

SERMON XLVIII

The Unsearchableness of God's Judgments

by
Isaac Barrow
(Born 1630, Died 1677)

*"How unsearchable are his judgments,
and his ways past finding out!"*
Romans 11:33

Introductory Note: This is a condensed version of Barrow's lengthy sermon. The original may be read on Open Library, but it will take much slow and careful reading. We have provided here a very concise summary. The text has not been changed in Points 1 through 18, but we have included words in brackets {***} for clarity. Points 1 and 17 being more difficult, we have a "reworded" version following each. Punctuation has been modernized, and some very minimal editing in his comments following each point. Barrow ends with 11 practical applications, which are condensed with no changes in the text.

1. As the dealings of very wise men sometimes are founded upon maxims and admit justifications, not obvious nor penetrable by vulgar conceit; so may God act according to rules of wisdom and justice, which it may be quite impossible by our faculties to apprehend or with our means to descry.

Reworded: The works of very wise men are sometimes founded upon sound maxims and proven reliable. They are not obvious nor understood by the ordinary man. In the same way, God acts according to rules of wisdom and justice which are impossible for men, even of the highest intelligence, to apprehend or discern.

As there are natural modes of being and operation, (such as God's necessary subsistence, his production [creation] of things from nothing, his immensity without extension, his prescience without necessitation of events, his ever acting but never changing, and the like), so there may be prudential and moral rules of proceeding far above our reach; so God himself tells us: *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts"* (Isa. 55:9).

2. As the standing rules of God's acting [are placed beyond the sphere of our apprehension], so the occasional grounds thereof are commonly placed beyond the sphere of our apprehension [too].

God is obliged to prosecute his own immutable decrees. Can we climb up above the heaven of

heavens and then unlock his closet, rifle his cabinet, and peruse the records of everlasting destiny by which the work is governed? No. *"Who knows his mind, or has been his counselor?"* (Rom. 11:34). *"Who has stood in the counsel of the Lord, or has perceived and heard his word?"* (Jer. 23:18).

3. We are also thoroughly incapable to discern the ways of Providence from [because of] our moral defects, in some measure common to all men.

We have not the perspicacity [keen vision] to espy the subtle tracks and secret reserves of divine wisdom. We have not the industry, with steady application of mind, to regard and meditate on God's works. We have not the temper and patience to wait upon God until he discover [reveals] himself in the accomplishment of his purposes. We have not that blessed purity of heart, which is requisite to the seeing God in his special dispensations. We have not that rectitude of will and government of our passions as not to be scandalized at what God does if it thwarts our conceit [ego] or humor. . . . We are apt to measure the equity and expedience of things according to our opinions and passions, affecting consequently to impose on God our silly imaginations as rules of his proceeding and to constitute him the executioner of our sorry passions.

4. The nature of those instruments, which divine Providence does use in administration of human affairs, hinders us from discerning it.

It is an observation among philosophers that the footsteps of divine wisdom are, to exclusion of doubt, far more conspicuous in the works of nature than in the management of our affairs, so that some who by contemplation of natural appearances were convinced of God's existence and his protection of the world, (who thence could not doubt but that an immense wisdom had erected the beautiful form of heaven and earth . . .) [when] reflecting on the course of human transaction have staggered into distrust [as to] whether a divine wisdom does sit at the helm of our affairs. . . . One great reason of this difference may be that whereas the instruments of divine power in nature are in themselves merely passive . . . and certain in their operation, . . . the visible engines of Providence in our affairs are self-moving agents, working with knowledge and choice.

For instance, what other cause would many think needful to assign for the conveyance of Joseph into Egypt than the envy of his brethren; for Shimei's reviling David than his base malignity; for David's numbering the people than his wanton pride; . . . for our Lord's suffering than the spiteful rage of the Jewish rulers and people? . . . All of these events are ascribed to God's hand and special ordination. But men could not see or avow it in them. What need will men ever say in such cases to introduce God's aid when human means suffice to achieve the feat?

5. Indeed, as in nature the influences of heaven and of inferior causes . . . are so knit and twisted one with the other that it is not easy to discriminate them so as to sever the bounds of

common and special Providence, or to discern what God performs by natural instruments [and] what by superior efficacy, [so too is it in the moral realm], . . . wherein God's wisdom bears one part, man's free will plays another; fortune and occasion also do strike in [play their part]. We, not seeing the first, are prone to ascribe all the harmony to the last, which are most obvious and visible.

6. We are more apt to do so because the manner of divine efficacy is ever very soft and gentle.

God's Providence does not hurry along like an impetuous rumbling torrent but glides on as a smooth and still current, with an irresistible but imperceptible force carrying things down with it. Without much ado, without any clatter, [but] by a nod of his head, by a whisper of his mouth, by a turn of his hand, he does effect his purposes. . . . He does so fashion the hearts of men, so manage their hands, so guide their steps, that even they who are acted [upon] by him cannot feel the least touch upon them. For, *"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of waters; he turns it wheresoever he will"* (Prov. 21:1). By secret pipes [and] by obscure channels God conveys [directs] the minds and wills of greatest persons (the chief engines of his Providence) to such points of resolution as he pleases, so that they seem to flow there of their own accord without any exterior direction or impulse. Hence do his most effectual operations slip by us without making impression on our minds . . . *"As you know not the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child, so you know not the works of God, who makes all"* (Ecc. 11:5).

7. God, in his progress toward the achievement of any design, is not wont [accustomed] to go in the most direct and compendious ways, but commonly winds about and takes a large compass, enfolding several other coincident purposes, some of which may be no less considerable than is that which we deem most necessary and affect to see dispatched [done immediately].

God can, although we cannot, wait to be gracious. As there are no passions in him to precipitate action, so there are no sensible differences of time. *"One day being with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"* (2 Pet. 3:8).

8. Again, God is wont [accustomed] to act variously [differently], according to the state and circumstances of things, or to the dispositions and capacities of persons; so as to do the same thing for different ends, and different things for the same end; to apply one instrument to several uses, and by several instruments to work out one purpose.

And so God afflicts good men out of love, for trial and improvement of their virtues. He afflicts bad men in displeasure, to illustrate his power and justice on them. With prosperity he encourages and blesses the one and punishes and curses the other. He reclaims both from error and sin by either of those methods, as their temper and their circumstances do require. Well might the Preacher, upon a careful observation of such occurrences, establish this rule: *"No man knows love or hatred"* (that is, the special regard of God toward men) *"by all that is before*

them," because, "all things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked" (Ecc. 9:1,2),

9. There are different ends which Providence in various order and measure pursues, which we cannot descry [discern] by reason of our dim insight and short prospect [limited view].

God, as the universal and perpetual Governor of the world in his dispensation of things, respects not only the good of this or that person of one nation or one age, but often, in some degree waiving that or taking care for it in a less remarkable way, has a provident regard to the more extensive good of a whole people, of the world, of posterity; such as when he ordered his friend Abraham to wander in a strange land for the benefit of his seed, Joseph was to be sold, calumniated, and fettered for the preservation of his family, our Lord to suffer those grievous things for the redemption of mankind, the Jews to be rejected for the salvation of the Gentiles.

In such cases, purblind [dim-sighted] men, observing events to cross [thwart] particular and present ends, but not being aware how conducive [helpful] they may prove to general, remote, and more important designs, can hardly be satisfied [convinced] how God should be concerned in them. The present, or that which lies adjacent just under our nose, is all that we can or will consider, and therefore we must be ill judges of what is done by all-provident wisdom.

10. Things bad in their own nature God permits with regard to their instrumental use and tendency; for that [because] often the worst things may be ordainable [appointed] to the best ends; things very bitter may work pleasant effects.

Upon the wildest stock divine husbandry can graft most excellent fruit. The worst evils are sin and suffering; yet from them accrues much glory to God and great benefit to men. Even from the most wicked act that ever was committed and from the most lamentable event that ever did happen, fruits admirably glorious and immensely beneficial did spring. Yet usually we are so blind as to be offended at such things, and from them to raise exceptions against Providence.

11. The expediency of things to be permitted or crossed [thwarted] does frequently consist not in themselves taken singly, as particular acts or events, but in their conjunction or reference to others with which they may become subservient toward a common end.

Different things, in themselves extremely bad, may bring about good effects by means of combination or collision, and thence prove fit weapons or tools of Providence. As the most deadly poisons may be mixed so as to curb each other's force, they may constitute a harmless mass or sometimes a wholesome medicine.

12. That Providence sometimes is obscure and intricate may be attributed to the will of God, who upon many good accounts designed it to be such. "Verily," says the Prophet, "thou art a God who hides thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isa. 45:15).

God does not usually intend to exert his hand notoriously [spectacularly], because every special interposition of his hand is in effect a miracle surmounting the natural power or thwarting the ordinary course of inferior causes. And it does not become him to prostitute [deprecate] his miraculous power or to exert it otherwise than upon singular occasions and for most weighty causes. It is not conformable to the tenor of his administrations to convince men against their will, or by irresistible evidence to wring persuasion from stubborn or stupid [dull] minds, but rather to exercise the wisdom and to prove the ingenuity of well disposed persons, who upon competent intimations shall be capable to spell out and forward to approve [see and acknowledge] his proceedings.

13. He will not glare [blaze] forth in discoveries [disclosures] so bright as to dazzle, to confound our weak sight; therefore he veils his face with a cloud and wraps his power in some obscurity. *"Clouds and darkness are round about him"* (Ps. 97:2); *"He makes darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him is dark waters and thick clouds of the sky"* (Ps. 18:11).

14. Being the less seen, he thereby means to improve and exalt our faith, that he may be the more believed.

Faith never rises higher than when it soars to objects beyond our sight. Thus we approve God's wisdom and justice in occurrences surmounting our conceit, relying upon God's word and help although the stream of his proceedings seem to thwart our hopes.

15. It is fit that God, by design, should many times act in ways [not only] surpassing our apprehension but apt to baffle or puzzle our reason, [in order] that he may appear God indeed, infinitely transcending us in perfection of wisdom and justice

16. The obscurity of Providence does indeed conciliate an awful reverence toward it, for darkness naturally raises a dread of invisible powers. *"With God is terrible majesty. Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out; men do therefore fear him"* (Job 37:22-24).

17. It is requisite that God should dispose many occurrences cross to our vulgar notions and offensive in our carnal sense, that we may thence be prompted to think of God, driven to seek him, engaged to mark him interposing in our affairs.

Reworded: It is necessary for God to arrange many events contrary to our own ideas and offensive to our earthly reasoning in order that we may be prompted to not only think of God but be driven to seek him and quick to acknowledge his interposing in our affairs.

When disorderly and surprising incidents occur, men retain doubts about Providence. They preposterously think that if they were managing things, nothing odd or amiss would occur. If human transactions passed along as the motions of nature do, in a smooth course without any disturbance, men would think of God no more than they do when they behold the sun rising,

the rivers running, or the sea flowing. They would not depend on his protection or have recourse to him for aid. It is difficulty and distress that compels them to implore God for relief, which causes them to see his hand reaching forth to them. *"When he slew them, then they sought him. They returned and inquired early after God. They remembered that God was their rock, and the most high God their Redeemer"* (Ps. 78:34,35).

18. It is needful that the present course of Providence should not be transparently clear and satisfactory, [in order] that we may be well assured concerning a future account [reckoning], and forced in our thoughts to recur thither [think again of that final judgment] for a resolution of all such emergent doubts and difficulties.

If all accounts were clearly stated and discharged here, if in this present time right did always prevail and iniquity was suppressed, if virtue was duly crowned and vice deservedly scourged, then who would hope or fear a final reckoning at the last judgment? This present time is not the place for judgment or dispensing rewards, but it is a state of probation, of work, of travail, of combat, of sowing toward a harvest. At the General Judgment, God's honor will be thoroughly vindicated and his despised patience and abused grace avenged. Every case will be rightly tried, every work justly recompensed, all accounts set straight. In the meanwhile, various things must occur that are beyond our grasp. Allow God to go through with his work before we censure it. *"Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes"* (1 Cor. 4:5).

Some practical applications grounded on the above may now be made.

1. It should render us modest and sober in our judgment about providential occurrences, not pretending thoroughly to know the reasons of God's proceedings or to define the consequences of them. It is plainly fond arrogance or profane imposture [irreverent deception] to assume perfect skill in that which passes our capacity to learn.
2. It should make us staunch and cautious of grounding judgment or censure upon present events about any cause or any person. It is notorious temerity [outrageous boldness] to pass sentence upon grounds incapable of evidence.
3. It should repress wanton curiosity, which may transport us beyond our bounds in speculation of these mysterious intrigues. We shall not only plunge ourselves into vain errors or anxious doubts, but we shall lose valuable time and labor, all the while unsettling our minds.
4. It should keep us from conceit and confidence in our own wisdom. How can we highly regard or place much confidence in our own wisdom when we are incapable of fathoming the reason for most common and obvious events?
5. It should preserve us from infidelity and from despair upon account of any cross accidents [vexing or thwarting events] occurring here. It is unreasonable to disbelieve an otherwise well grounded concept because we cannot free ourselves from anxiety and trivial objections drawn

from matters inscrutable to us. It is foolish to despair of a good event upon appearances of which we cannot apprehend the full reason or final result.

6. It should prevent our taking offense or being discontented at any events rising up before us. To be displeased at what an unsearchable superior wisdom orders is a childish weakness. To fret and wail at that which apparently proceeds from good intention and tends to good issue is pitiful frowardness [peevishness].

7. It should guard us from security, or from presuming upon impunity, for our miscarriages [sins]. Seeing that God always clearly and fully reveals his mind, it is vain to conclude from his silence, or because he is now patient, that he will never exercise his justice by chastising our offenses.

8. It should quicken our industry in observing and considering the works of Providence. Since the works of Providence are not easily discernible, yet the discerning of them in some measure is of great use, it is necessary that we be very diligent in contemplating them. The fainter our light is, the more attentive we should be in looking. The knottier the subject, the more earnest should be our study of it.

9. It should oblige us to be circumspect and wary in our conversation. The darker the way is, the more careful should be our walking therein, lest we err, stumble, or strike on something hurtful to us.

10. It should engage us constantly to seek God and depend on him for the protection and conduct of his grace, which is the only clue that can lead us safely through this intricate labyrinth of worldly contingencies.

11. In fine, it should cause us humbly to admire and adore that wisdom which governs the world in ways no less great and wonderful than just and holy. *"Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, O thou King of saints"* (Rev. 15:3, 19:2).

"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1 Tim. 1:17).

Taken from *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow, D.D.*, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, Volume III of nine. Edited by the Rev. Alexander Napier, M.A. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1859.