daytime that take us unaware and often find us without a vital, ready faith.

We know that you have not promised to surround us with immunity from all the ills to which humanity is subject. We only pray that when they come, if come they must, that they shall find us unafraid and with adequate resources to meet them.

Give us a constant faith and a steady courage, that we may neither whimper nor in peevish disgust complain before you.

We thank you that you still rule over the world that you have made. That though kings and prime ministers come and go, and though there be much shouting and noise and screaming hurricane-like events in time -- that these have not deviated you from your path.

Help us to remember, O Christ, that you are victorious, reigning over all; that in due time, in your own good time, you WILL work all things together for good to them that love you, who are called according to your purpose.

May we find our refuge in you, and so face the future without fear.

May your Spirit bathe our spirits in your Holy peace -  
through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Amen.