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Jonathan's Arrow

by T. Austin-Sparks

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An arrow has often been the symbol or instrument of a crisis in Bible times. In Elisha's time it symbolized deliverance from Syria (2 Kings 13). It symbolized God's judgment of Ahab in the days of Jehu (2 Kings 9). These were turning-points in history. So it was in the case of Jonathan's arrow.

The people had rejected God's best and refused every appeal and warning of Samuel as to what their decision and choice would eventually result in. But their hearts were hardened and they chose Saul. It was man's choice, not God's. It was like everything else, the common and popular thing: "Like unto the nations". The seeds of disruption were in the way of their own choosing. God had long patience and did what He could to win them back to His way. They took His goodness and patience, and the blessings that He gave as arguing for His agreement. But deep down and like a haunting shadow there was a doubt and a growing discontent. At a given point the real nature of that mistake sprang up and showed itself for what it really was. Secretly God moved with His reaction in the choice of David. But for a long time this reaction of God was not recognized and David was not in God's place for him. It is a strange and complicated situation and is difficult to piece together in a straightforward sequence. Saul was evidently so confused by his pride and self-interest, and so dominated by an evil spirit, that his course was full of contradictions. He seems to have had a split personality and was like two contrary persons. But the initial mistake was becoming more and more manifest and Saul was losing balance. The issue was becoming increasingly emphatic; God's choice or man's choice. A crisis was reached on the day of the arrow of Jonathan, Saul's son. Poor Jonathan; the tragic victim of divided loyalty!

The arrow was the sign and symbol. "Is not the arrow beyond you?" That fateful word "beyond". It marked a crisis. It signified the near end of one regime. It pointed to beyond Saul and his kingdom. It introduced the fierce and malignant phase which, while so painful for the instrument of God's full

purpose, would be the travail which makes the true Kingdom come. What a lot of prophecy, dispensation-truth, and ultimate issue in the battle of the ages this story holds! This arrow of Jonathan was an arrow of Divine Sovereignty, which works so strangely and inscrutably in the history of the elect. For David it was indeed an arrow, for an arrow is a piercing, wounding and painful thing. But its piercing was a "dividing asunder". David had become involved in a relationship with Saul which would demand an utter emancipation and absolute separation. His spirit and behaviour were magnificent, but with all his loyalty there was no hope for that union. So the arrow marked the point of a complete break. God had finished with one order. There could be no patching up or compromise. The ways of men and the ways of God must part for ever in the pain of the Cross.

This, then, in what seemed to be a simple incident in the boy and the arrows, contains, firstly, the story and history of man's mistake, fatal mistake. It dates back to the beginning of the Bible. A choice was offered between two ways - God's and man's. Warning and shown consequences were given. But man made his choice against the known will of God. The seeds of disruption and death were in that choice, and the tragedy of Saul's death on the battleground was foreshadowed. But God had already His Man, after His own heart, and after a long history, in which the sin of man's disobedience was brought home to him, God's greater David came to His place as "A Prince and A Saviour".

The same drama and tragedy were enacted by Israel's rejection of God's Best when they said: "WE WILL NOT have this man to reign over us." As God said to Samuel about Saul, "I have rejected him", so two thousand years have seen the terrible rejection by Israel of "the Son of David".

The story does not end there. It goes on wherever and whenever God's offer is rejected and man puts his own choice before God's. It works out in a lesser degree, but still with tragedy, where a choice for the lesser rather than for the fuller purpose of God is made by His people.