

How God Works to Bring Good Out of Evil 2

I have vivid memories of a television programme I watched some months ago about the building of the Burma road by Australian prisoners of war under the Japanese. The story, as you may know, is a gruesome one, and we weren't spared such details in the documentary. You wonder at man's inhumanity to man, and the appalling privations and suffering those who worked on that road endured.

However, as it unfolded, the story was not one of unrelenting gloom. There was, for example, remarkable calmness and very few acts of revenge at the time of the Japanese surrender. But more than this, there were the bonds which developed between the prisoners, the 'mateship', and the gentleness and caring, such as we who were not there can only get a vague understanding and idea but which was obviously so real to those men involved. One or two things recounted in that television documentary were truly beautiful. On the basis of what was shown, it's quite remarkable how much that was good and positive came to the surface within the context of what was otherwise so dreadful.

Today, our subject is the way in which God works to bring good out of evil. We are looking at the whole question of how it is that wars and tragedies happen in the first place. We are also looking at what can seem to be the 'indifference' of God when disaster strikes or tragedies occur. The most awful things can happen, as we all know, and God is apparently nowhere to be seen. And yet we are assured that He created us and loves us and that He is our heavenly Father. The well known words, as they are found in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 10 come to mind in this regard. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered". (verses 29,30).

That's fine, you say, but what about such care, and where was God when such and such a crime was committed, or a particularly nasty accident which comes to mind happened?

What we could perhaps do at this point is summarise the points which were made in the previous talk.

The first thing we saw, is that God is Love; that He wants and works for only those things which will bring us genuine happiness; and that it is as far from Him to bring harm on a person as heaven is from hell. To be sure, there is much in the Old Testament which seems to suggest otherwise. Even there though, there is so much else that speaks of His love and concern. Psalm 100 is a good example of this. It ends with the words. "For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."

"It is" wrote Swedenborg, "a Divine truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, still less does evil to anyone". (*Arcana Caelestia* 3131³). It's worth noting that the commonly heard comment "These things are sent to try us" is, strictly speaking, inaccurate. Nothing is sent to "try" us in that sense. God doesn't send along a sickness or accident to see how we will cope. That's just not the way He operates. War and suffering and the unhappy experiences of life occur because we humans possess free will.

This brings us to the second point. For all that God wants our happiness He can't force us. He offers and invites, but leaves us free to make our own decisions. And that's the way it has got to be. Sometimes our decisions are contrary to what He wants for us. For example, He wants us to be forgiving, when we have been hurt, or slandered, or let down by others. But we make up our minds and choose not to be. Yet again, there is no doubt that He wants us to be considerate and unselfish in the way we drive our cars. But there are times when we choose not to be, and take risks, many of which lead to an accident. It can't possibly be said that God caused the accident. The accident resulted from the exercise of someone's freewill, and the choice that person made to take risks and be reckless. The pity of it all is that so often in such cases, the innocent suffer as well.

This is not to say that God doesn't try to prevent accidents, crimes and tragedies occurring. He does. And what is important for us to note is that often, indeed most times, He succeeds in doing so, we rightly feel sorrow and sadness over the things which do take place. But the situation would be so very much worse if God wasn't in there, as He is all the time working to turn people away from criminal and reckless behaviour. But to prevent an accident or whatever occurring would require God to cut across, or to take away a person's free will (or freedom of choice). God will not do it. There are, therefore, those things which, of necessity, God permits.

It is not a case of God standing idly by on such occasions, helpless and unable to do anything more. God continues to work in the new situation which has developed to bring good out of it, even though it is now a situation of disaster, tragedy, or suffering. Out of the most unwanted and unhappy experience of life can come beautiful things and even blessings that would not have been there otherwise. Last time, you may remember, we talked of the 1957 bush fire which destroyed the then Hornsby Public School. But what is important is that people can now look back on that event and speak in terms of the good that came of it. And repeatedly this is the case. It's not something we see at the time, but looking back we can.

Another way of saying this is that you cannot see God "face to face". In the second book of the Bible, in the Book of Exodus, we are told how Moses asked if He could see God "face to face", and the request was refused. God said to Moses, "you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." (Exodus 33: 23). At the time of some accident or disaster occurring it is impossible for us to see how the Lord is working in the situation, or how good can be made to come of it. And the reason why it's impossible is that we are trying to see God "face to face". But we can't do this. It's only after the event, sometime into the future, that we are able to see something of the way God was at work, turning it around so that good and positive things came of it.

If good is to come out of tragedy and disaster it requires a degree of cooperation from those involved. People can become bitter and complaining and unbelieving as a result of some dreadful and unwanted experience. Other people can grow and develop in the most marvellous and unexpected ways. You possibly know of people who have developed great courage and strength in the midst of adversity. Desperately ill people can be an inspiration to those who nurse them and visit them. What brings out the best in some people can also bring out the worst in others. Knowing that God is endeavouring to bring blessings and benefits out of tragedies and disorders, we should aim to be open to His efforts. We should strive to be alert to openings and opportunities the situation might have created.

Most of us would see the point with regard to sickness. The Lord doesn't visit sickness on anyone. But once someone is sick He is in there working to bring good out of it. And one of the most obvious uses, or benefits, which the Lord will try to bring out of a person's sickness is a change of direction in their life. The majority of people are just so busy and so caught up with the things of this world that they rarely stop to probe life's deeper values and purposes.

And sickness, particularly if it is a serious sickness, gives them the opportunity to do this. They are forced by their illness to step off life's merry-go-round. Perhaps they have had a fright. Perhaps they have been taking for granted those around them. Perhaps they had also come to forget their dependance on God, their Maker. So the sickness is far from a negative experience. It brings compensations - compensations, not so much on the natural plane of life, but on the spiritual plane, where it matters most.

No human tragedy is without such compensations. The person who has been an alcoholic, for example, can appreciate and understand human weaknesses and needs which lead to alcoholism more than others who have never been afflicted by it. And appreciating and understanding those weaknesses and needs, the ex-alcoholic is better able than others to help those struggling to fight off their own alcoholism.

I remember once stopping by the bed of a person who had been made a quadraplegic as the result of an accident, and hanging across the top of the bed was a sign with the words on it, "God is good". And I wondered, terrible as the experience and suffering had been, yet that person had come to see the compensations, the blessings, and the benefits, of her otherwise awesome plight. In the midst of her suffering she had come to see things she had never seen or appreciated before. Her wonder and her sense of thankfulness to the Lord had grown even in the midst of it all. She had become herself and within, a different person. "God is good". The compensations were more real now than the accident had been.

There is often the feeling that some people have it worse than others. Either they are "accident-prone", or one thing just seems to happen after another. Others, it seems, escape unscathed. In the final analysis everyone has some profound disappointment or set back to cope with. With some it is a more obvious thing. With others it may be something that few if any know about. Then again, whatever it is that occurs, you will be given the strength to see it through. The Lord will give what is necessary. Also remember the Lord's endeavour in the midst of life's tragedies and disappointments to bring good out of them. However, we must choose whether to accept the good the Lord is working towards and which He offers. Some don't. And even if the unhappiness which is there lasts a long time, it will not last forever.

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