



# *Where is the Peace of God in a Violent World?*

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**November 2017**

## *Readings*

### **Psalm 91:1-6 (NRSV)**

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.”

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;  
he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night,  
or the arrow that flies by day,  
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.

You will only look with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.

Because you have made the LORD your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling place,

no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.  
For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.  
You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.  
Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honor them.  
With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

**Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* §234**

Laws of Permission Are Also Laws of Divine Providence.

There are no "laws of permission" that are simply that, or that are separate from the laws of divine providence. They are the same thing; so saying that God allows something to happen does not mean that he wants it to happen but that he cannot prevent it because of his goal, which is our salvation. Whatever happens for the sake of this goal, our salvation, is in accord with the laws of divine providence, since divine providence is always moving away from and contrary to our own intentions. It is constantly focused on its goal; so at every moment of its work, at every single step of its course, when it notices that we are straying from that goal it leads and turns and adapts us in accord with its laws, leading us away from evil and toward good. We will see shortly that this cannot be accomplished without allowing bad things to happen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. Translated by George F. Dole. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

It has been a grim time of late in the United States. We are overwhelmed with hurricanes, floods, and fires – that we often call “acts of God.” At the same time we are beset with violent shootings; often acts by people with mental disorders who can obtain guns legally and then massacre children [like at Sandy hook] or shoot randomly in a crowd that is enjoying music, like in Las Vegas. How do we come to grips with such events? Swedenborg tells us that the Divine is in all of creation. So how does that Divine bring tornadoes, hurricanes, and fires that kill so many innocent people and destroy the security of their lives?

How does God allow mentally disordered people to get away with atrocious acts that impact so many innocent lives? We debate the issues amongst us – how do we get more mental health treatment? Should we have more restrictions on access to guns? How do we miss “red flags” where a mass killer is preparing for a horrendous deed?

There are, of course, theological answers to the questions. I’ve given some of those explanations in sermons through the years. Yet, when faced with carnage in Las Vegas, much of Puerto Rico devastated by a hurricane – and now so many people in CA fleeing fires that threaten homes and lives – I feel outraged and grief-stricken. My prayers become: “So, God, where ARE YOU in this? Why can’t You just make these things stop?”

This week has been a valuable time to go back and take another look at those theological answers. Through the years, I’ve valued the little book by Rabbi Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It came out in 1981; Kushner sharing the tragedy of his three-year-old son dying of a degenerative disease. People tried to reassure him that “it was God’s will.” But the Rabbi found that to be an appalling theology. He could not accept a God who would take a young life for some Divine purpose. He came to see God as suffering with us in the realities of earthly life – not choosing to send us suffering.

I was in seminary when the book was first out; I remember thinking that honest emotional approach to God made more sense than a lot of things we were learning in “pastoral care” about comforting the grieving. Later I found Swedenborg, and felt that he had a theology to help us understand God’s role in terms of “free will.” I wished for a book like Kushner’s but within Swedenborgian theology. My wish was granted! In 2010 the Swedenborg Foundation released a book, *Why Does God Let It Happen?* by Bruce Henderson. This award-winning book incorporates many of

the insights of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Henderson’s book, however, is written from a specifically Swedenborgian perspective. It is hard to understand why God allows tragedy.

Henderson writes:

“Without the freedom to make mistakes that may lead to suffering in our own lives and the lives of others, we would be reduced to automatons. The same principle works on a spiritual level. If God were to meddle in our lives and change the course of history to preserve our own narrow sense of order and justice, where would he stop? God cannot pick and choose. His laws—and his love—must be absolute and consistent.”<sup>3</sup>

When I was a student at the Swedenborg School of Religion, one of my professors was the Swedenborgian scholar Rev. Dr. Robert Kirven. He wrote:

“Evil includes everything that flows from the hells, or comes about under hellish influences. Murder is evil, but the desire for murder; the intention to commit murder ... is sin.”

So, Swedenborg would see the shooting of people watching a concert as more than evil; it was intentional sin. Kirven goes on to say: “Swedenborg sees the basic, minimal freedom of choice as absolute, irreducible, and unbridgeable.”<sup>4</sup>

Understanding Swedenborg’s concept of free will can help us cope with tragedy. Henderson writes:

“We can wonder, with Rabbi Kushner, why “the wrong people” get sick or hurt, or die young. We can agonize with him over the “deep, aching sense of unfairness” over his son’s terminal disease. As people who are trying to do what is right in

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<sup>3</sup> Henderson, Bruce. *Why Does God Let it Happen?*. West Chester. Chrysalis Books, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Kirven, Robert: *A Concise Overview of Swedenborg’s Theology*. Newtown. J. Appleseed & CO. 2003

God's sight—living a religiously committed life—we would be tempted to ask the same question: If God truly is loving and fair, “How could he do this to me?” And not only how could he do this to “good parents,” but how could he do this to an innocent, three-year-old child? ...”

Rabbi Kushner has articulated the questions so well for so many people. He understands that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us, and that God does not sit on his throne, determining which of us will suffer misfortunes and which will be spared. But he does stand always ready to help, comfort, and lead. “The God I believe in,” Kushner wrote, “does not send us the problem; he gives us the strength to cope with the problem.”<sup>5</sup>

So, what can we take from Swedenborg in times of great tragedy-- personally or in our society? When we suffer, God suffers with us. Evil is not God's will; freedom of choice is God's will, since that is the only way we can grow into union with the Divine. In times of tragedy, it does not help to blame God for causing it. But it does help to support others in their suffering. It helps to reach out for others in our own pain. We were created to be social beings, in relationships with others.

I see God not in the actions of a deranged shooter, but in the compassionate actions of those in the crowd. Some gave their lives to save another life – by standing between a person and the bullet. Others focused on helping people find their way to a safe place. Hospitals moved into trauma mode and brought in extra staff. When the hospitals needed blood, the lines to give became 6 hours long. In Puerto Rico, many small towns were unable to get supplies, so neighbors helped each other, sharing their homes, their food, and their water. THAT is God.

That is God guiding us through Love and Wisdom to take action in the world, to help us towards the New Jerusalem. Ultimately, the healing journey for all of us is through our loving actions and caring relationships. To Swedenborg, faith could not exist apart from the good deeds we do for others.

Swedenborg tells us that tragedy is never God's will. But we are not helpless victims in a world of random violence. Ultimately, the healing journey of love and justice is through our actions

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<sup>5</sup> Kushner, Harold: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Archer. 2004

and relationships. Central to Swedenborg is that we can experience the Divine through our relationships with each other. Every loving action moves us closer to the New Jerusalem where we live in peace guided by God's will. God does have a will for all of us, that we love each other as God loves us and that we support each other through life's journey. Anything else is NOT God's will.