

How God Works To Bring Good Out Of Evil 1

A local Hornsby school recently celebrated its centenary and the event was written up in a special feature in the local newspaper. For those who have any special interest in the past its several articles make fascinating reading. One, in particular, caught my attention, and it was the reason why I kept the feature referred to. It describes the bush fire of November 30, 1957 which almost engulfed Hornsby, then a much smaller community than now. As can happen, a change of wind saved the day. But that change of wind came too late to save the school. "In intense heat and gale force winds, fire raced up Old Man valley and within a few hours destroyed all the main buildings of the infants, girls' primary and domestic continuation school, then sited on the western side of the highway." "But", continued the writer of the article, "with hindsight the fire was in fact a huge boost to the quality of secondary education in the Hornsby district." It clearly led to a reappraisal of secondary education needs in the area and "speeded the construction of real high schools".

Back in November, 1957, people standing in the blackened and smoking ruins of a school they took a lot of pride in, could never have anticipated that any good would come of the disaster. They could only have seen the days' events in completely negative terms. And that's not to be wondered at. And yet it opened up the way for new things to happen. Good things eventually resulted, and developments took place, which would never have been the case otherwise. What was at first a disaster, of no mean scale, was turned around so that positive and lasting benefits came of it.

Our subject today is precisely this - how things of benefit can come, or be made to come, out of the most unwanted and unfortunate experiences. How good can come, or be caused to come, out of evil. How much that is positive can be drawn forth from our most difficult, even saddest, moments and experiences. None of us sails through life without coming up against setbacks of one kind or another. It might be a sickness. It might be an accident. It might be something that's happened to us, or something that's happened to someone close to us. It's impossible at the time to see how good can come out of these things, and yet it can. Years later we can often look back and see how our disappointments and most unwanted experiences opened up the way for good and positive things we would not otherwise have come to.

This is not to say that the unwanted experiences of life to which we have been referring are a 'good' thing. In themselves they are not a 'good' thing. A sickness is not a 'good' thing. An accident is not a 'good' thing. A bushfire which ravages and destroys buildings and communities is not a 'good' thing. No one would suggest that war is a 'good' thing. But good can be made to come of these things. And this is the point we wish to highlight and hold on to today.

As well as this, it must not be thought that these accidents, tragedies, sicknesses, or whatever, are willed on us by God. This is simply not so. God is a God of love who wishes only what is good and uplifting and truly pleasant for us. It's as far from God to wish, or to bring, a sickness or accident upon us as heaven is from hell. If a baby is born with a congenital defect we must endeavour to resist the thought that God in some way had something to do with it. That God was, perhaps, punishing the parents, and this kind of thing. God simply doesn't operate in this way. The Divine doesn't do these kinds of things. God is our loving, heavenly Father, who as much as possible tries to protect us from all harm and disorders.

Swedenborg wrote "It is a Divine truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, still less does evil to anyone". (*Arcana Caelestia* 3131³). True, but in times gone past, people thought otherwise. We have only to look at some of the things said in the Old Testament about God punishing and visiting evil upon people. But it was appropriate for God to speak of Himself, or to allow Himself to be spoken of in such terms at those times. This was meaningful to people then. They had only simplistic notions of God and saw Him as being, more or less, a larger edition of themselves, as capable of anger and resentment as they knew themselves to be. Simple people, and these were 'simple' people, who "can only understand the Lord's power and His government if they think of Him as a stern ruler who punishes misdeeds but is terribly forgiving if people are sorry". (Rev. Peter Buss, "Why Did the Lord Let it Happen?", page 8).

The reality however, is otherwise. Nevertheless accidents do happen. There is suffering and disorder. So we are faced with an obvious question. Even if God is not responsible for them, how is it that the Divine stands by and lets such things take place?

If you were asked what is your most important possession, what would you say? As a young man you might say it's your car. Or you might answer that it's something which, though of very little value, means a great deal to you because of who gave it to you and when. But the question goes deeper than such things. Your most important and precious possession is your freedom - that's right, your freedom to think and will and choose. You can choose to think and will things that are good, or you can choose to think and will things which are evil. God made you this way. And He will never take that freedom away from you. To do so would be to turn you into a robot. Your responses would be entirely predictable. And though it would ensure a world without evil, suffering, tragedy, disorder, and all that kind of thing, it would also be a world devoid of human life. The point is that human life makes one with such freedom. Take away that freedom, and you take away what it is that makes us human.

There are no circumstances under which God will cut across our freedom and take it away from us. There are times when we wish the Divine would, or think He should. But to do so would be to put into reverse the whole mechanism of God's dealings with us. When the Divine has to, He lets us think and will evil and if we are determined, to do it. It's not that God wants those things to happen, but He must allow them to happen when we insist. Our freedom would only be a hollow thing, a mockery, otherwise.

All evil and disorder has its starting point in our misuse, or abuse of our God given freedom of choice. However, the teaching given makes it clear that God does not simply stand idly by when we have chosen to think or will or do evil. The appearance might be that the Divine does, but this is far from so.

Bear in mind that the Divine does everything possible to prevent an evil or disorder, and if it takes place it is because God could not prevent it short of taking away someone's freedom. God appeals to a person's conscience, for example, to dissuade them from doing what they have a mind to do and most times, thankfully, succeeds.

Where there is the determination to do evil, and it is done, God is present and is as active as He can be, minimising the harm as much as possible, and looking for every opening to bring good out of the situation somewhere and somehow.

It's very, very hard to see this at the time. You will, perhaps, remember what was said at the beginning of the talk, how people standing amidst the smoking ruins of Hornsby School would have shaken their heads in disbelief if it had been said to them at the time that 'good' will come out of this. But it did. And it does. The Apostle Paul put it this way. "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called together for His purpose." (Romans 8:8). And, taking up this point, and taking it further, we read in Swedenborg's theological writings. "Nothing is permitted, except to the end that something of good may come of it." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6489).

An important concept is touched upon here which we might consider for a moment. There are certain things God wills, there are other things which, though reluctantly and sadly, He permits. He permits evil and disorder when to prevent them occurring would mean taking away our freedom. The Lord permits evil (reading from Swedenborg) "not as one who is willing; but as one who is not able to resist it for the sake of the end, which is salvation." (*Divine Providence* 16). It doesn't mean the Divine has lost control. The Divine is there even at the time the evil is committed or the disorder occurs. Minimising the harm, softening the pain, and turning it around so that good comes of it.

In the wake of some disaster or act of ill will we can go one of two ways. We can go the way of bitterness, cynicism, and denial of God. People have something happen to them and bitterly, they abandon their belief in God or their confidence in other people. The alternative is to try to work with the Lord in the situation which has developed. We can try to be open to lessons we can learn or new directions in our lives to which the Lord might try to lead us as a result of the experience.

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