

The Difference between what God Wills and what God Permits.

Last week I began my talk by referring to what was obviously once a widely held belief that everything that happens to us, good or bad, is God's will. I referred at the outset, you may remember, to the first episode of the television series, "I Can Jump Puddles" in which, at the time the boy's illness was diagnosed as infantile paralysis, a friend of the family remarked that it was "God's will". It seems barbaric to think of a thing like this as being "God's will". And yet, and I repeat, this was the widely held belief in those times. People were expected to accept the vicissitudes of life as being "God's will"; its ups and downs, its joys and disappointments; the good things that happened and the tragedies.

In fact, it didn't stop there. Not only was an illness, tragedy, death, bankruptcy or whatever, thought to be "God's will" and spoken of in those terms; people also thought, as they had thought for centuries beforehand, that times of sorrow, illness, tragedy and disappointment, were in some way a 'visitation' for some earlier wrong doing. Even today, and as they stare some awesome disappointment in the face, people will be heard to cry, 'What have I done to deserve this?' In the Old Testament the story of Job highlights this belief and acceptance of things. As a reaction to disaster Job could calmly say, "the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

But what was an appropriate concept for people at that time, and at that stage of the development of the human race must, by no means, be taken to be a final, unchallengeable, statement of truth about the matter. They didn't think through such a belief as to what it made of God. We can. And our minds demand a more reasonable, more logical explanation of what is involved. That explanation is, I put it to you, to be found in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. The mysteries about Providence and the puzzles created by life's misfortunes and disappointments are there untangled.

I spoke last week of how it is that God is not the cause of both good and evil. He is a God of love who wills only what is good and happy for us. Necessarily, however, He has endowed us with the freedom to think and will as we choose. And it is, in so many cases, the abuse or misuse of that freedom which is the cause of tragedy and misfortune, even of many illnesses. A driver, for example, may lose his temper in a

traffic hold up and decide to drive around it, perhaps crossing double yellow lines to do so, and an accident results. God didn't cause the accident. It was caused because a driver allowed his sense of frustration, or desire to be on time for an appointment or his sheer foolhardiness, to override his caution and patience. He was free to make a decision, and he made a bad one. We are always making similar bad decisions; to brave the cold without a coat on; to take risks with our health which we shouldn't do; to be stupid and reckless when we should be careful; to get our own way and be selfish, even though that causes a great deal of unhappiness to others. But let's not blame the consequences of such decisions on God.

He is not the cause of what results from our foolish decisions. The thing is, though, that despite the foolishness of so many of our decisions our freedom to make them is vital. As I said, we wouldn't be human without it. And it holds the key to our eternal well-being and happiness because it is vital that we should, of ourselves, and in freedom, respond to God's purposes for us. He will not force our response any more than we would force a child's response to ourselves. It must be, as it were, spontaneous and free.

Swedenborg wrote of it, that, "It is a law of the Divine Providence that people should act from freedom according to reason." ('Divine Providence' 16). And God will not interfere with that freedom or take it away even though a person may be contemplating a course of action which will result in suffering and unhappiness. At the same time, and it is important to note this, it is not a matter of God doing nothing in the face of someone's decision to be reckless and uncaring or to commit some evil. To the contrary. He is very much on hand appealing to the conscience of the person concerned, or to their fear of possible consequences, to get them to abandon what they have in mind to do. And if He isn't successful to that extent at least His efforts might well result in the person doing something milder and less damaging than they originally intended. We have already seen how it is that God is not the cause of evil. He does not will tragedy, sickness or misfortune, of any kind. But when He can't prevent it happening without destroying a person's freedom (or free-will) which He will not do, He permits it. There are those things which God wills. There are also those things which He permits. And there is a world of difference between the two things. I realise though that it is very easy to misunderstand this idea of permission, so I would like you to listen very carefully to these words from Swedenborg's book, "The Divine Providence". They deserve really careful attention.

"It is said that God permits a thing (to happen), which does not mean that He wills it: but that He cannot avert it, (or prevent it), on account of the end, which is salvation." [Divine Providence 234](#).

Because there is something more precious at stake, and more important even than the damage and suffering a person may cause committing evil, the Lord permits it. But He permits reluctantly, sadly, and with anguish in His heart. He permits it as one who has tried in every way possible to prevent it. In case there is confusion about what is meant when it is said the Lord permits, listen to this:

"Although it is said of God that He permits, still it is not according to the idea which people have of permission, namely, that He concurs by permitting, for people (tend to think) that he who permits, also wills what he permits." [Arcana Caelestia 2768](#).

There are times, to be sure, when the price in terms of misery and suffering, seems too much to pay. Must God always permit evil and wrong-doing? It's fine, you might say, to speak of the great importance of our freedom to think and choose as we please. But couldn't there be exceptions? We can think of countless wicked things which have been done down through the ages and we ask would it have mattered for the Lord to make exceptions?

Hard as it is to accept sometimes, His way is the best way. The alternative is for Him to take over people's lives; to take away the sense we all have of being our own person; to turn us into obedient robots. And that's worse. If we think about it carefully and calmly we realise that we wouldn't want that as an alternative.

Even so, and though the Lord has to allow evil to take place and succeed, He makes sure that it serves a purpose somewhere. Even in situations of permission, He makes sure that it serves a purpose somewhere. We are sorry, and He is sorry, infinitely more so, when war, for example, breaks out. But nothing so dramatically confronts us with the evils of the love of power, the love of dominion, the love of possessions than war does, in all its horribleness and brutality. And the Lord uses the experience of war with us for that purpose. We would never accept that evil could have such a hold over us or drive us to such extremes. Now we can't deny it. We have to acknowledge the force and terrible nature of the evils that are sometimes awakened within us. And hopefully we can be led to repent of them.

Here is something of what Swedenborg wrote about this:

"Without permissions man cannot be led from evil by the Lord, and consequently cannot be reformed and saved. For unless evils were allowed to break out, man would not see them and therefore would not acknowledge them, and thus could not be induced to resist them." [Divine Providence 251](#).

Whether it is evil on the scale of war, or localised, as in the case of temper, the Lord hasn't wanted it to happen. He has allowed it because He has had to. But in allowing it He uses that experience with us to some good purposes. He gets us to recognise and acknowledge what we otherwise wouldn't recognise and acknowledge that we have it in us to do and think such things, and so He can lead us forward to repentance and reformation.

If we are to have some understanding of the way in which the Lord governs human affairs it is vital that we come to terms with this concept of permission. I am aware of the fact that I can't cover every angle involved, or every question which may occur to you in connection with it.

You will have noticed that it was referred to as a "law" of the Divine Providence that people should act from freedom according to reason. There are other such laws of the Divine Providence which I will be looking at in my talk next week.

[Transcript of The Swedenborg Programme – Number 6.](#)

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>