

LIFE CAN SEEM CRUEL, AND SO CAN GOD

by Rev. Donald L. Rose

As life can seem cruel, we do well to arm ourselves with the truth behind that anguishing appearance. God is love, and this life He gives us is good.

The Bible has a way of painting for us pictures that portray the way life can seem but then show what the reality is. This is eminently true of the story of Job. Throughout the book's 42 chapters is a recurrent theme of the strong appearance that God has hurt us. Job laments to his friends: "The hand of God has struck me! Why do you persecute me as God does?" (Chapter 19). Also, "God has wronged me and has surrounded me with His net." "God will not withdraw His anger ... Let Him take His rod away from me" (Chapter 9). The lament goes on and on, and one does not feel disposed to blame Job seeing the terrible losses and suffering he had to endure. It is the more distressing when it is considered that Job was such an exemplary person. "Why him?" we ask, just as we ask, "Why me?" sometimes. He didn't deserve that. Life isn't *fair*. God isn't fair!

But there are two absolutely crucial elements to the story that totally change the perspective. One is that Job ended up much more prosperous. "The Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before" (final chapter). He not only had more good things; he gained a far deeper understanding and appreciation. The other important element is that God was not the cause of the things that were done to Job. It seemed that way, but it was a sinister force other than God that inflicted that entire calamity.

But didn't God permit it? Yes, and that is the point I want to make from my religious perspective. One of the doctrines of the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg (to which I look for inspiration) is the doctrine of "permission." The teaching is that while many things that happen are of the will of God, there are things that occur which He only *allows* or *permits*. And here is the good news. He will not allow it unless, in some way, good will result.

Swedenborg notes that when God permits something people jump to the conclusion that God caused it. This is precisely what Job and his associates did. Here is a direct quote: "Nothing is permitted, except to the end that something of good may come of it." That is from *Heavenly Secrets* paragraph 6489. It is repeated even more emphatically later in the book. That is one of the things I taught my children when they were young. I can tell you there have been times when they have confronted me when something horrible has happened in the world.

"OK, Dad, what good could possibly come from that?" I can remember stammering out platitudes that did not seem convincing. It can be hard! And yet, I am confident in and strengthened by that truth. And, do you know, even my most articulate and challenging daughter tells me: now that it is truth she lives by.

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