

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 10 May 2020**

Children's Talk: The Lord Can Help Us Put the Pieces Together

- Do you like doing puzzles?
- For me, it depends.
 - I like doing puzzles when it feels like I'm doing well at them.
 - It's satisfying to find how each piece fits in and to watch the overall picture become clearer and clearer as you finish the puzzle.
 - But I don't really like doing puzzles when I can't seem to find any pieces that fit together.
 - Sometimes you have to do a whole lot of looking and trying different ones until you find two that actually fit together.
 - And sometimes you finally find two that you think will go together and then they don't actually fit! So frustrating!
- Sometimes our minds work on trying to put together mental puzzles.
 - Like a riddle where you have to think about it this way and that way until you finally figure out (or have someone else tell you) how it fits together.
 - And sometimes our mental puzzle pieces don't seem to fit together very well.
 - We look and we look and we try them this way and that way and they still don't seem to fit.
- Riddles and puzzles are one thing—they can be annoying if we can't figure out how they go together but the harder things are when we can't figure out how the puzzle pieces of life go together.
 - For example, one puzzle piece we can have is the idea that the Lord loves everyone and is in charge of everything.
 - That's a good puzzle piece to have as part of your picture.
 - But then you might also have a really hard day—a day when everything seems to go wrong and you're mad at everyone and everyone is mad at you.
 - And how do you fit that together with the idea that the Lord loves everyone and is in charge of everything?
 - Or when something really sad happens like someone getting really sick or dying—how do we fit that together with the idea that the Lord loves everyone and is in charge of everything?
- We can take those two puzzle pieces and spin them around and around in our minds and try to make them fit and they just don't seem to fit.
- I think sometimes the problem is that our picture of the puzzle is too small.
 - We need a bigger view.
 - Listen to what the Lord says to us in the prophet Isaiah:
 - Isaiah 55:8-9 (NKJV)
 - "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD.
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

- The Lord knows everything and *He* can see how all of the puzzle pieces fit together but our thoughts are not His thoughts.
 - His thoughts are way above ours.
 - It's like we're looking at our two pieces of the puzzle, thinking how they might fit together but the Lord is zoomed out and is looking at a 2 000 piece puzzle.
 - The two pieces that we have probably all have their places in the puzzle but they're not necessarily right next to each other—they might connect through a whole lot of other pieces in-between.
- And really, the Lord's not even just looking at a 2 000 piece puzzle.
 - There are over 7 billion people in the world, all with tons of different parts of their lives.
 - The Lord is looking a puzzle with trillions and trillions of pieces.
 - He can see how they all fit together but truly His thoughts are much, much, much higher than ours.
- We're never going to see things as clearly as the Lord does but I find it helpful and comforting to know that He can see how things all fit together.
 - And He also can help us to see how the pieces that we've got might fit together and some of the pieces that we might be missing.
 - Each new thing that we learn from the Lord's Word is like another piece of the puzzle.
 - And with more pieces of the puzzle we can have more of a chance of seeing how they might fit together.
 - For example, one thing that the Lord said is this: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).
 - Things are going to be hard sometimes in the world.
 - And we can still be of good cheer because the Lord has overcome the world.
- Another way of thinking about it is by thinking about another technique you use in making a puzzle—looking at the box.
 - Some people say that it's cheating to look at the box but it certainly makes it easier to figure out how to make the puzzle.
 - The Lord, in His Word, can help us to have some idea of the overall puzzle that we're trying to put together.
 - It's a picture of the Lord loving everyone and reaching out to everyone to try to bring them to heaven and happiness.
 - It's still going to be hard work and frustrating sometimes to figure out how the pieces go together but it does help to have a sense of the overall picture.
- So next time you're feeling frustrated by trying to figure out how things all fit together, think of the Lord.
 - Remember that He can see a much, much bigger view than You can.
 - Remember that you might need to find some more pieces to make things fit together and you can get those pieces from the Lord in His Word.
 - Remember that the Lord can see how things fit together and that He can help you to see how Your pieces might fit together.
 - And remember that the overall picture is always one of the Lord's love and care for you and for every single person.
- *Amen.*

Misconceptions of Providence, Part 1: If It Happened, It Was Meant to Be

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
10 May 2020

Intro

- A tragic accident happens—a three year old girl is playing outside and finds her way into the garage and manages to knock a storage box down that lands heavily on her hand.
 - And the hand is permanently damaged—it never works properly for the rest of her life.
 - Her parents take the child for surgery and physical therapy and all of those things but the hand never works like a normal hand.
- Was that what was meant to be?
 - Was that God's will?
 - What if the child later somehow becomes an amazing violinist, does that mean that it was meant to be?
 - What if one of the parents designs some system for good garage storage that will never fall down and raises awareness about the dangers of storing things improperly?
 - Or what if neither of those things happen and it's just a thing that happened that makes the child's and the parents' lives a bit harder—then was it God's will that it happened?
- Take another example, what about a couple that meets and falls in love?
 - Was it meant to be?
 - Was it God's will that they meet?
 - I read a story this week about a couple that met at 19 (<https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/posts/4202398856500849>).
 - They got married young.
 - Then they got divorced and split up.
 - Then they each married other people.
 - And they each got divorced.
 - And then they met again when they were almost sixty and have been together since then.
 - Which parts of all of that was meant to be?
 - Which parts were God's will?
 - All of it?
 - What if the story had ended differently?
- We're starting a series today on misconceptions about Divine Providence—different ways that we can fall into unhelpful ways of understanding how the Lord works.
 - Before we get into the details of it I want to make a few general, cautionary points.
 - 1. Whenever we talk about Divine Providence, it's going to get us thinking about difficult or tragic things that we have experienced, that the people we love have experienced, or that have happened in the broader world.
 - And no explanation, even the best explanation, is going to remove the pain from those tragedies—pain and loss and grief are still going to be there.
 - I don't want you to feel like I'm saying to you, "Because I've explained this, now you shouldn't feel what you're feeling anymore."
 - And please don't do that to other people either.

- 2. Remember that the point of these ideas and teachings is to be loving and helpful.
 - When we have clarity about these ideas it can be hard to hear other people expressing opposing ideas.
 - For example, imagine that you heard someone say, “That person got cancer because God is punishing them.”
 - What would you do?
 - It’s good to confront harmful ideas but not to dominate the person who is expressing them but to help them and the other people who they influence.
 - We should look on people who hold conflicting ideas with love and care not with disgust and superiority.
- 3. We’re not going to explain it all or understand it all.
 - Yes, in the New Church we are very lucky to have access to clear, helpful teachings on these topics but we are still human beings with tiny, little, finite brains, attempting to understand God’s infinite wisdom—we’re going to fall short.
 - Maybe the teachings of the New Church can provide us with a few more puzzle pieces to work with—maybe even some edge pieces or a hallowed corner piece—but we’re still only ever going to be looking at an insignificantly small portion of the puzzle that the Lord is looking at.
 - Just because we can say, “That’s Divine Providence” does not mean we actually understand what’s going on.
 - Let’s maintain our humility as we go through this.

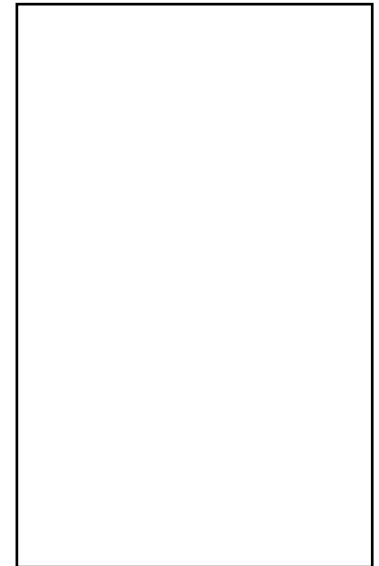
Trying to Increase the Resolution of the Image We’re Looking At

- What we’re going to do today is to try to gradually increase the resolution of the picture we’re looking at.
 - Digital images are composed of lots of blocks of different colours.
 - When a picture has a low-resolution then the image is blocky and blurry—we can see the blocky edges of the image and we can’t see clearly what’s going on in the image.
 - As we increase the resolution, there are more and more blocks making up the image and eventually we stop seeing the blocks at all and instead start to see the image more and more clearly.
- Our understanding of the Lord and His providence can be thought of like a digital image.
 - We’re going to be trying to gradually increase the resolution of that picture—introduce more and more details and complexity to help us end up with a clearer and clearer picture.
- This picture is the end result that we’re trying to get to—a clear, detailed, beautiful picture of the Lord lovingly caring for people.
 - But that’s not where we start.



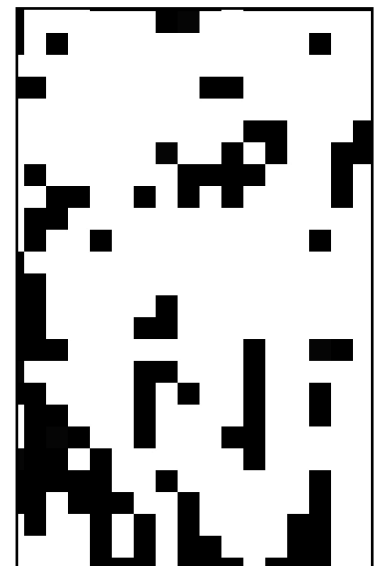
It's All God's Will

- We're going to start with one white pixel.
 - This is our first understanding of God's Providence: God does everything.
 - He's God; He's all powerful so everything that happens must be God doing it.
 - Good things that happen; terrible things that happen —they're all God doing them.
- Everything is God's plan, God's will.
 - So if something terrible happens to you, then your job is to accept that.
 - "It's God's will; who are we to question it?"
 - You probably can see some of the problems with this idea.
- But it's interesting, the teachings of the New Church say that this is developmentally where we are meant to begin.
 - As children it's important to believe that God is in charge of everything.
 - And the teachings of the New Church say that that's why you can find passages in the Bible that talk about God doing bad things.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §245
 - [Many passages] in the Word describe Jehovah God as not only turning his face away, being angry, punishing, and testing, but even killing — and, yes, cursing. This was in order to foster the belief that the Lord controls and arranges every last detail in the universe.... After accepting this very general idea, people would learn just how he controls and arranges things. They would see that he transforms the evil involved in punishment and in our ordeals into good.
- So our view is meant to grow in resolution—a white sheet of paper is not a very good picture of the Lord.



Some Things Are *Not* God's Will

- Let's add a second colour—some things are not from God.
 - We'll render those as black.
 - So now our picture is twice as accurate as it used to be, and it's still not very clear.
 - But with time we can start to sort things into things from God and things not from God and we begin to get a bit more of a picture, though still not really recognisable as the Lord.
 - When we see everything as black and white it's not a very high resolution picture of the world.
- Where do we get this idea that some things are not from God?
 - Well, in addition to those passages in the literal sense of the Word that say that God is the one doing those bad things, there are also passages like this from Lamentations:

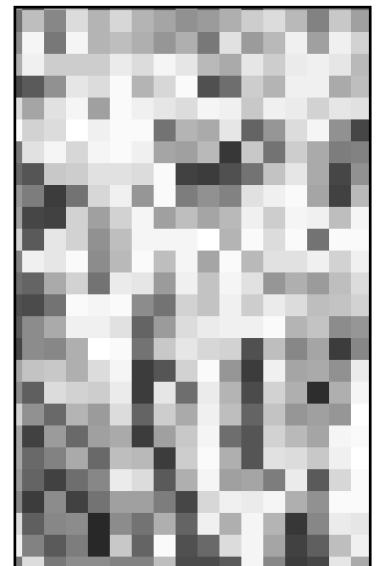


- Lamentations 3:33 (NKJV)
 - For [the Lord] does not afflict willingly,
Nor grieve the children of men.
- Or when Jesus said, “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:14).
- So we can conclude from these passages and other passages that certain things that happen are *not* God’s will—they’re *not* what God wanted to have happen.
 - Certain things are black not white.
- But the logical follow-up question to that is, “Well, then, why do any of these little ones perish?”
 - Why does anything happen that God doesn’t want to have happen?
 - This is known as “the problem of evil” and is succinctly summarised by C. S. Lewis in his book on the subject, like this:
 - “If God were good, He would make His creatures perfectly happy, and if He were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both” (*The Problem of Pain*, Chapter 2 - “Divine Omnipotence”).
 - [A very similar statement to this was popularised by David Hume in the 1700s and he attributed it to Epicurus. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_of_evil#cite_note-3]
 - If terrible things happen, what does that mean?
 - Does it mean that God is not all powerful?
 - Or does it mean that God is not good; He doesn’t care about people suffering?
 - Here, the Lord provides a really useful answer in the teachings of the New Church:
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §8227:2
 - “The belief also exists that bad things are attributable to the Divine because He permits them and does not take them away. And someone who permits something and does not take it away when he has the power to do so appears to will it and so to be the cause of it.”
 - It seems like, if you could do something to make something bad not happen but you let it happen, then you must *want* it to happen.
 - But the passage continues.
 - “But the Divine permits it because He cannot prevent it or take it away.”
 - Does that mean that He’s not all powerful?
 - No.
 - “The Divine wills only what is good; if therefore He were to prevent or remove bad things, [like] the miseries of punishment, vastation, persecution, temptation, and [other similar things], He would be willing something bad. For then the people who must suffer them could not have their faults corrected and evil would increase until it ruled over good.”
 - The Lord’s goal is to free people from evil and lead them to heaven and, if He were to take all the bad things away, that would have the opposite effect and so He can’t do it.

- Then the passage gives an analogy to help us understand it.
- “The situation is like that with a king who acquits the guilty. He is the cause of the ill done by them subsequently in his kingdom, and he is the cause of the resulting lawlessness of others, not to mention that the evil person becomes more deeply immersed in evil.”
 - If a king lets people go unpunished, that’s not good for other people who will be harmed by them, not good for society in general, or good for the people who weren’t punished because they’ll have no reason to stop doing evil things.
- “Therefore although a good and righteous king has the power to cancel punishments, yet he cannot, for if he cancels them he does not do what is good but what is bad. It should be recognised that all forms of punishment as well as of temptation in the next life have good as their end in view.”
- So, the fact that the Lord allows bad things to happen does *not* actually indicate that He is not good.
 - When properly understood, it’s actually a demonstration of His goodness and love for us and His wisdom in understanding how best to help us.

The Levels of God’s Will

- And then the teachings of the New Church also provide us with more than just two categories—things that God wills and things that God permits.
 - There are levels in between those two general categories.
- These levels are described as being closer or farther away from the Lord.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §9940
 - The things which are from the Lord are either nearer to, or further away from Him; and they are said to be “from His will,” “from good pleasure,” “from leave,” and “from permission.” The things which are from His will are the nearest to Him; those which are from His good pleasure are somewhat further away from Him; those which are from leave are still further away than that; and those which are from permission are the furthest from Him. But each degree [or level] contains countless aspects which are distinct from those which are in any other degree; and these countless things are secrets of heaven, only a few of which fall within the range of human understanding.
- Those levels provide some more resolution for us—God’s will, good pleasure, leave, and permission.
 - Like more shades of grey between pure white and pure black.
 - And there are a few other passages that provide a little bit more information about what those different levels involve (*Secrets of Heaven* §§1755, 2447:2) but, for our purposes, I think it’s sufficient to just know that there are levels in between.



- The value of knowing about these levels in between is expressed well in an article I found.
 - We must be on our guard, in our own efforts toward regeneration, and especially in educating our children, that we do not allow an emphasis only on the two extremes of this series [God's will and permissions] to place us, and them, in the impossible position of striving toward the highest good available to man, and at the same time virtually removing this good from any possibility of human attainment, by the thought... that anything less than this highest good is failure. The [teachings of the New Church] simply do not present such a picture to me. ...[F]or us to do so in our teaching of others would be as irrational as it would be to set up a ladder with only the highest and lowest rungs intact, then say, "Climb it!" (Pendleton, Dandridge. "Doctrine of Permission" *New Church Life*, 1980: p. 203).
 - We need to know about those levels in between—it's more complicated and nuanced than just that some things are exactly what God wants and some things are not at all what God wants but He has to permit them.
 - There are a whole range of things in between those two levels.
 - This allows us to see much more clearly how the Lord's Divine Providence might be working in the whole range of things that we experience and are aware of in our lives.
- Let's use these ideas to look at a few examples that can be confusing.



Examples

- Another foundational and popular idea about Divine Providence in the teachings of the New Church is that "nothing can take place... unless good can come out of it" (*Secrets of Heaven* §6663e).
 - And the Lord can bring good out of terrible, terrible things.
 - But...
 - And this is one of the main points that I've been wanting to get to:
 - Just because the Lord brings something good out of something bad does not make that bad thing part of the Lord's plan or what was meant to be.
- Consider this example from an article by Peter Buss:
 - A man may act in temper, cause a great deal of misery, and then on looking back he will see that something useful came out of it, so he will say: "Maybe I was meant to behave that way; see how it turned out." The behaviour was *not* meant. It was permitted and the good provided *despite* it. All too often people adopt a fatalistic attitude towards past faults, because it all "turned out for the best in the end."

Let us take the example of a... young man in a promising position with a firm who develops a strong and unreasonable sense of grievance against his [boss], so much so that he eventually gives in to his anger, there is a nasty scene, and he resigns. He then finds another job and does very well there, too; and so, on looking back on his life he will say: "That change was for the best. Obviously I was meant to do that." In saying this he excuses his ill-tempered behaviour, and even insinuates the thought that the Lord willed him to leave the first firm, thus that he acted according to the Lord's will. He did not. His

action was wrong, but the Lord still led him and provided good for him, despite his wrong. Had he behaved well, he might have received greater benefits; he will never know, because that was not what happened. (*"Doctrine of Permissions" New Church Life*, 1972: p. 409)

- That's a really important distinction to be able to see that the selfish things that we've done were not "meant to be" or "God's plan".
- Let's think about even more mundane examples: the printer jams at a very inconvenient moment, when you're already late to go do a presentation.
 - Or when you've already had a really bad day and you come home, take off your shoes, and then immediately stub your toe on a piece of furniture.
 - In those moments we can tend to look heavenward and ask, "Why God?! Why now?"
- What's going on in these examples?
 - They're so mundane that, when we think about them a bit more rationally, we can feel like, they're not actually a big deal either way.
 - God probably doesn't care much about them in the grand scheme of things.
 - He cares about our eternal welfare, getting us to heaven, more than our jammed printer or stubbed toe.
 - But I think it's wrong to conclude that the Lord has bigger cosmic fish to fry and so does not care about our frustration about the jammed printer or the pain in our big toe.
 - Remember that the Lord is Divine love and the source of all love and compassion in the universe.
 - If we would care about someone's frustration or pain then we can know for sure that the Lord also cares about.
 - He just *also* cares about things that are more important for us.
- In this analogy that we've been working with, I liked the idea of remembering the Lord's love and care for us, as being like adding colour to the picture.
 - It brings a warmth to the picture—understanding the Lord's Divine Providence is not just a matter of understanding some kind of cold, dry Divine calculus.
 - And even without the resolution improving, just adding colour significantly helps us to see the picture more clearly.



Conclusion

- Let me try to summarise the key ideas that can help us to understand how the Lord's Divine Providence works.
 - The Lord is in charge of everything.
 - He is good and loving and always working for our good.
 - There are a whole range of different things that happen—some are God's will and some are just things He permits and there are levels in between too.
 - He can and will bring good out of bad situations and good out of good situations.
 - The Lord cares about you and your pain and He's always working towards your eternal welfare.

- With all those ideas in mind I want to go back to those examples from the beginning and the question of what was meant to be and what was God's plan or not.

- And my recommendation is to let go of the why.

- Why did the storage box fall on the little girl's hand?

- 50 bazillion factors were involved—there's no simple, monolithic answer.

- And any time we try to say, "Oh *that's* why it happened!" it's going to be a very low resolution picture of what happened.

- Was it meant to be that that couple got together?

- We don't know.

- Was it God's will that they got divorced?

- It depends on the reasons but there are teachings about divorce in the Lord's Word and if the reasons why they got divorced were not in line with those teachings, then it's probably something that the Lord permitted instead of willing.

- Did the Lord still work to bring those people back to goodness and order?

- Absolutely!

- So let go of the question of whether something in the past was meant to be or God's plan and instead try to focus on trying to do God's will in the present moment—try your hardest to keep the Lord's commandments and do what He wants you to do and you'll gradually see a clearer and clearer picture of the Lord's loving providence for you.

- He said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (John 14:21).

- Amen.

