

# HOW PROVIDENCE WORKS

Rev. B. David Holm

*"Providence is the government of the Lord's Divine love and wisdom."*

The Lord is infinite, and He governs all things that happen in the universe both large and small. But He does not govern harshly, for every one of His laws reflects His Divine love for the entire human race. He governs from infinite Divine love, yet He governs by means of His Divine wisdom. All that the Lord does is wise, for He alone truly knows what is best for us. We can find very real comfort in the idea that the Lord rules and leads from love by means of wisdom.

We can accept this idea intelligently only if we understand certain things. For example, we should know that the Lord's goal or "end" is "a heaven from the human race." All that He does works toward that goal. Every detail of His Providence looks to what is eternal in what it does. The Lord, in all His leading and government of us, regards what will last forever-what will be of eternal benefit to us. All the merely temporary or "temporal" things of this world are relatively unimportant in themselves, for they pass away. They are important only so far as the Lord can show us things of eternal value by means of them. Again, there is real comfort in this, for when misfortune comes (as it does to nearly all of us) we can try to gain from it what will be of eternal benefit to us-things such as patience, courage, trust in the Lord, endurance, and the will to resist temptation. Such things will last forever, for they will become part of our eternal character in the spiritual world. The misfortunes which are only of this natural world are temporary and will vanish in time.

Since the Divine Providence is the Lord's government, and any government must have laws, there are Divine laws of Providence. The first law is the most important, for it enters into all the others. This first law is "that a person should act from freedom in accordance with reason." This means that each one of us is to be both free and rational. Without these two abilities or "faculties" none of us would be truly human. We would be puppets or robots, and could neither love the Lord nor be conjoined with Him. There could be no heaven derived from the human race, nor would there be anything of eternal value. Therefore the Lord guards our freedom and rationality as the very apple of His eye. For He wants us to respond freely to His love and to cooperate rationally with His wisdom. This is the first law of Providence.

The second law follows from this-that a person should act "as if from self." In order to preserve our freedom and rationality, it appears to every one of us as if we live and act from ourselves. This "appearance of self-life" is essential if our humanity is to be maintained. Therefore, it appears to all of us that life is our own. The Lord desires that we have this appearance and so guards it in us. Thus, though we are to acknowledge from the heart that all life is from the Lord alone, we are to act from the appearance that we live from ourselves. This means, for instance, that we are, as if from ourselves, to shun the evils we see in ourselves-shun them as sins against God. Only insofar as we do this, and so resist temptation, can the Lord cleanse us from evil and so save us. In all things we must act "as if of ourselves."

The third law of Providence is "that a person should not be compelled by external means to think and will the things of religion." If we were compelled to accept the things of religion, then our freedom and rationality in regard to spiritual or religious things would be destroyed. In order to prevent this, the Lord has given to us a love of spiritual freedom and a longing to understand heavenly things. Many times in history there have been attempts to suppress and even destroy this desire for freedom of religion. Yet time and time again people have defended their religious freedom. The desire for it is inborn in all of us. External compulsion is unthinkable in any genuine religion. No one can force us to believe. Forced religion doesn't do anyone any good. But this does not mean that we are not to compel ourselves in spiritual things. The very fact that the Lord forms a conscience in us, which tells us the difference between good and evil, indicates that we are to force ourselves to shun evil and do good. Such compulsion does not destroy genuine freedom and rationality. It strengthens them.

The Lord never wants to force any of us. It is for this reason that He does not speak directly to us-as in dreams and visions. If He did, we would be forced to believe, and our freedom and rationality would disappear. Because of this the Lord teaches us and leads us by means of His Holy Word-the Bible-written by men whom He inspired. When we read His Word or hear it preached, we are fully free to accept it or reject it. With those who freely reject it the Lord cannot be present. But with those who do freely accept it and allow it to become the basis of their spiritual life, the Lord can be present to both lead and teach. When we reverently read the Word, it is really the Lord speaking to us-telling us the way to go in our lives. Yet we are aware of this only when we stop and think. Most of the time, when we read and study the Lord's Word, we feel we are acting and thinking from ourselves-again, the appearance of self life. In this way our spiritual freedom and rationality are protected. This is the fourth law of Divine Providence-"that a person should be led and taught by the Lord by means of the Word, and this to all appearances as if by himself."

The fifth law is "that nothing of the workings of the Divine Providence should be evident to a person, but he should, nevertheless, know about it and acknowledge it." If we could actually see the workings of the Divine Providence in our lives, or in the life of anyone else close to us, it would be a terrible thing. We would feel forced, and our freedom and rationality would be threatened; our appearance of self life would be destroyed and with it our humanity. Also, if we could see the workings of Providence, what would we do if we saw something not to our liking? We would try to change it. We would fail to see the Lord's love and wisdom in what was going to happen. We would set our own prudence against the Lord's Providence, for we would fail to see the lasting good He would bring out of His Divine plan for us and those we love. This could destroy our spiritual faith. For this reason we cannot see the work of the Lord's Providence, either in the present or in the future. We can only see the Divine plans of the Lord after they have occurred. But it is very important that we do see them in this way. To see how the Lord has guided and led us and taught us is a wonderful thing. It strengthens and matures our faith and trust in Him. It gives us a warm sense of peace and safety-knowing that we are in His loving care. Truly, we should know about the Lord's Divine Providence and acknowledge it in the way we conduct our lives.

But what of all the disorders in the world-wars, crimes, starvation, poverty, disease and catastrophes? If there is a loving and wise God, why do such things happen? We must

understand that the "permission of evil" is also a part of the Divine Providence. Evil is never intended or sent by the Lord. He is a God of love and forgiveness who never punishes us. Neither does He inflict harm upon the innocent, nor even upon the guilty. Still, it is a law of order that every evil brings its own punishment upon itself, for the nature of evil is always destructive-even self-destructive. Evil is reluctantly permitted by the Lord, for the sake of human freedom and for the sake of salvation. If we are truly free, then we must be free even to turn from the Lord and do evil. In no other way can we be brought into heaven freely and rationally. Yet no evil is so powerful as to destroy the laws of Providence, for "the laws of permission are also laws of the Divine Providence." There is nothing so terrible that the Lord cannot bring some lasting good out of it.

There are many other things to be known about Divine Providence. The subject is treated fully in the book *The Divine Providence revealed through Emanuel Swedenborg*. We believe that this book is unique among religious books and suggest that you read this work for a more complete introduction.