

WHY DOES GOD LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

The Word gives numerous accounts of innocent people who fall prey to the evils of others. Joseph is a good man who is first sold into slavery and then falsely accused of a crime and imprisoned. Years later he tells his brothers that he knows that their intentions were evil, but that God meant their actions for good. This story conveys the Lord's constant eternal leading. He does not *will* evil events, but He does *permits* them. His purpose is to enable people to see evil, recognize it and flee from it. If the Lord prevented evil from happening, He would take away human freedom to recognize it and so to freely choose the goodness of heaven.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

If the universe is so lovingly governed by God, why do disasters, wars, poverty, hatred and other terrible things exist? Could God prevent them? Why does He allow them?

Joseph

The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph, a much loved son. Jealous of their father's special attentions to him, his brothers find him alone, strip him of his clothing and throw him into a pit. Their father Jacob, tricked into believing his son has died, mourns for him. Sold as a slave in Egypt, Joseph builds a new life. But he is falsely accused of immorality by his master's wife and sent to prison.

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison (Genesis 39:21-22).

Released from prison to explain Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph is put in charge of managing critical food supplies during a famine. He meets his starving brothers while serving as Pharaoh's second in command and eventually reveals his identity. When Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers are afraid because of how they had mistreated him. But Joseph says:

"Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:19-20).

Joseph trusted that the Lord was taking care of him. In looking back, he could see how the Lord had used all of his experiences to bring blessing—not just to himself, but to an entire nation.



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Slaughter of the Innocents

It can be hard to see potential blessings coming from difficult events in the Word. For example, when King Herod heard the news of Jesus' birth he determined to kill Him. Joseph was warned to escape in a dream, and fled to Egypt with Mary and the infant Lord. But the wise men had told Herod where Jesus was to be born, so in terrible anger...

[Herod] sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under (Matthew 2:16).

How can we understand this terrible act? How could the Lord could have let this happen? The Heavenly Doctrines provide a deeper meaning for circumstances like this, telling us that events in the Word picture spiritual occurrences, not just worldly ones. The Heavenly Doctrines also give insight into how and why the Lord leads people and allows bad things to happen, even though a loving God does not *want* them to happen.

Why Does the Lord Allow Evil?

The Lord wants to save every human being. He wants to lift each person from a life of slavery to selfishness, and bring them into heavenly joy. But the Lord wants people to be free to choose good or evil. Choosing good involves seeing selfish behaviors, acknowledging them, and shunning them as sins against the Lord.

Unless evils were allowed to break out, a person would not see them and therefore would not acknowledge them, and thus could not be induced to resist them. Evils cannot be repressed by any act of Providence; for if they were they would remain shut in, and like a disease, such as cancer they would spread and consume everything vital in the person (see *Divine Providence* 251).

If the Lord did not allow evil things to happen, people could not be led away from evil.

Lead Us Not into Temptation

This may make it seem as if the Lord wants us to experience temptations. But the truth is that He does not tempt us. He looks constantly at the good that people can be led into by getting rid of their evil actions and longings—which can only happen through temptation.

For God never takes part in temptations in any other manner. And though He permits, still it is not according to the idea which a human being has of permission, namely, that by permitting He agrees. A person cannot understand it in any other manner than that he who permits also wills. But it is really the evil within a person which causes, and leads into temptation (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2768).

WHY DOES GOD LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN?



Will, Good Pleasure, Leave, and Permission

The Lord views human life from the perspective of eternity.

The Lord foresees and sees all things in both general and particular, and provides and disposes for them (*Arcana Coelestia* 1755).

The Lord really wants good things to happen—He *wills* them. He also allows other things that are not quite as good to happen—He *consents* to them. But although He allows bad things to happen He does not will them. He cannot intervene and stop them without taking away human freedom—so He *permits* them.

All order begins in the Lord, and it is in accordance with that order that He rules over every single thing. But there is much variation to His rule; that is to say, it may be His Will, or His Good Pleasure, or His Consent, or His Permission from which He rules. Things that have their origin in His will or in His good pleasure are products of laws of order which have regard to what is good, as also do many things that exist by His consent, and even some that do so by His permission. But when a person separates himself from good he subjects himself to the laws of order which are those of truth separated from good and which condemn. For all truth condemns a person and casts him down into hell; but out of mercy, the Lord rescues him and raises him up into heaven. From this it is clear that it is a person himself who condemns himself (*Arcana Coelestia* 2447).

So although the Lord does not *will* bad things to happen, He allows them so that people can see evil, reject it, and so freely choose heaven.

OPTIONAL READING

The things which are from the Lord are either nearer to, or more remote from Him; and they are said to be “from His will,” “from good pleasure,” “from leave,” and “from permission.” The things which are from will are most nearly from Him...and those which are from permission are most remotely from Him. These are the degrees of the influx and reception of the Divine. But each degree contains innumerable things which are distinct from those which are in any other degree; and these innumerable things are secrets of heaven, a few only of which fall into the human understanding (*Arcana Coelestia* 9940).



FOCUS POINTS

1. Compare Joseph's treatment by his brothers with how the Lord was preparing Joseph to save many lives during a famine in Egypt.

<i>Joseph's Brothers</i>	<i>The Lord's Preparation</i>

2. Is it possible for people to tell how the Lord is leading them by looking at the things that happen in their lives?
3. Is the Lord loving people by allowing them to experience bad things? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the ways we can reflect on the Lord's leading when bad things are happening, for example during a war?
5. Does knowing that the Lord does not want bad things to happen change how you think about Him?
6. What benefits can the Lord bring from allowing evil to come to light?
7. Why doesn't the Lord simply stop bad things from happening?

Activity 1

WHY DOES A LOVING GOD ALLOW WAR?



It is not from the Divine providence that wars occur, because they involve...enormous evils which are opposed to Christian charity (*Divine Providence* 251).

Wars often precede changes in national boundaries, governments or religious thought. Although it may not be possible to see the Lord's leading hand when wars are happening, by taking an historical perspective we can imagine how different the world might be today if the outcome of a particular war had been different, for example, if a certain country had won rather than lost a war.

The Lord permits the terrible evils of war for the sake of His end in view, which is that human beings may be saved. Higher issues are at stake than the loss of life and the ugly things that good people suffer in war. In other words, higher goods can sometimes be brought out of His *allowing* evil to occur rather than by His *preventing* it.

The outcome of a war between Spain and England would seem to illustrate this idea. The Spanish Armada, a fleet of 132 Spanish warships, sailed against England in 1588. English ships peppered the warships with cannon fire and sent small fire boats into the port. To avoid the attack, the Spaniards hurried into the English Channel, and after losing several sea battles, were forced to set sail towards the North Sea. There, a terrific storm swept the ships north of Scotland and Ireland, and more than half were destroyed. Consequently the Spanish were prevented from invading England or dominating the seas, leaving the English free to explore the Hudson Bay area and establish colonies in North America.

The weather was a leading factor in the success of the English. The unusual wind that blew with such terrible force has been nicknamed the "Protestant Wind." Clearly, it changed the course of world history. One consequence of this destruction was the preservation of the Protestant church in England, and the opportunity for people to have access to the Word in their own language.

The English Renaissance blossomed after this victory, and during that period England had a greater impact on literature than other European countries. The age of exploration followed, and with it the Word was spread around the world. The Renaissance period was a time of study of the wisdom of ancient civilizations, and a time of scientific discovery. These paved the way for the "Last Judgment" of 1757, which took place in the spiritual world, restoring spiritual freedom.

Discussion or Reflection

1. Did Divine providence bring about the unusual winds for the sake of religious liberty?
2. Or did Divine providence foresee that the wind and storms would be there, and insinuate ideas into the Spanish commanders' minds about when and where they should sail?



OF THE LORD'S WILL OR PERMISSION?

The Lord foresees and sees all things and every individual thing...though some things arise from His permission, some from His concession, some from His consent, some from His good pleasure, and some from His will.

(Arcana Coelestia 1755)

Look at the events listed below.

1. Which of these things seem to be of the Lord's will?
2. Which seem more likely to be evils that the Lord *permits* (to protect human freedom) but certainly does not *will* to happen?

Indicate your answer by placing an X on the chart somewhere between the "will" and "permission" sides of the chart, reflecting whether you think the event is of the Lord's will, good pleasure, consent, concession or permission.

Event	Will or Permission
Murderer gets death sentence	
Person stops smoking	
Teenager dies	
Someone helps, to benefit themselves	
Businessman makes lots of money	
Animals are cloned	
New medicine found to cure illness	
Travel in airplanes	
A baby is born with a disability	
Lies are exposed	
War starts	
Natural disaster	
Life support extends a life	
A baby is aborted	
A person commits suicide	
Crops are genetically engineered	

Why might it be easier to guess at which things arise from the Lord's will or from His permission rather than somewhere in the middle of the "spectrum", such as from His concession, His consent, or His good pleasure? Choose one situation to discuss.

Activity 3

BRINGING SOMETHING GOOD OUT OF EVIL



When hard things happen in our lives or in the lives of people we love, we sometimes wonder how a loving God can allow them to happen. It is one thing when a person brings trouble upon himself. We may grieve over what he is going through, but we can understand why it is happening. It can be more challenging when someone suffers because of the weakness or evil intentions of others, for example when there is ethnic strife or when someone is killed by a drunk driver. When tragedies strike, people need care more than explanations about evil. Yet the Lord gives us answers when we are ready for them.

The following readings provide insight into the way the Lord brings something good out of every evil that happens to a person. This good is often not evident from our natural point of view, but the Heavenly Doctrines assure us that nothing is allowed to happen unless something good may come out of it (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6489).

When the Lord is with someone, He leads him and makes provision so that all that happens, whether sad or joyful, may bring him what is good. This is the Divine providence (*Arcana Coelestia* 6303).

In every present moment the Lord foresees evil, and provides good. This He does from the first thread of life even to eternity (*Arcana Coelestia* 9296).

The evil things that are foreseen are constantly being turned towards what is good by means of the Lord's provident arrangement, since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything (*Arcana Coelestia* 6489).

When we say that God permits, we do not mean that He wills, but that for the sake of the goal, which is salvation, He cannot prevent (*Divine Providence* 234).

Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving good from Him. For whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness (*Arcana Coelestia* 8480:1,3).

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. If the Lord can foresee evil things, why doesn't He prevent them?
2. What would happen if the Lord intervened and prevented you from making a really bad choice in your life? How would this affect your chances of going to heaven?
3. Can you think of some examples of times when the Lord brought something good out of evil?

TAKING IT HOME



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

Ideas for Journal Entries

Use one of these journal ideas to help you think about why the Lord allows evil.

- ◆ Clearly seeing an evil helps us to recognize evil for what it is. Write about an evil that you have seen and how seeing this evil helps you to appreciate its opposite.
- ◆ In what ways is evil like quicksand or a quagmire?

For Reflection

- ◆ Think about something terrible that has happened—a natural disaster, major conflict, *etc.* Reflect on how the Lord may see the same event, trying to bring good from it.
- ◆ Reflect on something difficult that has happened in your life. Can you think of one way in which the Lord brought something good from it? This might include people you have met as a result, insights about yourself or others, *etc.* Does knowing that good can come from something bad help you to look for the Lord's leading hand in your life?

Spiritual Task

by the Rev. John Odhner

Think of Eternal Things

The Divine providence of the Lord, in everything that it does, regards what is infinite and the eternal (Divine Providence 46).

Knowing that the Lord looks to eternal things can help us whenever we are having some kind of difficulty. When we think of eternal things, then our thought is aligned with the Lord's providence. For this reason, one of the most powerful defenses against evil is to think about eternal life.

No evils can be removed except by the true use of freedom of choice in spiritual things, and this is done by directing the mind to reflection upon the state of life after death (*True Christian Religion* 498).

Task

Consider that your life in this world is just a blink of an eye compared to eternity. Take a moment each day to think about eternal life. Remember that each moment has a series of consequences extending to eternity, and each moment is a new beginning (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3854:2). Remind yourself that your eternal life has already begun.

Further Reading

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT

by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

The Lord is continually speaking with people (Arcana Coelestia 904).

When you comfort a person in real trouble or distress, you may find yourself saying, “Everything is going to be all right.” Maybe the person you are talking to is badly injured. Maybe the person has suffered a terrible loss. Maybe the present distress is bringing a time of sorrow that will endure for a long while. But still you say, “Everything is going to be all right.”

And you are telling the truth!

Yes, you are telling the truth. It is not because you have some special knowledge and can predict the future. It’s just true. It is true because the Lord has all power and He loves and cares for us. And the Lord speaks to us with a speech that is higher than words. It is truth coming right to us, saying that He loves us, telling us to trust in Him and to do good, telling us that everything will be all right.

Sometimes the Lord’s speech to us seems so far away that hardly any truth gets to us, and we are not touched with comfort or hope. At these times, the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church tell us that it is almost as if He were not speaking to us (see *Arcana Coelestia* 904). But, of course, He is. People can turn away from Him so that they do not hear. When we are thoughtless or cruel, we do not hear. When we are too worried and fearful, we do not hear. In fact, someone could read something to us directly from the Word, and we could be untouched by it, as if we did not really hear.

Think of what the Lord said and says to people in the Word:

I will be with you; I will not fail you, nor forsake you (Joshua 1:5).

Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Let not your heart be troubled...I go to prepare a place for you (John 14:1,2).

Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10).

I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).

I am with you always (Matthew 28:20).

The Lord speaks many comforting words in His Word. Think of Joseph during that unhappy time when he was hated by his brothers and probably feared what they might do to him. Such fears would have been understandable, but even then the Lord was saying that everything would be all right. Joseph had dreams, which in a distant and symbolic way told him that all would be well.

Can you imagine the pain and sorrow David and his men felt in another story when they returned to their homes one day and found nothing but ashes? Their homes were burned, and everything had been taken away including their wives and children. Grown men were sobbing until they were exhausted from crying. David had also lost his family and possessions, but still the grief stricken men talked of stoning him in their despair and frustration.

We read, “And David was greatly distressed: for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters. But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God” (I Samuel 30:6). David did not find strength or hope in himself, but only from the Lord. He did not know what would happen next, but he was willing to listen to the Lord. He asked the priest to get the ephod—the breastplate with precious stones whose sparkles and flashes showed what the Lord was saying.

And what the Lord said was a message of hope and amazing assurance. David was told that *without fail* he would get back *everything* that had been taken (see I Samuel 30:8).

Inspired by hope, not from David, but from the Lord, the men chased after the people who had stolen their families and possessions. And at the end of the story they did indeed recover everything. “And nothing of theirs was lacking, either small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything which they had taken to them. David recovered all” (I Samuel 30:19).

Here we have a story of seeming hopelessness, ending with everything being all right. David *knew* things would be all right, and his knowing this from the Lord made all the difference in what he did.

At times when people feel trust in the Lord, they can just *know* something. They even know that whatever happens to them in time will still lead to happiness. “They know that for those who trust in the Lord all things advance toward a happy state. Whatever happens to them, whether it appears to be prosperous or not prosperous, is still good, because it conduces as a means to their eternal happiness” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8478:3).

It is good that we know important things—that there is a heaven, that there is a Divine providence over all things, that the Lord has all power in heaven and on earth. Sometimes these things do not comfort us, and it is almost as if we did not know them. But they are true, and the Lord is always telling us they are true.

So, when you comfort another person in time of trouble, you may be able to hear the Lord speaking. This means that you are in a trusting state of truth. You find yourself speaking words of hope. And these thoughts of comfort and hope do not come from yourself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 904). And so it is possible for us to truly say to someone else in distress, “Everything is going to be all right.”