

Free Will And Freedom - Part 2.

My emphasis last week was on the freedom to choose. Every normal person is in free-will. Every normal person enjoys the freedom to choose what their thoughts and attitudes are going to be and what feelings they are going to identify with. Even in prison every possible restriction may be placed on people, yet they still retain their freedom to choose what their reactions to their jailers or captors will be.

Of God's planning and designing we are free agents. We can act or react, accept or reject points of view, expressions of opinion, the teaching of the Scriptures or the implications of the Ten Commandments. It's up to us. We decide. And though by our choices we may bring evil and unhappiness into the world, yet this is the way it had to be and has to be. If God's purposes in creation were to be realised or to have any hope of fulfilment it was necessary that He create not just an army of robots who would dutifully do His bidding, but human beings who, potentially, and of their own free will, could and would love to do His bidding.

You see an analogy of this where children are concerned. There's a world of difference between a situation where a child only out of duty shows some sign of affection as compared to a situation where a child spontaneously and of his or her own free will demonstrates it. And how much more real that affection is when it comes spontaneously and freely than where it is only dutifully given!

In creating the universe God's objective was a race of beings who would of their own free will respond to His purposes for them. Free will gives the hope that that objective will be fulfilled. This is why it is so important. This is why it is so closely guarded and protected by the Lord moment by moment throughout our life in this world. And also this is why the Lord will not arbitrarily withdraw that free will, or cut across it, because by so doing He would withdraw all prospect of that person being led in freedom to salvation.

There must be times when, like myself, you will have wished the Lord could have stepped in and prevented some accident or disorder taking place. We frequently read of the most horrible crimes and wish that the Lord might have intervened; that He could have stopped the person going out who was later attacked; openly warned them; or put some obstacle in the way of the attacker.

In point of fact He is always trying to prevent such things happening, but if preventing them means taking away, or cutting across, someone's freedom, He will not do it. He will not do it because by so doing He straight away damns that person and consigns them to spiritual oblivion. For the sake of protecting free will and, in turn, keeping open the possibility of a person's reformation and regeneration, the Lord on many, many occasions and with great reluctance, has to permit evils and disorders to break out.

I explained in my talk a week ago how it comes about that we enjoy free will. As is the teaching given in Swedenborg's theological works, we live our lives in the world midway, between two opposing impulses or influences reaching us, from heaven on the one hand and from hell on the other. The influence of the one is not permitted to overwhelm the influence of the other. Each reaches us in equal measure, leaving us quite free to choose which of the two we will respond to or give into. Understandable, if we continually accede to the promptings of one or the other over some particular issue then, so far as that thing is concerned, we create, ourselves, something of an imbalance. A person who, for example, and after initial promptings, becomes a habitual liar, creates something of an imbalance which is obviously difficult for him to redress when and if he comes to his senses later on.

So important is freewill, or this freedom we have to make choices between good and evil, between truth and falsity, that when it was in danger of being lost, as happened two thousand years ago, God came on earth as Jesus to prevent that happening. It's an incredible thing, really, that in the years leading up to the coming of the Lord a situation of gross imbalance developed. Had He not come people would no longer have been in a position to make free decisions because the influences reaching them in favour of evil would have been so pressing and so overwhelming. God came on earth as Jesus to restore the basis on which we enjoy freewill.

In view of us being now in the week leading up to Easter you will understand why I pause on this a moment.

Although they are only touched upon in a few places, Jesus' main and most important work on earth centred on his temptation conflicts with the devil, or with the hells. He needed to reduce their power if He was to restore equilibrium.

It does not put things too strongly to say that He was intent on the defeat of the hells.

But they on their part were intent on defeating the Lord and they brought Him, successively, into all sorts of situations where they hoped He might buckle under. The prospect of crucifixion was one of these, as was the sense of rejection and failure with which they taunted Him at the time. But Jesus didn't buckle under. By submitting to the crucifixion without rancour or bitterness, the Lord won a final victory over evil; over the hells. And it is this triumph over evil, and the restoration of free will which went with it, which we celebrate and give thanks for at this time.

The fact that we have free will does not mean that we are free, at least in the true sense of the term and as Jesus spoke about it. And it is this point I particularly wanted to talk about tonight. Having free will is one thing. As we noted at the beginning, every normal person has free will. But this doesn't mean that they are free. Free will is but the starting point of true freedom. If we use our free will as the Lord wishes us to use it; choosing the kind of life and attitudes He urges upon us; we become free. Until then, and for all that we might think otherwise, we are not free... not free at all.

We have probably all made the mistake at one time or another of thinking that freedom is synonymous with the liberty to do just as we please. Probably as teenagers we complained of the rules and restrictions at home and wondered why we couldn't be "free" to come home when we wanted and to go out with whoever we liked. As adults we have chafed against the Lord's teachings and Commandments, wondering and wishing we could be "free" to live and do as we please, to indulge every whim, to gratify every inclination. But what we imagine to be freedom is not, and would not be, freedom at all. To give into our inclinations like I've described and to indulge and gratify them is to become their servant or slave.

That's not freedom! We can be taken in by the deception that it is. But it's not. Jesus very tellingly once said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8;34). There are times when it seems attractive and inviting to treat another person in just the same way he has been treating you; to have the satisfaction of revenge.

'If only I was free to do so', we tell ourselves. That's the deception, because what we think would be freedom would not be freedom at all. We'd be giving in to our baser impulses. And, in the process, they would get a grip on us which we would later find difficult to shake off.

"Every one", Jesus said "who commits sin is the servant of sin". Attractive though it may at times seem to do these things, yet the fact is that to lie, cheat, have revenge, adulterate, bear false witness, or whatever, is to become the prisoner of our lower natures, and the slave of our most disorderly impulses and desires.

If we would be truly free, clearly then we must resist and rise above what is merely self gratifying in our lives. We must shake off the bonds which our unregenerate inclinations would try to place upon us. Freedom, you see, is not something we achieve by weakly giving in to every disorderly suggestion which comes to us or every disorderly inclination which urges itself upon us. To the contrary, it is by holding out against these things; resisting them and overcoming them; that we come to have freedom. It's as Jesus also said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32).

"When man is regenerate," wrote Swedenborg, "he then for the first time comes into a state of freedom; before this he was in a state of slavery." (*Arcana Caelestia* 892). And, in a sense, that says it all. Before regeneration we are largely governed and heavily swayed by evil and self regarding tendencies. We are, as we've seen, not really free at all. We find ourselves being drawn along by our selfishness and our blatant self interest. But by means of regeneration we put these things away from us and for the first time really begin to enjoy freedom.

"To serve the Lord by doing according to His Commandments, and thus by obeying, is not to be a servant but it is to be free; for the true freedom of man consists in being led by the Lord." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8988).

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