

GOD AND INNOCENT SUFFERING

By Michael Stanley

To love another, is like giving birth to a child, to open oneself willingly to the joy and suffering the other may bring. That is the Divine Love that is the Almighty Creator God.

God and Innocent Suffering

For as far back as we can see one question above all others has disturbed the sincere religious believer. "Why does God permit so many innocent people to suffer?" I do not claim to be able to prove any 'pat' answer to this serious question, but I intend to show why it is that so many Christians, whether they are Christians who suffer greatly or not in any way, can live with them, but even have their lives enriched by coming to understand the Divine purpose behind it all.

I invite you to follow me on a mental journey which will require a little effort and a little openness perhaps, to break with certain naturally ingrained habits and lines of thought, conscious or unconscious; but if you can make this journey you should find that your mind is deepened and your spiritual life enriched.

The Basic Problem

Religion, especially the Christian religion, implies in its teachings, three things about God.

God exists

God is good

God is all powerful

These beliefs are intuitively accepted as true by many, and because they provide a necessary basis for an awareness of meaning and purpose in life and a sense of inner security. Without these beliefs it is impossible to account for the marvel of our creation, unless one is blinded by the essentially irrational and unsound arguments of the case for evolution guided by chance.

But immediately a problem arises from our experience. We look around us in life and we see a lot of ugly distortion of that which should be perfect, and that which is perfect in other areas; and we see so much disruption and evil; and above all, we see so much suffering by undoubtedly innocent people who have done nothing to merit the suffering that they face. And it is this problem that at times can cause so many who would like to believe in the above three statements, to have a nagging doubt.

"Couldn't God do something to change things a bit and make this world a bit easier, or make it seem a bit more just and fair than it usually does?"

Categories of Suffering

First, let us differentiate between two very different categories of suffering. The first main category is what we call 'merited suffering'. People, including ourselves, perform evil, selfish, hurtful actions at times and often when this occurs punishment follows. The parent punishes his child, society punishes the wrongdoer. The man who is constantly intending evil against his neighbour is not happy, he is disturbed, he is restless, he is discontented, he is jealous. He suffers because of his evil state of mind.

We are often careless; we trip over things that we shouldn't and fall flat on our face; so we suffer because we weren't alert enough, because we weren't watching, we weren't thinking what we were doing.

These are cases of 'merited suffering', and they should raise no problem for us.

But there is often 'Unmerited Suffering'? Some may be due to an evil person or persons who are in an evil state. One person gets angry and strikes another. We see this with our own children when they get into a fight. An evil state and anger bursts forth in hurtful action, and one person is an innocent sufferer, not the cause of the upset.

Secondly, some is due to interaction with the environment. Accidents occur to people. They may lose limbs or life through no fault of their own. It is simply an accident of nature. We all recall many flood disasters throughout the world, people losing their life through no fault of their own.

Thirdly, some is due to congenital causes. For example, some children are born deformed or deficient in some way, hampered from the start of life, way behind their fellows in the ability to run or jump, to write or reason, and so on, all due to some defect in the genes.

Fourthly, some is due to physiological causes. Here we can include protracted illness and extreme pain due to internal malfunctioning.

Fifthly, some is due to psychological causes. Mental handicap, mental disturbance and mental suffering, again well known to all of us in one form or other.

Finally, under the heading of emotional causes, there is the loss of a loved one, perhaps the loss of a child, a whole family or half a family in a road accident, and so on.

Well we've got plenty to make us feel a sense of injustice in a list like that!

Can God be good? Can He be all powerful at the same time if He permits so many things like that? And there is no doubt about it, there is an awful lot of it; we can't shovel this innocent suffering into a small area and say, "well it's only a little bit of life"; if we do that what we are doing really is saying, "Well perhaps God is nearly all powerful, but there is a little bit that is outside His control and He has to let some of His people suffer terribly because He has not got 100% control.

No, the truth of the matter is that innocent suffering is widespread.

Three Hypothetical Worlds

1. Where Evil Cannot Harm

Now suppose God did not make the world as He has done. Let us suppose He had made it a different way. Let us in fact, imagine that you are the Creator, able to create a whole world of people yourself and able to make it in any way you like. You have absolute power and freedom to create a whole world of people to whatever plan you choose.

You might start off by saying, "Well, I think I ought to create a world in which anyone who does any evil can't possibly cause any pain or suffering to anybody else by it. So however evil someone is, it won't harm anyone".

Let us then try to think for a moment about living in such a world in which evil desires and actions can't do any harm to anybody else.

Firstly, how might you, as God of this world, bring this about? You might do it in the following way. For example, you could arrange that if someone wants to strike somebody else, his arm is restrained as he tries to hit, hurt or kill another person. You, as God, intervene from within and restrain his actions.

Now put yourself in the position of that man, who at the time, perhaps feels quite justified in striking out against another. He would be, as it were, in a physical straightjacket. It would be just as if he was locked up in a prison and couldn't do the things he wanted to do. It would be a prison in which you as God would be putting internal chains on other people. Conceivably that kind of situation could have been brought about by God, but He has chosen not to put that kind of physical restraint on His human creation.

Many of us have children of our own. If we had the power, I wonder what degree of restraint we would put upon what our children do. Clearly if we are wise, we do put some restraints as for instance, when we try to prevent them running onto the road and being run over by a car. But if we had the power, I wonder whether we would want to lock all our children up in a kind of prison such that whatever they try to do, either naughty, or hurtful, they were stopped physically. So the actual Creator is of such a nature that He cannot bring Himself to do that; and that tells us something important about God.

Well, let's say that as God, instead of restraining a man's actions, you cause a mental block to occur whenever evil thoughts arise in his mind. But again you've got another kind of prison. Now it's a mental

prison. As the man's feelings of jealousy build up against someone and he feels the desire to go out and take it out on the other, he finds his mind blocked, his mind goes blank. Somebody is interfering and taking away his freedom to think and to desire, enclosing him in a mental prison. Clearly the real God is not doing that either.

You might try a third way of preventing evil going forth to cause pain and suffering. You might do it by preventing evil altogether in the first place.

As God of your little world you might say "Well, all the people I make are never going to be evil because I am going to make them so that they are incapable of being evil. They are not going to be able to think selfishly just of themselves; they will only be able to think of other people and to love one another, always doing kind helpful deeds".

What sort of people would they be and how would they stand in relation to you as their God? They would be your puppets. They would not really have a life of their own. You would be pumping into them the thoughts and desires that you say they must have. It wouldn't be a truly human world at all. It would be a 'puppet' world. Clearly the actual God has not made a puppet world. He has not made us so that we must be angels of light always doing His will because there is nothing else we could possibly think of, because we have no power or ability to choose anything else, but only to do everything that He wants us to do.

Again, thinking of our own children, if we had the power, I wonder how many of us would want to cause our children to be like that, so that they necessarily had to be good through no choice of their own? Would we feel that they really loved us? If a person must do the right thing and must behave in a nice way, love as we understand it, wouldn't exist, only the appearance of love.

God has certainly refused to construct a world of that nature.

2. Where the Environment Cannot Hurt

Suppose you decide as God in your little world to make the environment such that it can't cause your people any pain or suffering. If someone falls over it won't hurt him. If he bangs or crashes his head into the wall or walks accidentally into a fire it won't hurt or burn him in any way. What sort of world would that be?

The first thing that springs to my mind is that if I lived in such a world, I would probably lumber and bungle my way along knowing that it doesn't matter how I go, I won't get hurt. I would become lazy. I would become slothful. I wouldn't need to think much. I would not be alert to anything because there would be nothing to be alert to. Whatever I did, it wouldn't matter. Everything would be alright. My mind would begin to go to sleep. There would be nothing to challenge me, nothing to draw me on, nothing to help other people learn to be careful of, nothing to help them overcome and nothing to teach them, no wounds to heal when they are in trouble and so on. It would be a dreamlike world. It would be a world that at times we might feel we would like to live in. But what sort of people would we be if we lived in that sort of world, and what kind of a God would make such a world in which we live in a kind of dreaming innocence, in a state in which we are, as it were, protected by cotton wool, like a new born baby? We do protect a helpless baby from all the knocks in life, giving it all the food, affection, warmth and protection it needs. But should people remain forever as 'babes in arms'? Neither is God of such a nature as to want to live with eternally undeveloped babes and infants.

So these first two 'worlds', because they are only hypothetical, tell us important things about God. Just as the true artist can only impress his nature and his values on his creation, so God's nature and His values are impressed on His world so that we can see something of God in the way He has made this real world we live in.

What are some of those values that emerge from our first two imaginary worlds?

Firstly, we realise that God is concerned to give His people inner freedom. He wants them to be free. Why? So that they can give Him love freely in return, because God is a Being who longs to be loved by His children, not through any force or compulsion, but because they so choose, even though they could choose differently.

Laws of God's Providence

In one of his most helpful books, *Divine Providence*, Swedenborg lists several spiritual laws of life that follow from the very nature of God. These are laws that Swedenborg saw so clearly in operation in his lengthy and direct experiences of the eternal spiritual world and in his meditation on the Word of God. The first of these laws is this:

"Man is given by God to perceive and to feel life to be in himself"

In other words, although man's life depends moment by moment on God giving him life, God has made it so that we feel as though we are separate. Why? So that we can love Him freely in return.

A second law that should be seen along with this first one is this.

"Man is enabled by God to act from freedom and according to reason".

In other words man is given the chance if he wishes to distort the life that God gives him and to do things that are hurtful and evil. If God took that way there could be no free love in return for Him. God must permit something of evil to be a possibility, otherwise freely returned love is not a possibility and could never exist.

Again think of the bringing up of children. If children have no chance, no opportunity to do anything naughty or wrong, how can they 'choose' to love their parents in return? Freedom is an essential quality of love.

And the third law is this:

"Man is to be led and taught in freedom".

If God creates man and leaves him free to live a life that he chooses, how is man going to be led into a loving, unselfish life? Only of course if God has some way of teaching and inspiring man that does not force him to respond.

And so God has chosen the way of 'hidden revelation'. God reveals Himself to man in hidden ways. That is to say, a part of us can see God 'speaking' to us, through Nature, through creation, through sacred scriptures, through other people. Another part of us can say, 'how can I believe in a God I can't see?' God is partly revealed and partly hidden because He chooses to leave us that freedom to choose whether we will respond to Him and follow His guidance without being forced in any way.

From our second hypothetical world, an environment unable to cause pain or suffering, we realise that God has certain values which are higher than the natural ones of money, comfort and well being, values such as, the need for challenge in life, the need for alertness and sensitivity to what is going on around us, the need for courage in dangerous circumstances. Here we are opening up a whole new range of values that inspire and guide a higher, deeper part of our nature.

The soldier in battle, fighting a true war of defence has known this; he has known that courage is greater than the desire to seek safety. And so we learn that God is of such a nature that He values these things more than the natural desire for ease or for pleasure.

3. Where Suffering Can Never be Excessive

But could you not create a world, such that although there is pain and suffering caused by evil people and by the environment, nevertheless, it is never allowed to become excessive, so that there are no prolonged illnesses, or natural disasters, sweeping to death or making homeless thousands of people? Surely you as God could limit what suffering you allow to happen more than actually does, and so reduce the innocent suffering that there is around us.

Relativity of Suffering

We must realise first that suffering is something which is relative. That is to say, suppose God did reduce the worst kind of pain and suffering. Suppose He hadn't allowed Hitler, for example, to get away with the atrocities He did. Suppose He didn't allow natural disasters to take place and so on. Suppose He made it

such that nobody ever felt pain beyond a certain threshold which is less than what it is now. Well, if we lived in that sort of world, we wouldn't realise that we were in any better or easier sort of world. We would still feel just as troubled by the pain or the suffering that is left.

There is a good illustration of this given in an important book by Victor Frankl. Frankl spent three years in Auschwitz, one of the worst German Nazi Concentration Camps. He is talking about suffering and I quote:

'I would like to draw an analogy. A man's suffering is similar to the behaviour of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the size of human suffering is absolutely relative.'

Man's Search for Meaning, Victor E Frankl, Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd

And that is written by a man who was taken through extreme forms of torture and physical degradation.

Secondly it is very important to realise that the degree of suffering that we experience is dependent upon the sum of two things. It is not simply dependent upon the degree of pain that comes to us from our external circumstances, whether it be physical pain, mental pain or spiritual pain. The degree of suffering we experience can be expressed by the following equations:

Degree of suffering = degree of pain + our attitude

Now our attitude is something which comes from the spirit within us and through our own freedom of choice, as to how we choose to respond to our circumstances.

Reading a book like Frankl's written from this concentration camp experiences, makes us realise so clearly that it is *pain + attitude* that counts. There are those who are subjected to more pain than others. But their sense of suffering may be far less than many undergoing far less pain, depending on their attitude to life and their condition.

There are yogis in the East who can train themselves not to feel pain by overcoming it with mental will and practice. With will power it is possible to reduce the effect, even to shut it out for periods.

Now in a world in which God prevented virtually all suffering, it might make belief in God easier for us, but at what cost? We would have little or no cause to think very deeply at all. Our belief would have come too easily to us, all the problems easily solved. "Right", we would think, "now we can get on living a nice, ordinary, decent, good life". And we would cease to think about the source of our life and its real purpose. There would be nothing to jog us, to stop us in our tracks; we would just sail on regardless. Our deepest and most spiritually human levels of life would remain dormant and permanently anaesthetised. We would remain forever unrealised, unfulfilled and incomplete, failing to be aware of and develop the most vital part of the spirit God has given us. We would remain a shadow, an immature and unfinished work of creation.

The Suffering of Auschwitz

Let Frankl take us for a moment into his concentration camp, to that terrible pit of human degradation and pain. It is worth a fairly lengthy quote.

"The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome and irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedom, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to

rob you of your very self, your inner freedom: which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstances renouncing freedom and dignity to become moulded into the form of the typical inmate.

An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realise values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfilment in experiencing beauty art, or nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behaviour: namely, in man's attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then they must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death life cannot be complete.

Once the meaning of suffering had been revealed to us, we refused to minimize or alleviate the camp's tortures by ignoring them or harbouring false illusions and entertaining artificial optimism. Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs. We had realized its hidden opportunities for achievement.

Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings reaches into the lowest depths and becomes apparent even on the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp."

I've quoted at some length from Frankl, because it is the direct experience of someone who has suffered greatly, something which I cannot claim to have done.

Like all of us here, I know suffering in life and sometimes that suffering is, like gas, always filling the chamber of my mind. And yet, we know that there are people who are enduring very much more pain than we are.

We know suffering to our own degree of experience and we can often let it envelop our whole life, like Frankl's 'gas'. But with our suffering, we should not be asking how much we have to endure, but what our attitude to it is. What can we learn from it? How can we grow through it, not 'how much am I having to suffer compared to others?'

The Use of 'Innocent Suffering'

In considering the use of suffering, we should first distinguish between two different cases. (a) the person who does not himself suffer but who comes into close contact with someone else who is in great suffering, and (b) the sufferer themselves and what suffering can do for them.

Let us take the first case. You have probably known friends or relatives who have suffered a great deal and are perhaps close to one or two of them. Think of the effect that that has had on you. Has it not struck a deep chord? Usually, without realising it, we are a bit hard and shallow in life, but when we come up against the suffering of someone whom we feel is completely innocent, it moves something deep inside us; it stops us; it makes us feel differently; it may cause us to reflect on what we're doing and why we're here.

You see it has or should have a deep effect; it can cause the opening up of a deeper level of life. It may only be a beginning. Maybe if we move away and don't come across this situation for quite a while we may forget it; but nevertheless the experience will lie there like a little seed, deep within us, ready to be reawakened when something of the depth of life and human relationships, strikes us again. This may be the only way in which God can stir certain hard and stony hearts in this life, to bring about the beginnings of that process often called rebirth, or the awakening to the real meaning and purpose of life and love.

"O.K, fine", we might say. That's fine for the hard hearted whose hearts may begin to melt and realise there is more to life than getting things for yourself. But what about your second case, the innocent sufferer? Is it fair that he should be allowed to suffer in order that someone else may be saved and brought to life"?

Let us suppose someone who suffered greatly dies and enters the eternal spiritual world and is enabled to realise that through his suffering, two or three people, close in his life, were aroused to respond to the nature of God's love and to the fact that a loving, caring life is the kind of life that we have been ideally made for. If they grasped that, that in itself should be sufficient to cause them to say, "Thank you God for using me to bring awareness of the real meaning and goal of life to someone else".

Of course in their freedom they might react differently. They might curse God or fate, for having 'caused' them to suffer innocently. But then we are back in the situation where an evil and a selfish heart brings 'punishment' upon itself, in feeling cursed, which is a form of merited suffering.

But the most telling point is surely this, that there are those who through suffering, sometimes of a prolonged nature, have found themselves passing through a doorway to the depths or heights of life.

It certainly happened in the striking case of Victor Frankl, who as a result, became a very wonderful and skilled therapist, helping many people find the meaning of their life. It was his experience of the concentration camp that led him to such a deep awareness of meaning and depth to human life and to his ability to help others live more fulfilled, mature lives.

Certainly he will never curse God for having allowed Hitler to do what he did; nor did he lose his faith in God's existence and goodness.

It requires thinking about. It requires, as I said in the beginning, allowing ourselves to think along rather different channels to those we are accustomed to. It may well require us to rethink some of our values. What is really the greatest value in life? What is most truly human? What is humanity at its most mature and best? What is it to be fulfilled?

We all know it is good to help one another to make life a little easier for each other: that can be a good thing, but is it so important that we should forget or sweep out of the way deeper experiences that involve courage, sensitivity and self sacrifice for instance?

Is there not something far higher and greater than the enjoyment of a comfortable, easy existence where everything goes well, the sun always shines and the spirit of man dozes and slumbers on?

According to those spiritually deep scriptures we call the Bible, we have been made in the image and likeness of God. Something in His nature is to be found in each of us, though like a deeply buried pearl, waiting to be found, developed and exercised, so that we might experience our deepest fulfilment.

Jesus Christ

We should not leave this subject without focusing on the unique person of Jesus Christ, who should be seen in two ways.

First, He is the prime example of an innocent sufferer. He was called by John the Baptist, 'The Lamb of God'. He fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah where it was said he would be 'like a lamb led to the slaughter'. In the Old Testament, lambs are innocent and lambs are slain.

Jesus Christ was a person who did not avoid suffering! Nor did He seek it out. He did not feel proud because of what He was suffering, or what He was made to suffer. He didn't avoid it because He knew that it lay along the path which was His destiny, the path along which He had to go to achieve the ultimate purpose of His existence. "The Son of Man must suffer many things" Luke 9:22. And so when the time came, Jesus allowed Himself to be led 'like a lamb to the slaughter'.

That is one way we look at Jesus, as an innocent man; but from His own testimony there is a second way He asks us to regard Him, as the window which opens directly onto God Himself. Once a disciple, Philip, asked Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father". And Jesus "Have I been so long with you and yet you don't know me Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father". John 14:9

In other words, for a close disciple to behold Jesus truly, is to see the very nature of God Himself embodied in the humanity and flesh of Jesus.

Therefore, even when we 'look at' Jesus hanging upon the cross, we should realise that we are looking symbolically at an aspect of the very nature of God. When we 'look at' Jesus resurrected from the dead to glory, again we are looking upon an embodiment of the glory of God.

If we can rid ourselves of the idea that Jesus on earth was simply a historical happening, He becomes a wonderful open image of God's own nature.

This is God revealed in Christ. He gives Himself to His creatures. He is always stooping down to them in countless ways to be with them, to give Himself to them and inevitably He suffers at the hands of some of them, just as Jesus was mocked, scourged, laughed at and rejected. So when God tries to reach us, so often we reject Him in the same way; but it doesn't stop God and He goes on reaching down to us until even if we do the very worst to Him He rises victorious and glorious in the end because His love for us is so powerful and unquenchable that eventually it reaches through and touches even the stoniest heart. Jesus Christ is the prime example of the innocent sufferer who is the open window through which we glimpse God Himself.

What is God like? Look at Jesus Christ, and you look into the face of Divine Love itself.

If love is truly love, there is much that can make it grieve or suffer. Every mother, every father knows this from their own children. The more parents love their children, the more deeply felt the suffering their children may well cause them from time to time. But because love is truly love, we can also know its joy. The joy of parenthood, the joy of the teacher, then joy of the nurse and so on. Because love is truly love, we can know fulfilment when we allow that love to give itself to others and it is reciprocated.

Yet suffering, as Jesus showed, is not an end in itself. Suffering is not something to be sought out. It is not a virtue. You are not a better person just because you have suffered more than somebody else.

But suffering is a means and probably the only means to awaken the depths of one's being and begin the transformation of one's life into an image of the Divine.

We would not and should not set out to choose an Auschwitz or a martyr's death. But if some form of suffering, great or not so great, lies on our path through life, we should recognise that through it we are offered an opportunity to transcend our ordinary selves, to experience life on a higher dimension nearer to God's plane of life.

But with no suffering, we shall remain babes and infants needing to live in the only world that we can appreciate, a world of cotton wool, of 'anaesthetic and soft cuddles'.

God has made us capable of learning to become 'grown' men and women. With His depth of response to life coursing through our veins, He is truly alive in us and truly fulfilled in all He does through us. All His creativity, all His loving, all His caring, all His Suffering at our hands, is all part of this one pulsing Divine love. You can't take away one part of it without taking away the whole.

Jesus, the purest living symbol of Divine love, has said, 'These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full'. Joy and suffering are not mutually exclusive, they are both infinitely wrapped up in the Divine life itself.

Victor Frankl went through hell on earth and found buried in that heap of human degradation we call Auschwitz, the pearl of life. He found it there. Could he have found it any other way? That was his path. Ours may be slightly different.

We have the testimony of historically great and historically insignificant men and women before us, people who have known the depths of prolonged suffering and fought through to find eternal life in all its glorious deeper meaning, purpose and joy.

I shall let the poet Edwin Markham, with his artistry and sensitivity, encapsulate the content of this talk in words of beauty and truth,

*Defeat may serve as well as victory
To shake the soul and let the glory out.*

*When the great oak is straining in the wind,
The boughs drink in new beauty, and the trunk
Sends down a deeper root on the windward side.
Only the soul that knows the mighty grief
Can know the mighty rapture.
Sorrows come
To stretch out spaces in the heart for joy.*

Edwin Markham

Appendix

In writing the above, I have been influenced and guided by the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, particularly in his book, the 'Divine Providence'.

In that work Swedenborg has given us an insight into the nature and wisdom of God. This perception was given to him during to unique experience he underwent, of living continuously for 27 years in both the spiritual and natural worlds simultaneously. The ways of God in this world can only be fully appreciated in the light of knowledge of the nature of life after death, in the heavenly and hellish communities of the spiritual world that form the final abode of all men and women. For a detailed knowledge and understanding of the spiritual world, I recommend Swedenborg's most popular work, 'Heaven & Hell'.

Some extracts from 'New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrines' follow.

The numbers refer to paragraphs.

267. Providence is the name for the Lord's governance in the heavens and on earth. Since all the goodness that comes from love and all the truth that leads to faith-the things that are required for our salvation-come from him and none whatever comes from us, we can see that the Lord's divine providence is involved in absolutely everything that contributes to the salvation of the human race. As the Lord teaches in John:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. ([John 14:6](#))

And again,

As a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it abides on the vine, the same goes for you unless you abide in me. Without me you cannot do anything. ([John 15:4, 5](#))

268. The Lord's divine providence is operative in the smallest details of our lives; *there is only one source of life, who is the Lord, and in him we live and move and have our being* [[Acts 17:28](#)].

269. People who think about divine providence in worldly terms come to the conclusion that it applies only on the largest scale, but that the details are left to us. But people who think this way do not know the mysteries of heaven. They draw their conclusions solely on the basis of self-love, love for the world, and the things that give pleasure to these loves. So when they see evil people raised to high rank, making more money than good people, and skillfully and successfully accomplishing evil things, they say in their hearts that none of this would be happening if divine providence were operative in all the details. They fail to take into account, though, that the goal of divine providence does not concern what is momentary and transient, what comes to an end when our lives in this world cease. Rather, its goal concerns what lasts to eternity, what therefore does not have an end. Whatever has no end is real, while what comes to an end is relatively unreal. Consider, if you will, whether a hundred thousand years are anything next to eternity, and you will see that they are not. What then are the few years of our lives in this world?

270. Anyone who weighs the matter properly can know that eminence and wealth in this world are not genuine divine blessings, even though we call them that because we enjoy them so much. They come to an end for us; and they also lead many of us astray and turn us away from heaven. No, the real blessings that

come from the Divine are eternal life and the happiness it brings. This is what the Lord is teaching us in Luke:

Provide yourselves a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys; because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ([Luke 12:33, 34](#))

271. The reason the skills of evil people bring them success is that by the divine design, whatever we do, we do on the basis of our own reasoning and our own free will. If we did not have the freedom to act on the basis of our own reasoning, and if our consequent skills never accomplished anything, we could not even begin being prepared to receive eternal life. Eternal life is instilled in us only when we are in a state of freedom and when our powers of reason are enlightened. This is because no one can be compelled by outside forces to become a good person, since nothing that is done under compulsion is of lasting effect. The goodness under that circumstance would not become ours. What is ours is what we do freely according to our own reasoning, and what we do freely is what we do because we will it and love it; our will or our love is our true self. If we are compelled to do something that we do not want to do, then our mind is constantly turning to what we would rather do instead. Not only that, everyone is drawn to what is forbidden because of the hidden pull of freedom. So we can see that if we were not kept in a state of freedom we could not be provided with any goodness.

272. God's allowing us the freedom to think, intend, and (within the limits of the law) even do what is evil is called "permission."

273. When our skills bring us happiness in this world, it seems as though this were being done by our own prudence; in actuality, however, divine providence is always with us, permitting what is evil but also constantly leading us away from it. As for happiness in heaven, people know and understand that our being led in this direction is not something accomplished by our own prudence; heavenly happiness comes from the Lord and is brought about by his divine providence preparing us for goodness and constantly guiding us in that direction.

274. We cannot grasp the truth of this from the light of the physical world, because this light does not reveal to us the laws of the divine design.

275. It is important to know that there is divine providence and there is also divine foresight. ¹ Goodness is what the Lord provides, and evil is what the Lord foresees. Both foresight and providence are necessary, because what comes from us is nothing but evil and what comes from the Lord is nothing but good.

THE AUTHOR

Dr. Stanley, formerly a solid state physicist at Columbia University, N.Y., now lectures in Theology, Philosophy and Psychology. He has given specialist lectures on Swedenborg's contribution to science and philosophy at several Australian Universities, and is at present Principal of the New Church College in Radcliffe, Manchester.