

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Spring 2010 No. 116

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NOT...APART FROM YOUR FATHER

By David Phillips

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father (Mtt 10.29).

What does Jesus mean when he says ‘apart from your Father’? Some Bible translators suggest the meaning is ‘apart from your Father’s will’ (NIV & NKJV) whilst others (ESV & AV) preserve a degree of ambiguity in following the original more closely ‘apart from your Father’. If it is the ‘will’ of the Father that Jesus has in mind then we might say that this implies the providence of God, since it means that everything that happens is in accord with the will of God. However, it is just as possible that what happens accords with God’s will but is nevertheless remote. The more ambiguous ‘apart from your Father’ suggests more than just the ‘will’ of God, it suggests the closeness of God, the direct involvement of God, which is much more what we mean by providence. God is active in ordering His creation, even, Jesus tells us, in what we might consider to be a meaningless event, the death of a sparrow.

When you read these words what is your immediate response? Do you think of the cute little sparrows and what Jesus is therefore affirming about the loving care of God? Children’s choruses such as ‘there are hundreds of sparrows’ drive us in that direction. Yet the immediate context of these words of Jesus has to do with the fear of God. Our first response should not be warm feelings, but reverent fear. It is possible that Jesus is picking up here on the words of Amos chapter 3 verse 5. The old Greek translation, the Septuagint, has here “Will a bird fall on the earth without a fowler?” The context of Amos is also about judgement on the people of Israel and the point is that the bird dies because the fowler sets a trap. Israel will perish because God will ensnare them in the trap. If this saying points us to the providence of God, what can we learn from it about providence?

Fear

First, providence should make us fear God. At the very least the Biblical teaching about the providence of God should fill us with a sense of awe as we consider how great God is. It is beyond my understanding how God can be involved in upholding and directing everything. The temptation therefore is to reduce our vision of God to fit our own experience and understanding, but instead we should be struck with reverent fear as we contemplate this God.

Deists and others see God as remote and detached from creation believing that this glorifies Him. They are concerned that providence degrades God because it makes Him responsible for the mess of creation. Not only is this view wrong, because it is not what God has revealed, but it also strips God of the glory which the working of providence displays.

Others, again ostensibly to preserve the honour of God, seem to make God himself apparently subject to the whims of man or the randomness of the universe. They do not want God to be responsible for evil, but therefore seem to make Him responsible to something other than Himself. The Biblical teaching, though uncomfortable, reminds us that nothing happens apart from God, He is not remote, He is over all. Reverent fear is a proper response to our God.

Do not fear

Although we should fear God, we should not fear others. Take away providence and you have good reason to fear. You might end up fearing the vagaries of blind chance, becoming paralysed by the

uncertainty about what each day may bring. But the words of Jesus here relate to the fear of man, the fear of persecution. These words have been important to Christians in every generation and remain so today.

We are not promised that we won't have possible reason for fear. Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate us because it hated Him first. This is not a promise that we will escape harm. It is not a promise that we escape death – the sparrows fall. A loved one who is critically ill may, by the goodness of God, recover, but we are not promised that. What we are promised is that these things do not happen apart from the Father. If you are under persecution God may deliver you, as he delivered Daniel, or you may die, as Stephen died, but you will not die apart from the Father. Therefore, though we should fear God, there is no reason to fear any other.

The big picture

This fear and lack of fear should teach us to look beyond the immediate circumstances that confront us. This is by no means easy because we become so caught up in what is happening to us. But it is important to try to see “the big picture”. Those words ‘in all things God works for the good of those who love him’ are at times hard to swallow. But it is precisely at those times that they are most important. Something may be happening which is definitely bad, and that may be all we can see for a time, but there is a bigger picture, and if we could but see it, the present troubles would fade.

Providence teaches us that there is a big picture, because we affirm that God is preserving and governing for a purpose. The gods of Greek mythology seem to intervene in the affairs of men for their amusement as much as anything. Terry Pratchett exploits this idea to good effect in his Discworld novels but in neither is there any sense of ultimate purpose. Yet God has revealed that there is a purpose to creation and that God is active in directing and governing creation in order to accomplish that purpose.

Obedience

Knowing the providence of God should encourage us to obedience. In particular, that we should be courageous to obey God regardless of the consequences before men. This is why Jesus spoke these words, because He had already said: “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light: and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops.”

It is possible to worry too much about life's “what ifs”, about the consequences of our actions. Philosophers, authors and scriptwriters love such situations, but whilst the decisions we have to make as Christians are by no means easy, when we are presented with a clear choice of obedience then we should choose obedience regardless of the consequences. We choose the right because whatever the outcome, we will not be apart from the Father.

If you are willing to be a little bit dishonest at work you may cover up your mistakes, or you may be made to look better than your colleagues, or be seen as loyal to the company and so eligible for promotion or a pay rise. It is possible to rationalise our disobedience, to say that I will do this wrong because a greater good will come out of it. But when we disobey God because we believe that it will lead to a better outcome we are saying that the future is in our hands not His. It is because we believe in the providence of God that we will always be concerned to do what is right. The disciples were to “speak in the light” and “preach on the housetops” knowing what the consequences might be, knowing that it might lead to death, but they had to learn that even if that were the outcome, it would not be apart from their Father; they would not be apart from their Father.

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