

Divine Providence and Tragedy

by the Rev. Lawson M. Smith

“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows”
(Matthew 10:29-31).

We are grateful to the Lord for all the good things that take place in our lives. Religious people often say that what is commonly called “good luck” is really the Lord’s providence. But it’s much harder to see how the Lord is taking care of us when misfortune or tragedy strikes someone we love.

There are natural disasters, such as an earthquake or a volcano. And there are manmade disasters, such as terrorist bombings or concentration camps. People are maimed or killed in car accidents, and struck down by cancer or other terrible diseases. Wicked people get away with murder, and other terrible injustices occur. People are spiteful and hurt each other badly. We cannot help but ask ourselves sometimes, “Why does God let such things happen?”

In ancient times, people often simply believed that God rules all things, and that they could not expect to know why certain things happened. Many believed that all things, good and bad, came from God. In the book of Job, for example, we see Job’s terrible suffering as he lost his loved ones, all his wealth, and finally his health. Job saw these tragedies as Divine judgment for his sins and a test of his faith. His comment was, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

It is so important for us to believe in God, and to believe that He has all power, that the Lord permitted this appearance that tragedy and disaster as well as blessings come from Him. The ancient Israelites needed to believe that Jehovah punished their sins. Otherwise, He would have seemed weak, not God. They would have felt it didn’t matter whether or not they kept His commandments. But then God came into the world in Person. He revealed Himself to us as our Lord, Jesus Christ. He showed us that He is a God of love, our Heavenly Father, who even feeds the ravens and clothes the grass of the field, and forgives our sins.

God does not send punishments or misfortunes into our lives. But if misfortunes are not Divine punishments, how can we understand them?

Evil and suffering have been a stumbling-block to many people’s faith. Some people choose to give up the idea that God has all power, rather than the idea that God is loving. They believe that God cares for us, but does not have complete control of events. Things get out of hand, and tragedies occur. Others feel driven away from a belief in God by bitter experiences. They accept a godless universe that operates by random chance. Still others think that God has all power but does not care or know about individual human lives.

Rather than give up our belief in the Lord, we can try to understand the laws according to which God acts. Now it may seem strange to think of God acting according to laws. Can't He do as He chooses? Who could make laws for Him? But isn't it stranger to think of God acting erratically, doing one thing one day and the opposite another day, merely on whim?

God is the Source of all the wonderful order that we see in the universe. He enables our minds to discover laws of nature, and to work out just laws to govern human society. He is orderliness itself, justice and truth itself, mercy itself. To say that the Lord operates according to laws means that He has a certain purpose or goal in all His actions. Because of His goal, there are certain ways and means which He always follows. Thus there are reasons for what He does which we can understand in some measure, at least in general, if not in particular cases.

The Lord has explained the most basic laws according to which He acts so that we can understand and love Him deeply, and defend ourselves against unbelief in times of grief. One of the books of the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church, *Divine Providence*, includes chapters on five laws of providence, a chapter on the Lord's goal in creation and in His work with us, and a chapter on His permission of evil and hurtful things. If we believe in God, this book can help us to understand Him.

The Lord's goal for us is heaven. Heaven is the state in which we love the Lord above all things and we love our neighbors as ourselves. Love must be given freely. The Lord could force us to obey Him out of fear, or He could have created us as robots. But His goal is that we may love Him freely, and choose and want Him to be close to us. Then He can make us happier and happier forever, because we are willing to receive His blessings.

The first law of the Lord's providence, then, is that human beings must act in freedom, according to what makes sense to them. This implies that people must be allowed not only to love but also to hate and to hurt. If we were not free to choose evil, then neither would we be free to choose good. So the Lord always preserves human freedom, even allowing us to do stupid things, to hurt others and to be hurt—but within certain limits.

One of the limits is that we cannot take away another person's freedom to believe in the Lord and to love Him. One person cannot destroy another's opportunity to go to heaven. The Lord always guards the spiritual freedom of each one of us. We can help other people believe in the Lord, or we can make it harder for them, but ultimately the choice is their own.

So the Lord allows no hardship, evil or misfortune to happen which cannot be turned to good. We know some of the benefits that the Lord brings out of unhappy or tragic situations. We confront the nature of evil, and of humankind apart from the Lord. We realize the need to fight injustice in society. The Lord stirs us to act. We face the need for personal change and repentance. Setbacks, such as in business or in health, slow us down in our onward rush to gain material things and pleasures, and give us a chance to re-think our priorities. We gain direct experience of our dependence on the Lord as we realize that we cannot manage without Him. This, in turn, brings us into a closer relationship with Him than before, allowing us to receive more of His blessings.

The Lord is always thinking of our eternal happiness. While He wants us to be happy all the time, He would never sacrifice our eternal happiness to some short-term pleasure. There are lessons that we cannot learn except through grief because of the selfish and materialistic state of humanity today.

The Lord never causes grief. Hellish spirits are always eager to do that. And sometimes the Lord allows them to cause a limited amount of hurt, because He sees that He will be able to turn it into a long-lasting strength for the good people going through that trial. In fact the Lord is always, always shielding us from harm and filling us with good things. Otherwise life would be nothing but misery from beginning to end.

In times of trouble it seems as though God has forgotten us, or as though He is standing back, waiting to see what we will do. The Heavenly Doctrine says that actually the Lord is never closer to us than when we are in trouble or temptation. It is just that the unhappy state brought on by the hellish spirits around us dims our eyes to the fact that the Lord is carrying us in His arms. He is a very present help in trouble. Through the gift of freedom to choose what we love, and through the ability to think either rationally or irrationally, we can choose to see the depth of the Lord's love for us and His great wisdom in leading us.

The Lord respects our freedom, because He loves us. He respects it so much that He allows us to get into trouble, and then, as far as we are willing, He brings us new strength out of our troubles. He is constantly, though quietly, working with us, encouraging and warning, providing us with circumstances and opportunities to make the spiritual, eternal choices we want to make.

Psalm 37 says, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholds him with His hand" (verses 23-24). May we come to see the truth of this more and more in our lives.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 6:25-34, 10:24-39; *Divine Providence* 70:1-3, 71: heading, 72; *Arcana Coelestia* 6574:2-3