

Catford Lectures 2007-2008

Part 7

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[00:00:01] Gott ist der Geist.

Die Bibel sagt uns das klar, aber es ist interessant, wie Gott in dem alten Testament manchmal mit Menschen kommuniziert hat, indem sie menschliche oder evangelische Formen benutzen. Gott wird oft als der Engel des Herrn genannt.

Diese Manifestationen sind die Theophanies. Wir sehen das klar mit Abraham. Es wird in Genesis 18 und 19 gesagt, dass drei Männer kamen, um Abraham zu besuchen. Einer von ihnen sprach zu ihm. Und er hat sich several Mal als der Herr identifiziert.

In fact, he told Abraham that he intended to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. And as I'm sure you remember, Lot, Abraham's nephew, was living in Sodom. [00:01:02] So Abraham pleaded with the Lord for the Lord to save the cities. And the Lord agreed to save the cities if he could find ten righteous people in them. But it wasn't to be.

Only Lot and his two daughters were rescued. Some years later, we find that Jacob wrestled with a man who he identifies as God. Later still, the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses out of a burning bush and tells him that he's the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Joshua, before the conquest of Jericho, fell down before the commander of the Lord's army, recognizing him as God.

In the time of the judges, Manoah and his wife eventually recognized the angel of the Lord as God. [00:02:01] And there are other examples. God displayed himself to man in human or angelic form.

And of course, later in time, God came.

God came here. God the Son. Born into this world, living as a real human being, showing God to any who are willing to look. Often, rather than God displaying himself in human form, as we've seen in the examples I've mentioned, we see his actions described by referring to him with some human

characteristics.

I'm thinking particularly of the physical form. We found the scriptures talk, when referring to God, about his heart. For example, in Ezekiel 28, we find the Prince of Tyre has set his heart as the heart of God. [00:03:06] We read about God's finger.

The finger of God broke the Ten Commandments on the tables of stone which Moses broke. Many times we read of the eyes of the Lord. In Psalm 34, for example, they're on the righteous.

The ears of the Lord.

Again, in Psalm 34, they're open to the cry of the righteous. Many times we read of the hand of the Lord. I didn't namely say that the hand of the Lord was against her. We read of the arms of the Lord, and undoubtedly there are many others. The human form used to show characteristics of God.

I want to pick up one of these and see something of what it teaches us about the Lord God. [00:04:03] The one I have in mind is the arm, or the arms of God.

I intend to look at some scriptures from both the Old and New Testament. Of course, there will be many that I don't refer to. I think I've got a representative selection here. Although the use in the scripture of God's arm, or arms, illustrates several different aspects of his character and his work, always, I think, when we see them mentioned, they're telling us something of his strength and power. Usually, in fact probably in the vast majority of times, it's power displayed in a clear and obvious way. Other times, it's perhaps not so obvious, but it is there. In fact, there are passages where the arm seems to be used essentially synonymously with strength.

[00:05:04] I'll just refer to one. I suggest there's no need to turn to this one. I've got a few scriptures I want to mention. This one's in Isaiah 33, where it's written, O Lord, be gracious unto us, we have waited for thee. Be thou their arm every morning, our salvation also in the time of trouble. Be their arm, be their strength.

If we employ the law of first mention, or principle of first mention, that Brother Nick mentioned last month, we'll often find the characteristics of the use of a term in scripture from its first mention. You see, the arms get their first mention in Genesis 49.

This is where Jacob is blessing his sons.

[00:06:07] He says of Joseph, in verse 24, The arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.

Immediately we see here a crystal clear link between the arms and strength. God made his arms strong.

Often we find in scripture that God's arms are described as being stretched out, or outstretched.

Obviously if you think about it, a boxer can't punch without stretching out his arm. A wrestler can't succeed if he keeps his arms by his side. In fact, it's difficult to do anything that needs well-controlled strength without actively using the arms. [00:07:09] That's why arms gives us such a good picture of

strength and power. Now let's go to the beginning.

Turn with me to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah chapter 27.

Jeremiah 27 verse 5.

The Lord is speaking.

I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground by my great power and by my outstretched arm. And then turn over to chapter 32.

[00:08:10] Verse 17.

Our Lord God, behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm. And there is nothing too hard for thee. God created.

God created by his great power and his outstretched arm. Now when we look at Genesis 1, we see that God said.

God said, and it was so.

God said, let there be light, and there was light. God said, let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and it was so. God said, let the waters under the heavens be gathered together in one place and let dry land appear, and it was so. [00:09:03] And so on.

But behind these words that brought all into being was infinite power and strength. Power and strength illustrated for us by God stretching out his arm.

Yes, God just said.

And it was done.

But to make it clear that behind this is infinite strength and power, we're told that God stretched out his arm. He stretched out his arm to create out of nothing the physical world and to create all life. And I don't need to tell you that God's creation of life is one of the most strongly attacked truths. Satan's always attacked aspects of God, his character, his person, his work. The divinity and humanity of Christ, the resurrection, salvation by faith alone. [00:10:03] Fundamental truths.

But disputed by many essentially right from the beginning. That the general denial of the creation of life by a divine being is a modern phenomenon.

And it's so important to modern man. Important because it removes responsibility. It makes man autonomous.

It makes man free to do what he likes. It allows man to please himself.

If God didn't make me, then I have no one to be responsible to.

I'm free.

Free to behave exactly how I choose. Or so modern man thinks.

But in fact God said and life came into being.

And God's infinite power in creating life is illustrated by his stretching out his arm.

[00:11:10] There are other references to God's arm being outstretched. And they always refer to extraordinary displays of power on God's part. These are not events that can be explained by the so-called laws of nature. But events that have miraculous power behind them. Because God is involved in the laws of nature. What we see in the laws of nature is the active upholding work of the Lord Jesus. Please turn with me to Exodus chapter 6.

In at least 10 passages we read that God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with an outstretched arm.

[00:12:11] Exodus chapter 6 verse 6.

The Lord's speaking to Moses. He says, Therefore saying to the children of Israel, I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will rid you out of their bondage and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm and with great judgments. If we were to turn over to Deuteronomy, time and again we see that the Lord reminds them that he brought them out of Egypt with a stretched out or outstretched arm. In the New Testament in Acts chapter 13.

[00:13:03] Paul at Antioch in Persidia in verse 17 of Acts 13.

Acts 13 talks about the high arm that the Lord used.

The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt and with a high arm brought them out of it.

God had promised Abraham, before Abraham had children in fact, that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. [00:14:04] It would be theirs. They would live in it. He also told Abraham that they would be slaves in another land. Those who enslaved them would be judged and the Israelites brought out of great possessions. The Israelites couldn't do this. They were powerless. They were powerless against the might of the Egyptians and God's active intervention was required. The request to leave didn't work. They didn't leave without the Lord displaying his power time and again. Ten miraculous plagues were successively brought on the land of Egypt culminating in the death of the first born sons. Then they were allowed to depart.

After this event, whenever the Israelites looked back, they saw this as a key point in their history. [00:15:01] God showed his amazing power in an extraordinary, in fact, a totally unique way to bring the children of Israel out of slavery. It was with an outstretched arm that his power was displayed.

Let's turn over to Isaiah 63.

Isaiah 63 verse 11 says, Then he remembered the days of old, Moses and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he that put his Holy Spirit within him that led them by the right hand of Moses with his glorious arm dividing the water before them? To make himself an everlasting name. [00:16:02] So after coming out of Egypt, there's the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Egyptian army behind them, the waters of the Red Sea in front, and the Israelites have no means of escape. And once again, in another miraculous intervention, God displays his power. And although Moses, by stretching out his hand over the sea, was the instrument that God used, it was actually God stretching out his glorious arm, as we've read here in verse 12, that did it. We read too that God gave the Israelites the land, the promised land, by his outstretched arm.

The children of Israel were brought out of slavery, out of Egypt by the mighty power of God. [00:17:05] They were brought into a desert where they were tested. Sadly, they repeatedly rebelled against God. They showed their true character and they had to wander in the desert for 40 years for the rebellious generation to die out. They reached the border of their land, but they had to cross the River Jordan and then go in and possess the land. Could the children of Israel have conquered the land on their own? Well, there were a lot of them, but they had hardly any experience of war and they felt weak and powerless before the inhabitants. And I'm sure they couldn't have succeeded on their own. Let's turn over to Psalm 44.

Psalm 44.

[00:18:10] We have heard with our ears, O God. Our fathers have told us what work they didst in their days, in the times of old, how they didst drive out the heathen with thy hand and plantedst them, how they didst afflict the people and cast them out, for they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them, but thy right hand and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them. It was God's arm that brought them victory.

It was God's arm that took them into the land. So we've seen some events from the past where God uses his infinite power [00:19:02] by stretching out his arm in creation, in rescuing his people from slavery, in bringing them successfully into their promised land. Let's now look into the future for a moment. We know that the time will come when true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ will be taken from the earth to be with him, and they'll follow a terrible time for this earth, when God will judge.

A world that has rejected our Lord Jesus Christ will be judged by God, and among those that will be judged will be what the Bible calls Assyria. Let's have a little background on Assyria. Assyria was located in what is now northern Iraq.

Although in the previous millennium Assyria had periods of greatness, [00:20:05] it had by about 1000 B.C. declined. That's around David and Solomon's time. It had declined to a small kingdom competing for influence with Babylon and similar kingdoms in Mesopotamia. But it grew again in power, and by the mid-700s B.C. Assyria had subjected the Babylonians, defeated the Medes, conquered Syria, and they then invaded northern Israel.

The northern kingdom of Israel, really. This was during the reign of Menahem, one of the last of the kings of Israel.

And the Assyrians imposed on Israel a heavy tribute. A few years down the line, the last king of Israel, Hoshea, refused to pay. And the Assyrians didn't take too kindly to this, and besieged some area of Israel captive.

[00:21:04] And they resettled the people in other parts of the empire. And so the northern kingdom ended. The people were taken away from their land and into Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah continued, but when their king Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to Sennacherib, a later ruler of Assyria, the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem. The angels of the Lord destroyed the Assyrian army, and Hezekiah and Jerusalem were saved.

And if we move forward from there, another hundred years or so, in 612 B.C., right near the end of Josiah's reign in Jerusalem, the Babylonians conquered the capital of Assyria, Nineveh.

And although there were some attempts to keep Assyrian power alive around Haran, with Egyptian support, this didn't last long. In fact, Josiah was killed meddling in these death throes of the Assyrian empire. [00:22:06] The Assyrian empire was destroyed. But the Bible is clear, when we look at prophetic scriptures, we see that Assyria will be prominent in the end times. The times still to come. Assyria will be an enemy of Israel, but it's easy to see that the future Assyria may perhaps be an alignment of states from that area, with the purpose of destroying the Jewish nation. But if we turn over to Isaiah chapter 30, we see what happens. Isaiah 30 verse 30, [00:23:01] The Lord shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lightning down of his arm, with indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering and tempest and harrowstones. For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a wrath.

The Lord will display his arm, he will show miraculous power in rescuing Israel from the hands of Assyria.

And then along with these victories over his enemies, the Lord will call out his earthly people, the Israelites, out of the countries where they have been scattered. Remember those from the northern kingdom were taken by the Assyrians, those from Judah, the southern kingdom, were taken captive by the Babylonians, and Israelite rule over the land of their possession came to an end. We know that some Jews returned during the Persian Empire, [00:24:06] undesirable, as described in the book of Ezra. But their descendants, after they rejected their Messiah, were scattered by the Romans.

But if we turn to Ezekiel, we turn to Ezekiel chapter 20, we see another miraculous event.

Ezekiel 20 verse 34, looking into the future, and the Lord says, I will bring you out from the people and will gather you out of the countries where you are scattered with a mighty hand and with a stretched out arm and with fury pulled forth.

[00:25:02] The Lord will bring them out of the countries where they have been scattered. Of course there has already been a limited regathering into Israel. There is nothing compared with the Lord's miraculous intervention to bring all the 12 tribes back together into their land. There are many Jews who are scattered throughout the world, there are many in America of course, in this country, and I am sure there are many more people not presently recognized as Israelites, but the Lord knows them. The Lord stretches out His arm in a miraculous intervention to identify His people and to bring them back.

And if we look at the previous verse here in Ezekiel chapter 20, verse 33, As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand [00:26:02] and with a stretched out arm and with fury pulled out, I will rule over you.

We find that His rule, His rule for the millennium is characterized here by His stretched out arm.

Stretched out arm and out pulled off.

I will just turn over to a verse in Isaiah.

Isaiah chapter 40 says, Behold the Lord God will come with strong hand and His arm shall rule for Him.

Again the key is strength and power. It is very clear that the Lord's rule over the earth will be characterized by righteousness. Man will not be allowed to get away with sin and disorder. [00:27:02] The Lord will rule in strength. His arm shall rule for him.

So we see graphically brought before us the Lord using His arm in strength and power to perform the miraculous.

The scriptures have told us that He used it in creation, in bringing His people out of bondage and into their new land, in the regathering of dispersed Israel, the defeat of their and His enemies, and His righteous millennial rule. God used His arm in strength and power to do what couldn't be done naturally.

Although the arms are most commonly associated directly with strength, we find God's arms used in other ways too, [00:28:04] although behind these uses is a display of strength. Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she was to have a baby.

It was to have no earthly father. In fact it would be conceived through the Holy Spirit and would be the long form Messiah. And Gabriel finishes with, nothing is impossible with God. A miraculous event.

Humanly speaking impossible, but not to God. Nothing is impossible with God. Mary rushes over to her cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth through the Holy Spirit confirms who this child will be. Let's turn to Luke 1. [00:29:06] Mary makes a wonderful statement. We'll pick it up at verse 46.

Luke 1 verse 46.

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has showed strength with His arm. Again God has showed great and extraordinary power, illustrated by Him using His arm. He has wrought strength with His arm. I can't see that Mary here is referring to anything other than the Incarnation itself. [00:30:02] That's what her statement is all about. The Incarnation.

An extraordinary display of God's power. And I think perhaps the most amazing of all. God became man.

In fact preordained before anything came into existence.

Because created man would rebel. And there would be no other way to bring him back to God. But God should enter this world at all.

And when He did, not in great pomp and power as He'd be fully entitled to, but in humility and weakness.

Born here as a human baby. This is truly amazing. In fact it's an amazing display of power. The Incarnation is no demonstration of divine weakness. But God stretching out His arm in power and strength. He's wrought strength with His arm, Mary says. [00:31:04] And it's a constant meditation, isn't it? A wonderful truth, that God was there in a stable, lying in a mammal feeding trough, because there was no room for Him in the guest houses of Bethlehem. That baby was God.

The creator of everything. The giver of life, the upholder of all. There is the weakest of human beings. Just a small human baby. Man sees weakness.

Yet this was an amazing display of God's power. Leading on of course to the cross, and the wonder of redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Available to us only because God became man. Then in the stable, a real human baby. The Lord Jesus grew up, truly God and truly man.

Only twice do we read in the New Testament of His arms.

[00:32:02] The arms of the Lord Jesus.

They're in Mark, and here's the first. Mark chapter 9.

The disciples went to speak.

Mostly they seemed to get on well with each other, but there were issues that caused problems from time to time. And here's one that caught their attention. Who's the greatest? Who's the most important?

And the Lord addresses the issue. Mark 9 verse 33.

And he came to Capernaum. And being in the house, he asked them, what was it that you disputed among yourselves by the way? [00:33:04] But they held their peace. For by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest? And he sat down and called the twelve and said unto them, if any man desire to be first, the same should be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and set him in the midst of them. And when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, whoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me.

And whoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him who sent me.

The Lord's answer to their question about who's the greatest, was that to be really great, you have to be a servant to others. And this requires real humility.

And he then follows this angle up. [00:34:03] Doing humble things pleases God. Welcoming a humble dependent child in the Lord's name, is welcoming the Lord Jesus and therefore welcoming God. But notice that to illustrate this point, the Lord didn't just say it.

He didn't just point to a distant child. In fact he got one.

He put him in the midst and took him in his arms. He showed them what welcoming was. Not a theoretical idea, but a practical matter. Welcoming a child was taking him in the arms and holding him close to you.

However insignificant or filthy or smelly or irritating the child may be. That close.

Notice the Lord's arms were involved. [00:35:02] Obviously he couldn't take a child close to him and hold him without using his arms. And we could perhaps say of this, arms used in humility. I said that arms speak of strength. So where does strength come in? Well here it's not physical strength I think, but moral strength. The humility that the Lord Jesus talks about requires moral strength. And actually it's difficult to lower ourselves. It's difficult to be servants to others. It's difficult to welcome the insignificant, the distracting, the irritating. The second occasion where the scripture records the Lord Jesus when here is a man using his arms is somewhat similar and it's found in the next chapter of Mark in fact. Mark chapter 10.

[00:36:01] Verse 13.

Mark 10 verse 13. And they brought young children to him that he should touch them. And his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not for such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall not enter therein.

And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them and blessed them. Again the idea of humility shines out in this. And the lesson is similar but perhaps taken a little further. In Mark 9 it's showing humility by welcoming the child, the insignificant. [00:37:03] Here it's being like the child. The child's humility and trust that is given as our example. Humility and trust in order to enter the kingdom of God. There's nothing ourselves and our achievements that make us worthy of his presence. We need to be as humble and trusting as a child in order to enter the kingdom of God. And notice the Lord went beyond the mother's expectations. They wanted the Lord to touch the little ones. He did much more. He took them in his arms with the love, security, the support that that shows. Turn over with me to Isaiah 40.

[00:38:04] This may not be the main focus of these two passages in Mark where we find our Lord Jesus taking up children in his arms, the two passages we read. There is another wonderful and important thought in this which is brought out even more clearly in Isaiah 40. Look at verse 11. It says, He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom and shall gently lead those that are with young.

This refers to none other than the Lord himself, of course. The original context as shown in earlier verses is Israel, but it's wonderfully applicable to us. This is the Lord's real care.

We're not left to wander alone in the world.

[00:39:01] We have a deeply caring shepherd. He tends his flock. He looks after them. He provides pasture and water. He defends them from attack. He watches over them. He loves them, in fact. The

lambs, the young, the weak, he carries in his arms.

And that's where strength comes in. The contrast between the weakness of the lambs, those that can't walk any further, can cope no longer, have given up perhaps, and the strength of the shepherd's arms as he carries them, in love, close to his heart, in his bosom. What a wonderful picture this gives us of the way the Lord Jesus cares for us and loves us. It's an individual care and love for each of us.

And let's just take this a little further. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 33. [00:40:04] Deuteronomy 33.

Verse 26.

There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky.

The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

What a wonderful picture this gives us, doesn't it? Notice God's sovereign power and authority. He rides on the heavens to help you. And again, as is so often in the Old Testament, the primary reference is obviously to Israel. But because he's our God too, there is application for ourselves. The eternal God is our refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. [00:41:04] As we all know, life gets difficult. Let's not suppose for one moment that we as Christians are immune from feeling down. Circumstances may be against us, but the Lord is there. We may feel persecuted. We may be suffering for righteousness' sake, but he's there. Underneath are the everlasting arms. It may be that our problems are actually our own fault, of our own making. But he is still there. Underneath are the everlasting arms. He is our refuge, and so often in the scriptures, particularly in the Psalms, he is shown as a fortress, a refuge, a rock. Something that won't be destroyed, but will stand against the assaults of the enemy. Somewhere where we're secure.

And that's what we have here. A refuge in the eternal God.

[00:42:01] The God who exists outside of space and time.

Our refuge, our security, is shown with this picture of his arms. Where are his arms? They're underneath. Underneath us. For how long? Everlasting. We can't be more secure and supportive than that. This is our God.

To go back to the theme of strength. We've seen God's arms being used to display strength in various ways. His outstretched arm illustrated his strength and power to create. Create the universe and all life. His outstretched arm brought his earthly people out of bondage. Brought them through the Red Sea when they seemed trapped by the Egyptian army. Through the Jordan by miraculously holding back the waters. And into the promised land.

[00:43:01] We saw too how his arms will defeat his people's enemies in a future day. Will regather his people and how he will rule with justice.

We then saw his arms used to illustrate strength in other ways. The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God into this world. We saw the Lord Jesus using his arms to illustrate principles of

humility. He picks up children, takes them in his arms. We've seen the care and the love of the Lord Jesus. Illustrated by a shepherd caring for his flock in Isaiah 40. Beneath it all we have the everlasting arms providing all our security and support. As we talk about strength and think of the Lord's strength.

It reminds me of my own weakness and our corporate weakness too.

[00:44:02] I think sometimes we get into trouble when we think we are strong. And the Lord has to bring us down to earth. He wants us to understand our dependence on him.

The Apostle Paul had some sort of experience like that. In 2 Corinthians 12 we read that he was given a thorn in the flesh. We don't know where it was but it was something that hampered him. Undoubtedly hampered him from doing the Lord's work in a way he felt he could and would like to do. But the Lord denied it.

The Lord wouldn't take it away in spite of Paul's pleas to that effect. My grace is sufficient for you, the Lord says. My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Our weakness when we recognise and accept it allows God's power to show through.

[00:45:06] I return to the Lord's arms.

Whenever I think of the arms of the Lord Jesus I think of the cross. I don't think the scriptures actually mention his arms in connection with the cross. But I'd like to just for a moment, we can look by faith and see his most appalling sufferings. Sufferings because of us, sufferings for my sins. And we see his outstretched arms. And I think that we can see they are a welcome, a welcome for all. Arms stretched out in terrible suffering but welcoming all who come to him in faith. And my final scripture, I want us to go back to one that I mentioned right in the beginning. Isaiah 33.

Isaiah 33 verse 2.

[00:46:19] Oh Lord, be gracious unto us, we have waited for thee.

Be thou their arm every morning, our salvation also in the time of trouble. There are other translations that have our arm. And this is what we need isn't it? It's our prayer surely. We need his strength, we need his arm every morning. Daily strength for our individual lives, for our assembly life. The Lord's arm, the Lord's strength to do what we should do. Let's pray for the Lord's arm every morning.

I'd like us to finish with number 242. [00:47:07] 242. Sing aloud to God our strength.

He has brought us hither to, he will bring us home at length. This the Lord our God will do. Doubt not, for his word is stable. Fear not, for his arm is able. 242.