

The Lord's Providence

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"But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save a great people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

The story of Joseph provides us with a wonderful example of the Lord's guidance, which we call "providence." Joseph had some terrible experiences, and yet the Lord was with him, and lifted him up to become a ruler in Egypt.

As a child, Joseph was the favorite of his father, Jacob. Jacob gave him a coat of many colors and granted him special privileges. But his brothers despised him for this treatment and decided to get rid of him. They sold him into the hands of some Midianite slave traders, and Joseph ended up in Potiphar's house in Egypt. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, and when he refused to comply, she had him thrown in prison.

Still, the Lord was with Joseph, and we see how his life began to take an upward swing. Joseph became the overseer in the prison. Then he interpreted the dreams of the butler and the baker; he predicted correctly that the butler would be restored to his position, while the baker would be hanged.

Two years later Pharaoh had two dreams. He dreamed of seven skinny cows eating seven fat cows, and of seven thin heads of corn devouring seven healthy heads. The butler remembered Joseph at this point and advised Pharaoh to call him out of prison to interpret the dreams. Joseph explained that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and he suggested that Pharaoh store up grain during the years of plenty. Pharaoh placed Joseph in charge of this operation, raising him to second-in-command over all of Egypt.

When the famine hit, people from the surrounding areas came to Egypt to get food. Joseph's brothers fit into this category. When they came to Egypt, Joseph played with them: he forced them to bring Benjamin to Egypt, he called them spies, he hid a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. Finally Joseph revealed himself to them and brought his whole family down to Egypt so that he could provide for them there.

In this context the text makes sense: Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery, and now he could provide for their safety as a ruler in Egypt. As he said to them, "...As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day to save a great people alive" (Genesis 50:20). The Lord had providentially led Joseph to greatness so that he could provide for Joseph's family, and so for the future nation of Israel.

In the same way, the Lord guides all of us toward greatness and provides for our eternal happiness in heaven. He works with us in all our endeavors, as He did with Joseph. But how He leads us is important to think about. So today we will focus on the Lord's providence. We will see some of the ways the Lord works for us, and also examine some misconceptions about providence.

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- 1. The Goal.** The first part of the Lord's providence to focus on is His goal. This goal can be seen by analogy in the nation of Israel. The Lord was not only trying to preserve Joseph and his brothers from death in a famine. His plans had a much greater scope. This was just one step in the process of fulfilling the covenant He had established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make them a great nation and lead them into the Land of Canaan. From this we can see that the Lord is not only working toward our happiness here, but that His main goal is to get us to heaven.

A teaching which confirms this says that the goal of the Lord's providence is a heaven from the human race (see *Divine Providence* 27:2). It supports this claim by saying that the Lord did not create the universe for His own sake, but for others, since He loves others and desires to make them happy.

From this it follows that the Divine Love [of the Lord], and consequently the Divine Providence, has for its end a heaven which should consist of people who have become, and who are becoming angels, upon whom the Lord can bestow all the blessings and felicities that belong to love and wisdom, and bestow these from Himself in them (ibid.).

So Divine providence is the force of the Lord's love, working through His wisdom, to lead each one of us toward happiness in heaven. In the context of this powerful force, it makes sense, as another teaching says, that we are all predestined to heaven—predestined in the sense that heaven is where the Lord wants us, and that is where He guides us with all of His Divine means (see *Divine Providence* 322:1).

- 2. A Warped Sense of Providence.** However, if we separate this power of the Lord from His love for each one of us as individuals, we can get the wrong impression.

To explain, let me use Joseph's brothers as an example. They sold Joseph into slavery. Then a chain of events occurred. Joseph went from Potiphar's house to prison, where he interpreted some dreams and was eventually raised to power. The appearance is that the Lord *needed* Joseph's brothers to sell Him into slavery so that He could get Joseph in to Egypt and raise him to power. And that's what Joseph seems to say to his brothers: "...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

So the *appearance* is that God has a grand design, and we are more or less pawns which He orchestrates to make the design work. In other words, He needs some people to suffer and others to hurt people so that He can reach His goals—namely to get as many people as possible to heaven.

The trouble with this idea is that it has a fair amount of truth in it—but it's not quite the right picture. To see why we can look at an illustration of this point of view as put forth by Thornton Wilder in his book, *The Eighth Day*. He uses the image of a tapestry to show how God achieves His goals. Here is a description by Harold Kushner of the tapestry and how Wilder uses it:

*Looked at from the right side, it is an intricately woven work of art, drawing together threads of different lengths and colors to make up an inspiring picture. But turn the tapestry over, and you will see a hodgepodge of many threads, some short, and some long, some smooth and some cut and knotted, going off in different directions. Wilder offers this as his explanation of why good people have to suffer in this life. God has a pattern into which all of our lives fit. His pattern requires that some lives be twisted, knotted, or cut short, while others extend to impressive lengths, not because one thread is more deserving than another, but simply because the pattern requires it (Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Avon Books, 1981; pp. 17-18.).*

This is an appearance, and according to this appearance we are the Lord's pawns.

If we think about it, we hear this point of view fairly often. What do we say or hear sometimes when a baby dies? "God needed that baby in heaven, so He took him." Or what about when someone barely escapes an accident or lives a long life here on earth? "God needed him here on earth." "She can still be useful in this life so God left her here."

But we are not the Lord's puppets. He does not cause some people to stay alive and others to die early in life so that He can accomplish some grand design. His *one design* is to bring the greatest number of

people into heaven as possible, and He works with each one of us as individuals to get us there. As one minister of the New Church put it, “God is not in the killing business, He’s in the salvation business.” That’s His one and only goal, and everything else—creation, the church, marriage, revelation—looks toward that goal (see *Divine Providence* 55).

3. **How Does Providence Really Work?** It’s hard to imagine how the Lord could lead each of us individually toward heaven without causing or needing any kind of suffering to occur. We see suffering so often, and if the Lord didn’t need it to happen then it seems like He doesn’t have control over it and so doesn’t have the power to stop tragedies from happening. Yet the first thing we should remember is that the Lord is omnipotent, or all-powerful. From this vantage point we can more clearly see the Lord’s system of providence and how human suffering fits into His overall plan.
 - a. **God Is All-powerful.** We can see the Lord’s omnipotence in the fact that He raised Joseph to power and, through him, provided for the future Israelitish nation. We see the Lord working toward the fulfillment of His covenant, constantly leading the events of Joseph’s life toward the goal of bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. The meaning within this story shows how the Lord bends us toward heaven at every stage of our lives. He intends heaven for us, and, as one passage says, “what God intends He does” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6572). God is powerful, and He provides for us in wonderful ways.
 - b. **The Lord’s System of Providence.** The Lord has revealed some of the ways He provides for us. In general we can see two scopes of His providence: a universal scope and a particular scope. This means that the Lord has set up a system or environment in which we live—the universal scope—and and guides us as individuals in that system—the particular scope (see *Divine Providence* 202-203; *Arcana Coelestia* 1919:4, 2694:3, 6482).

In terms of the *universal scope*, the Lord has given us many things: He created us in His image with an understanding (or ability to comprehend truth) and a will (or the ability to do what is good); He has also provided a mental environment of freedom, where we are in equilibrium between the influences of heaven and hell; and He has given us a natural world with natural laws and order to reinforce the feeling we all have that we live our own lives. These are all part of the Lord’s universal system.

But in that system, the Lord leads us as *individuals*. He does not set things up and leave us to fend for ourselves. If He did, we would end up nowhere near heaven. The reason is that each one of our choices impacts our spiritual direction immensely. Changing a job, for example, or deciding to marry someone, has a tremendous effect upon us. So the Lord explains that we need His guidance continually to keep us on track toward heaven. Otherwise we would loose our way very quickly. As *Divine Providence* explains, “It is like an arrow shot from a bow which, if it made the slightest deviation from the target at the moment of being aimed would deviate immensely at a distance of a thousand feet or more. **So it would be if the Lord did not lead the states of human minds every fraction of a moment**” (*Divine Providence* 202:3, emphasis added).

- c. **Permissions.** Because of the nature of the Lord’s providence people can suffer. In the overall system or universal scope, the Lord provides a natural environment to ensure our freedom. But in that environment, people can do harm to other people, accidents can happen, and natural disasters take place. These are not part of the Lord’s will—He doesn’t *want* them to happen—but still He *permits* them to happen if necessary. “Permissions” are bad things which the Lord allows for the sake of the end, which is salvation (see *Divine Providence* 281).

Nonetheless, the Lord’s providence has its particular scope. The Lord has to allow tragedies and the like to happen so that the universal environment in which we live and which ensures our feeling of freedom, remains intact. Still He works with each person who is suffering to bring the best possible

outcome from it. In this way we see the Lord providing, and continually reacting or re-providing, based on our choices or the misfortunes which befall us.

We can see this work of the Lord's providence when people choose to do evil which hurts other people. The Lord has to allow that to happen because He does not limit the freedom which is so essential to salvation. But He constantly works with the victims to soften the pain and to bring good things out of their suffering.

In this respect we have the example of Joseph and his brothers. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery and caused him great suffering. But the Lord used that terrible situation to bring about a miracle: He raised Joseph to power in Egypt and, in turn, provided for the very brothers who had committed the crime against Joseph. "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save a great people alive." When people do evil to harm others, the Lord brings a tremendous amount of good out of it. But He didn't *make* or *need* or *want* the suffering to occur in the first place. He permitted it for the sake of the end: providing salvation for all people.

Tragedies and natural disasters also bring suffering to people, and the Lord also permits them for the sake of salvation. Still the Lord works for the best outcome in these situations as well. If a baby dies in a car accident, God mourns. But then He uses that terrible situation to bring about a positive result: He takes that child up into heaven and strengthens the atmosphere of innocence in heaven by means of him or her. He permits the tragedy and then uses it in numerous ways for good.

If a person survives a hurricane in which many people died, we sometimes interpret that to mean God wanted that person to live. In reality that person stayed alive according to natural law: a house didn't fall on her and stop her heart from working. Because of that, the Lord is able to guide that person to useful activities, as He does with all of us.

So we see that the Lord permits bad things to happen and brings good things out of them. He loves each one of us individually and works for the best outcome for us. All things fall under His providence.

Conclusion

We now return to Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's brothers feared him when their father died, because they thought he was going to seek revenge on them. Joseph responded by saying: "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about as it is this day to save a great people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones" (Genesis 50:20-21).

In the internal sense this means that God will provide (*Arcana Coelestia* 6570). God will bend our faults and our misfortunes toward good, and He will guide us continually toward heaven. As Joseph comforted his brothers, so we can be comforted by understanding the Lord's providence. We know that we are not alone, as we sometimes appear to be. Instead, we have a God who loves us watching over us continually.

So He says to us, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" (Genesis 28:15).

Amen.

Readings from the Word: Genesis 49 and 50 (parts); *Divine Providence* 27:1-2.