

# God's Awful Judgment in the Breaking and Withering of the Strong Rods of a Community

by Jonathan Edwards

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*The sermon discusses the significance of strong rods in a community and the consequences of their removal, highlighting the importance of wise and able rulers in promoting prosperity and defending against calamities.*

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 4:25, 1 Kings 10:8, Psalm 82:6, Ecclesiastes 10:17, Ezekiel 19:12

**Topics:** "Godly Leadership", "Judgment And Mourning"

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## Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the awful judgment of God when strong rulers in a community, symbolized as strong rods, are broken and withered by death. He emphasizes the importance of qualified, wise, and able magistrates who are well-equipped for governance, possess integrity, and have a spirit of government. Edwards highlights the positive impact of such rulers on society's prosperity, unity, and spiritual well-being, drawing examples from biblical references like Solomon's reign. The sermon underscores the significant loss and vulnerability a community faces when deprived of strong and righteous leaders, making it a cause for great lamentation.

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## Transcript

God's Awful Judgment In The Breaking And Withering Of The Strong Rods Of A Community

Dated June 26, 1748 upon the death of Col. John Stoddard

Ezekiel 19:12

Her strong rods were broken and withered.

Preached at Northampton on the Lord's day, June 26, 1748, on the death of the Honorable John Stoddard, Esq. often a member of his Majesty's council, for many years chief justice of the court of Common Pleas for the county of Hampshire, judge of the probate of wills, and chief colonel of the regiment, etc. who died at Boston, June 19, 1748 in the 67th year of his age.

When God by death removes from a people those in place of public authority and rule that have been as strong rods, 'tis an awful judgment of God on that people, and worthy of great lamentation.

IN order to a right understanding and improvement of these words, these four things must be observed concerning them.

1. Who she is that is here represented as having had strong rods, viz. the Jewish community, who here, as often elsewhere, is called the people's mother. She is here compared to a vine planted in a very fruitful soil, verse 10. The Jewish church and state is often elsewhere compared to a vine; as in Psa. 80:8, etc.; Isa. 5:2; Jer. 2:21; Eze. 15, 17:6.

2. What is meant by her strong rods, viz. her wise, able, and well qualified magistrates or rulers. That the rulers or magistrates are intended is manifest by verse 11, "And she had strong rods for the scepters of them that bear rule." And by rods that were strong, must be meant such rulers as were well qualified for magistracy, such as had great abilities and other qualifications fitting them for the business of rule. They were wont to choose a rod or staff of the strongest and hardest sort of wood that could be found, for the mace or scepter of a prince; such a one only being counted fit for that use; and this generally was overlaid with gold.

It is very remarkable that such a strong rod should grow out of a weak vine. But so it had been in Israel, through God's extraordinary blessing, in times past. Though the nation is spoken of here, and frequently elsewhere, as weak and helpless in itself, and entirely dependent as a vine, the weakest of all trees, that cannot support itself by its own strength, and never stands but as it leans on or hangs by something else that is stronger than itself; yet God has caused many of her sons to be strong rods fit for scepters; he has raised up in Israel many able and excellent princes and magistrates, who had done worthily in their day.

3. It should be understood and observed what is meant by these strong rods being broken and withered, viz. these able and excellent rulers being removed by death. Men's dying is often compared in Scripture to the withering of the growth of the earth.

4. It should be observed after what manner the breaking and withering of these strong rods is here spoken of, viz. as a great and awful calamity, that God had brought upon that people. It is spoken of as one of the chief effects of God's dreadful displeasure against them; "But she was plucked up in fury, she was cast down to the ground, and the east wind dried up her fruit: her strong rods were broken and withered, the fire hath consumed them." The great benefits she enjoyed while her strong rods remained, are represented in the preceding verse; "And she had strong rods for the scepters of them that bear rule, and her stature was exalted among the thick branches; and she appeared in her height with the multitude of her branches." And the terrible calamities that attended the breaking and withering of her strong rods, are represented in the two verses next following the text; "And now she is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty ground. And fire is gone out of a rod of her branches, which hath devoured her fruit." And in the conclusion in the next words, is very emphatically declared the worthiness of such a dispensation to be greatly lamented; "So that she hath no strong rod to be a scepter to rule. This is a lamentation, and shall be for a lamentation."

That which I therefore observe from the words of the text, to be the subject of discourse at this time, is this, viz. When God by death removes from a people those in place of public authority and rule that have been as strong rods, it is an awful judgment of God on that people, and worthy of great lamentation.

In discoursing on this proposition, I would:

I. Show what kind of rulers may fitly be called strong rods.

II. Show why the removal of such rulers from a people by death is to be looked upon as an awful judgment of God on that people, and is greatly to be lamented.

I. I would observe what qualifications of those who are in public authority and rule may properly give them the denomination of strong rods.

First, one qualification of rulers whence they may properly be denominated strong rods, is a great ability for the management of public affairs. This is the case, when they who stand in a place of public authority are men of great natural abilities, men of uncommon strength of reason and largeness of understanding; especially when they have a remarkable genius for government, a peculiar turn of mind fitting them to gain an extraordinary understanding in things of that nature. They have ability, in an especial manner, for insight into the mysteries of government, and for discerning those things wherein the public welfare or calamity consists, and the proper means to avoid the one and promote the other. [It is] an extraordinary talent at distinguishing what is right and just, from that which is wrong and unequal, and to see through the false colors with which injustice is often disguised, and unravel the false and subtle arguments and cunning sophistry that is often made use of to defend iniquity. They have not only great natural abilities in these respects, but their abilities and talents have been improved by study, learning, observation, and experience. By these means, they have obtained great actual knowledge. They have acquired great skill in public affairs, and things requisite to be known in order to their wise, prudent, and effectual management. They have obtained a great understanding of men and things, a great knowledge of human nature, and of the way of accommodating themselves to it, so as most effectually to influence it to wise purposes. They have obtained a very extensive knowledge of men with whom they are concerned in the management of public affairs, either those who have a joint concern in government, or those who are to be governed; and they have also obtained a very full and particular understanding of the state and circumstances of the country or people of whom they have the care, and know well their laws and constitution, and what their circumstances require. Likewise, they have a great knowledge of the people of neighboring nations, states, or provinces, with whom they have occasion to be concerned in the management of public affairs committed to them. These things all contribute to render those who are in authority fit to be denominated "strong rods."

Second, when they have not only great understanding, but largeness of heart, and a greatness and nobleness of disposition, this is another qualification that belongs to the character of a "strong rod."

Those that are by Divine Providence set in a place of public authority and rule, are called "gods, and sons of the Most High," Psa. 82:6. And therefore it is peculiarly unbecoming them to be of a mean spirit, a disposition that will admit of their doing those things that are sordid and vile; as when they are persons of a narrow, private spirit, that may be found in little tricks and intrigues to promote their private interest. Such will shamefully defile their hands to gain a few pounds, are not ashamed to grind the faces of the poor, and screw their neighbors; and will take advantage of their authority or commission to line their pockets with what is fraudulently taken or withheld from others. When a man in authority is of such a mean spirit, it weakens his authority, and makes him justly contemptible in the eyes of men, and is utterly inconsistent with his being a strong rod.

But on the contrary, it greatly establishes his authority, and causes others to stand in awe of him, when they see him to be a man of greatness of mind, one that abhors those things that are mean and sordid, and not capable of a compliance with them: one that is of a public spirit, and not of a private narrow disposition; a man of honor, and not of mean artifice and clandestine management, for filthy lucre; one that

abhors trifling and impertinence, or to waste away his time, that should be spent in the service of God, his king, and his country, in vain amusements and diversions, and in the pursuit of the gratifications of sensual appetites. God charges the rulers in Israel, that pretended to be their great and mighty men, with being mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink. There does not seem to be any reference to their being men of strong heads, and able to bear a great deal of strong drink, as some have supposed. There is a severe sarcasm in the words; for the prophet is speaking of the great men, princes, and judges in Israel (as appears by the verse next following), which should be mighty men, strong rods, men of eminent qualifications, excelling in nobleness of spirit, of glorious strength and fortitude of mind. But instead of that, they were mighty or eminent for nothing but gluttony and drunkenness.

Third, when those that are in authority are endowed with much of a spirit of government, this is another thing that entitles them to the denomination of "strong rods." They not only are men of great understanding and wisdom in affairs that appertain to government, but have also a peculiar talent at using their knowledge, and exerting themselves in this great and important business, according to their great understanding in it. They are men of eminent fortitude, are not afraid of the faces of men, and are not afraid to do the part that properly belongs to them as rulers, though they meet with great opposition, and the spirits of men are greatly irritated by it. They have a spirit of resolution and activity, so as to keep the wheels of government in proper motion, and to cause judgment and justice to run down as a mighty stream. They have not only a great knowledge of government, and the things that belong to it in theory, but it is, as it were, natural to them to apply the various powers and faculties with which God has endowed them, and the knowledge they have obtained by study and observation, to that business, so as to perform it most advantageously and effectually.

Fourth, stability and firmness of integrity, fidelity, and piety, in the exercise of authority, is another thing that greatly contributes to, and is very essential in, the character of a "strong rod."

He is not only a man of strong reason and great discerning to know what is just, but is a man of strict integrity and righteousness, firm and immovable in the execution of justice and judgment. He is not only a man of great ability to bear down vice and immorality, but has a disposition agreeable to such ability. He is one that has a strong aversion to wickedness, and is disposed to use the power God has put into his hands to suppress it. He is one that not only opposes vice by his authority, but by his example. He is one of inflexible fidelity, who will be faithful to God whose minister he is, to his people for good, and who is immovable in his regard to his supreme authority, his commands and his glory; and will be faithful to his king and country. He will not be induced by the many temptations that attend the business of men in public authority, basely to betray his trust; will not consent to do what he thinks not to be for the public good, for his own gain or advancement, or any private interest. He is well principled, and firm in acting agreeably to his principles, and will not be prevailed with to do otherwise through fear of favor, to follow a multitude, or to maintain his interest in any on whom he depends for the honor or profit of his place, whether it be prince or people; and is also one of that strength of mind, whereby he rules his own spirit. These things very eminently contribute to a ruler's title to the denomination of a "strong rod."

Fifth, and lastly, it also contributes to that strength of a man in authority by which he may be denominated a "strong rod," when he is in such circumstances as give him advantage for the exercise of his strength for the public good; as his being a person of honorable descent, of a distinguished education, a man of estate, one advanced in years, one that has long been in authority, so that it is become as it were natural for the people to pay him deference, to reverence him, to be influenced and governed by him, and to submit to his authority. And add to this, his being extensively known, and much honored and regarded

abroad; his being one of a good presence, majesty of countenance, decency of behavior, becoming one of authority; of forcible speech, etc. These things add to his strength, and increase his ability and advantage to serve his generation in the place of a ruler, and therefore serve to render him one that is the more fitly and eminently called a "strong rod." -- I now proceed,

II. To show that when such strong rods are broken and withered by death, it is an awful judgment of God on the people who are deprived of them, and worthy of great lamentation. -- And that on two accounts.

First, by reason of the many positive benefits and blessings to a people that such rulers are the instrument of.

Almost all the prosperity of a public society and civil community does, under God, depend on their rulers. They are like the main springs or wheels in a machine, that keep every part in its due motion, and are in the body politic, as the vitals in the body natural, and as the pillars and foundation in a building. Civil rules are called "the foundations of the earth." Psa. 82, and 11:3.

The prosperity of a people depends more on their rulers than is commonly imagined. As they have the public society under the care and power, so they have advantage to promote the public interest every way. And if they are such rulers as have been described, they are some of the greatest blessings to the public. Their influence has a tendency to promote wealth, and cause temporal possessions and blessings to abound; and to promote virtue amongst them, and so to unite them one to another in peace and mutual benevolence, and make them happy in society, each one the instrument of his neighbors' quietness, comfort, and prosperity; and by these means to advance their reputation and honor in the world; and which is much more, to promote their spiritual and eternal happiness. Therefore, the wise man says, Ecc. 10:17, "Blessed art thou, O land, when they king is the son of nobles."

We have a remarkable instance and evidence of the happy and great influence of such a strong rod as had been described, to promote the universal prosperity of a people, in the history of the reign of Solomon, though many of the people were uneasy under his government, and thought him too rigorous in his administrations, see 1 Kin. 12:4. "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon." 1 Kin. 4:25. "And he made silver to be among them as stones for abundance." Chap. 10:27. "And Judah and Israel were many, eating and drinking and making merry." 1 Kin. 4:20. The queen of Sheba admired, and was greatly affected with, the happiness of the people, under the government of such a strong rod. 1 Kin. 10:8, 9, "Happy are the men (says she), happy are these thy servants which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom. Blessed be the Lord thy God which delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel forever, therefore made he thee king, to do judgment and justice."

The flourishing state of the kingdom of Judah, while they had strong rods for the scepters of them that bare rule, is taken notice of in our context; "her stature was exalted among the thick branches, and she appeared in her height with the multitude of her branches."

Such rulers are eminently the ministers of God to his people for good. They are great gifts of the Most High to a people, blessed tokens of his favor, and vehicles of his goodness to them; and therein are images of his own Son, the grand medium of all God's goodness to fallen mankind. Therefore, all of them are called, sons of the Most High. All civil rulers, if they are as they ought to be, such strong rods as have been described, will be like the Son of the Most High, vehicles of good to mankind, and like him, will be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds, as the tender grass springing

out of the earth, by clear shining after rain. And therefore, when a people are bereaved of them, they sustain an unspeakable loss, and are the subjects of a judgment of God that is greatly to be lamented.

Second, on account of the great calamities such rulers are a defense from. Innumerable are the grievous and fatal calamities which public societies are exposed to in this evil world, from which they can have no defense without order and authority. If a people are without government, they are like a city broken down and without walls, encompassed on every side by enemies, and become unavoidably subject to all manner of confusion and misery.

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