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PROVIDENCE AND PERMISSION ✓

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Lessons: Genesis 50: 7-21. Psalm 91. AC 6663.

“I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I the Lord do all these things.” (Isaiah 45: 7)

The Lord is Love itself. He created the universe solely to the end that He might impart eternal joy and blessedness to man. He governs all things of His creation with omnipotent power—but for the sake of that Divine end alone. His government is one of pure mercy toward the whole human race. Nothing of evil, therefore, could possibly proceed from God. Everything He creates is good. Everything He does is merciful.

Yet evil exists. It appears to be sent by the Lord, for we see catastrophes so completely beyond human control that they can only be called acts of God—which nonetheless cause widespread suffering and death. We see storms, floods, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, bring inescapable misfortune and tragedy to the good as well as to the evil. We see whole nations reduced to want and misery by the depredations of war, the innocent suffering equally with the guilty. If God does not prevent such things, although He has the power to do so, our natural conclusion is that He must will them, and thus that He is the Author of both good and evil.

The same appearance is strong in the letter of the Word, where God is depicted as sending plagues upon His enemies, inciting nations to war, and condemning whole cities to destruction by fire

and brimstone out of heaven. He Himself says, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me." And in the 45th chapter of Isaiah He apparently proclaims Himself to be the originator of both good and evil, saying, "I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things."

The appearance that the Lord wills evil is directly contrary to the truth. But if we will look more deeply into the statements of the Word, penetrating the outer covering of the literal sense, we will discover there a deeper meaning. And so in this case, we will find the truth revealed that although evil exists, the Lord does not will it, but merely permits it for the sake of a good end. Strange as it may seem, the Lord foresaw from the beginning that He could accomplish the supreme purpose of creation only by providing for the possibility of evil. This was because the happiness of heaven, which it was His will to impart to man, could not otherwise be given. This is the happiness of love, of wisdom, and of use, received as gifts from the Lord, but so completely given that man may possess them altogether as if they were his own. Nothing can appear to man to be his own save that which he himself freely chooses. Whatever we receive as a matter of necessity, without effort or choice, although in itself it may be eminently good, has no power to impart a joy such as we experience in the possession of that for which we long have labored. Things we do under compulsion yield no such delight as those we undertake freely because we love to do them. So it is with the Lord's gifts. We must receive His love and wisdom, not from necessity but from choice. We must perform the uses of His kingdom, not from compulsion but from love, if we would know the true happiness of heaven. And for this reason the Lord has provided us with the opportunity of choice. He has so created the universe that man might not be compelled to receive His gifts, but might be free also to reject them. He has created man under no necessity to keep the Divine Law, but with the power to revolt against it, and this in order that he might know the joy of serving the Lord of his own free will, and thus from love.

Evil itself is not from the Lord. But the possibility of evil arising was inherent in creation from the beginning. It was of the Lord's love, and thus of His Providence, that it should be so. Nor

could evil be possible unless man were actually permitted to do it. Whence it follows that the permission of evil also is of Providence. But let us clearly understand: the fact that evil was possible by no means implies that it was inevitable. Man was under no necessity to choose it. The human race might have remained in the innocence of the Golden Age, developing from its first-infancy even to adult intelligence, without falling into evil. And yet man might have known all the happiness of free choice. To attain this happiness, the possibility of evil is necessary; but evil itself is not.

To see this clearly we must inquire more closely what evil is. Evil is not an original creation, but merely a perversion of good. The good things created by the Lord and offered to man for his enjoyment are perverted when they are misplaced, or taken out of their true order. There are degrees of good and truth from highest to lowest; that is, from the Lord Himself to the ultimates of nature. These degrees form as it were a ladder, like that seen by Jacob in his dream at Bethel—a ladder resting upon the earth, reaching into heaven, with the Lord standing above it. Man is born at the foot of this ladder; and the Lord, through all the operations of His Providence, seeks to lift him up, step by step. This He can do, however, only so far as man is willing to follow. For at every stage man must freely choose whether he will remain in a lower good or will strive for that which is higher. Man may stop short on any rung of the ladder, continuing there to serve the Lord and the neighbor from love and charity. But he may also cling to a lower good not for the sake of use, but for the sake of self-gratification, from a love of power, of wealth, or of mere pleasure. This is what destroys order, for it looks as an end in itself to that which was intended only as a means to further advancement. It turns the good gifts received from the Lord aside from the use they were intended to perform, and devotes them to the service of self; whereupon they cease to be good, being perverted into evil. Everything created by the Lord, and everything that He gives to man is good; but it becomes evil in man when it is misappropriated by him. That which afterwards became evil, therefore, was originally good.

“I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I the Lord do all these things.” The light here meant is the light of the mind, the light of Heavenly Truth that gives man spiritual understanding; while the darkness is the opposite of this,

the falsity that leads into error and insanity. The Lord does not create falsity; but He does create degrees of truth. The Truth of heaven in its descent to man is clothed in external appearances which must be removed, one by one, in order to approach the inner Truth. If, however, these appearances are confirmed as the Truth itself, and the existence of any higher truth is denied, then do they become falsities. The Lord creates appearances, but man alone turns them into falsities.

It is to be noted that as recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, even while "the earth was without form, and void, . . . darkness was upon the face of the deep." Even before God said, "Let there be light," there was darkness; and God "divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night." What is here meant by darkness is not the falsity of evil, but the shades of sensual appearances. These in themselves are good. They are necessary as a means of tempering the light of heaven to man's finite understanding. In pure light nothing can be seen. It is the contrast of light and shade that brings natural objects into view. So also it is with spiritual objects. Truth can be seen only by means of appearances that are like shadows of varying density. In this sense it is literally true that God "forms the light and creates darkness." Man is born into the darkness of ignorance, and he comes at first awakening into the heavily shaded light of purely sensual appearances. Little by little, as the mind grows and its power of vision is strengthened, the light that shines in his darkness grows brighter, and we say that he advances into knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom. This he does gradually—in all seeming by his own effort—to the end that the intelligence and wisdom with which he is progressively gifted by the Lord may appear to be his own. Only if man chooses to love darkness rather than light, and thus confirms the appearances—wilfully rejecting the higher truth that is intended to dispel the shadows—does he convert these appearances into falsity, and turn them to the service of evil.

Again, in the story of the fall, it is related that Adam and Eve were seduced by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent thereby became a symbol for all evil. Yet the serpent was created by God, and was placed in the garden. It did not then represent evil, but the lowest degree of good: the sensual delights into which man first comes, and out of which he may be elevated, step by

step, that he may be introduced into heavenly delights. The delights of the senses in themselves are good. They are the foundation of all mental life. They are essential as a means of opening the mind to the influx of heaven. Only when they are turned from this purpose to mere self-gratification do they become evil. This turning is done, not by the Lord but by man, when he refuses the higher delights of which they are but the clothing and embodiment. Wherefore the Lord says, "I make peace and create evil."

This is spoken according to appearances. To man it seems as if the Lord, by making the senses so delightful, lured him innocently into evil, and then brought punishment upon him. But the fact is that the Lord "makes peace." He endows us with the faculty of sensing spiritual things, of seeing heavenly truth, and of performing heavenly uses. He gives us bodily senses in order that spiritual things may be brought within our grasp, and made tangible to us; and also that we might, as it were, discover spiritual things for ourselves—might choose their delights in preference to those of the senses, and thus might come to possess them as our own. This is His Divine purpose of love, in presenting us with the possibility of choice. Yet in so doing He gives us the power to seek sensual delights for their own sake instead of for the spiritual uses for which they were given. This is the only sense in which it can be said that the Lord "creates evil." And in this sense, by "evil" is meant the same as by the serpent in the garden. It is the external good—the bodily pleasures, the worldly delights—which man himself turns into evil when by the abuse of freedom he elevates them out of their rightful place as the servants of his higher faculties, and makes them masters over his mind.

This, if he insists, man must be permitted to do; and when he does so he brings evil upon himself—the evil of sin. At the same time he brings evil upon others—not the evil of sin but the evil of temptation, which the Lord in His Providence turns into good. Here is a wonderful thing. The Lord permits man to will evil, and to think evil within himself so far as he chooses to do so. But the Lord does not permit man to bring evil into act except so far as that act may be made to serve the spiritual welfare of others. He permits no man, by any outward deed, to injure or destroy the eternal life of another. He provides and protects the possibility of heavenly use and happiness with every man, allowing no one but the man himself to prevent the attainment of that Divinely intended

destiny. All who are willing to be led by the Lord are kept perpetually under His protecting care. As the Psalmist says: "Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the Most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee; neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling." (Psalm 91: 9, 10)

The evils that men commit the Lord turns to the spiritual benefit of others. He utilizes them to restrain the wicked, by punishment and by the external bond of fear. He uses them also to bring about—with the good—purification and amendment of life. For when we see horrible evils committed by others, with all the effects of grief and suffering that follow from them, they enable us to recognize the infernal quality of evil tendencies and selfish loves—worldly passions that we have been harboring in our own minds—that we may strike them at their source, and in the intention or desire of the heart shun them as sins against God.

This being the case it becomes clear that the only evils capable of doing us spiritual injury are those we ourselves commit from our own will and choice. This is meant by the Lord's words: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. For whatsoever entereth into the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out in the draught. But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies; these are the things which defile a man." (Matthew 15: 11, 17-20)

Things that happen to us, seeming calamities beyond our control, whether brought about by the forces of nature or by the malevolent acts of evil men, are powerless to harm our spiritual life unless we ourselves permit them to do so. They are indeed Divine permissions, but they are all under the government of the Lord's Providence, that has regard only to what is good. Men may seek to do evil, but the Lord, in wonderful ways, converts their deeds to the service of His own ends of love and mercy, even as was declared by Joseph to his brethren who sold him into Egypt: "As for you, ye intended evil against me; but God intended it for good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save alive a great people." (Genesis 50: 20) Such is the mercy of the Lord, manifest not only in the manifold blessings of His Providence, but also in the permission of evil.