

Oh, Troubler of Israel

A sermon by Rev. Jeff Smith

Preached at BA Cathedral 7/23/2023

Good morning. We need to talk about your problems. What I mean by this is that we need to talk about the things that make you sad, angry, frustrated, furious, upset, agitated, annoyed, etc.—the events and/or people that trouble you. Today I simply hope to share some insights that might help you live a more peaceful existence. I pray that today's talk will help you let go of your attempts to control things over which you don't actually have any control ... and to recognize where you do have a modicum of influence in your life.

What kind of results do you think we would get if we were to put a simple post on social media saying, "What bothers you?" Let's see ... bad drivers; a spouse; crooked paintings; hair in one's food; snow; a certain pastor; the church; nice people. Almost anything in this world could be something that "bothers" someone. Are people and the world really the source of our troubles, annoyances, and hardships?

King Ahab in our story sure thought this way. Ahab was the worst of the kings of Israel to that point. For three years, there had been a drought in Israel. Why was this drought happening? It's because Elijah did it. Elijah pronounced this curse on the land, and so the blame is on him. When Ahab set his eyes on Elijah, he called him the "troubler of Israel."

We know very well that Elijah was not to blame. He was just the messenger of the Lord. But we also know that the Lord was not to blame. The Lord is Love and Wisdom itself. The true cause of the curse was Ahab's worshipping of Baal and other gods in the land. The true cause of the drought was that he had distanced himself from Jehovah. A simple lesson that we can take away from this story is that the Lord is not to blame for our troubles. When we choose to live outside of His Commandments, then the blame falls squarely on us.

Ok, we can't blame the Lord, but we can still blame bad drivers for making us raging mad, right?

To understand where our raging madness comes from, we need to lay down some doctrinal foundation by talking about degrees. Degrees are stages or levels in which there is a causal relationship, meaning, there is a necessary order and flow to the different levels. If we don't understand these levels and how they flow, then we will *never* properly understand spiritual life ... or natural life. We read in *Divine Love and Wisdom*: "People who are unaware of these degrees cannot with any judgment discern causes. They see only effects, and judge causes on the basis of these by a process of continuous induction from the effects" (185).

If we simply observe our various emotions as they come up, it makes perfect sense that we would place the cause of our emotions outside of us. For example, I observe that when somebody says something mean to me or otherwise threatens harm to me or my character, that I become upset, thus, the person is the source of my upset. And we state it that way, too: "You're making me angry."

But what power! What power one person wields over another, such that one can make another happy, sad, or angry! If this apparent paradigm were in fact true, I would hesitate to say that anybody is really spiritually free.

We do indeed experience emotions as a result of a “cause-and-effect” relationship. However, our experiences in the natural world are not the causes that lead to the spiritual effects of happiness or anger inside us.

Wait now. If the cause isn’t from outside of me, then the cause must be from inside of me. Does that mean I am the source of my own problems? And you are the source of your own problems? Is it then my fault that I feel anguish from how someone else treated me? Is it your fault that you can’t let go of regret?

Pause here. The purpose of understanding where our suffering comes from is not to cast blame. The goal is not to find out who ought to feel bad. The purpose is to understand how life works in order that we may live life more fully, more usefully, and more spiritually. Understanding how life works doesn’t let anybody off the hook. Trust the Lord that an offender will be held accountable for their deeds, regardless of how we feel about them.

During our readings, we heard this from *Heavenly Secrets*: “The interaction of the soul with the body is a communication of the spiritual [stuff] of heaven with the natural [stuff] of the world, when one flows into the other” (6057). This means that our bodily senses don’t flow into our spirit, thus the things we *hear, touch, see, and experience* don’t flow into our spirit to *make* us feel a certain way. It is the soul that flows into the body and outward.

And yet, the origin of our emotional experiences is not our own souls. Yes, our souls have issues, but they are not the origin of the evil or good that flows from our souls to our bodies. Swedenborg recounts his experience of how things flow into our minds, saying that he was able to experience the phenomenon of his thoughts and feelings flowing into his mind by means of the spirits with him. The good thoughts and feelings flow in from heaven through good spirits; and evil thoughts and feelings flow in from hell through evil spirits. When he experienced the evil thoughts and feelings coming in, he rebuked the evil spirits who were responsible. Have you tried rebuking any evil spirits recently? I recommend that you try it.

Our spirits reside in the world of spirits, which is in the middle between heaven and hell, and we are thus a conduit, or vessel for bringing good or evil into this world. Thus, also, we are not the source of the thoughts or feelings—good or evil—that come into our minds.

There is a lingering question, though ... why is it that we *feel* certain ways when we see a baby, or when someone we love is hurt, or when someone shames us in public, or when we stub our toe for the 50th time on a table? And why also might these same experiences evoke big feelings in us on one day, and leave us ambivalent on a different day?

The following from the book *Divine Providence* describes how a radio works: “[A person’s] love is the end [or purpose], its affections and perceptions are the cause, and the delights and thoughts of its affections are the effect” (n. 180). The loves at our core are like various radio stations emitting different frequencies. The delights or emotions we experience are like songs that play on our mind-

radio. We experience different feelings when we see that baby or when we get hurt because our experiences in this world auto-tune us to different radio stations connected to loves inside us. Depending on our spiritual location, we may more readily pick up one station or another. That is why one thing might bother us one day, and not the next. The experience is just an experience. The love-frequency that gets tuned in is what determines our emotional reaction.

In many ways, we aren't in control of how an experience affects us. We really aren't in control of the frequency that comes through our radio. It is this lack of control that gives the *appearance* that the outside world has troubled us ... or made us happy.

That being said, this doesn't mean we are out of control. We have control over our relationship with the Lord. You see, when we are out of relationship with the Lord, meaning we have stopped looking to Him and we look to ourselves, or relationships, or attention, or material things to make us happy, then we will end up like Ahab, who believed that the Lord did nothing for him and blamed Elijah for the troubles of Israel. If, however, we work to acknowledge the Lord's hand in our lives, and make an effort to move into a relationship with Him, the Lord draws us closer, keeping those Hellish frequencies more and more out of range. Think of it like listening to the radio on a car trip—the more you drive toward the Lord, the more heavenly stations come in range, and the hellish stations go out of range, making it so our experiences don't tune them in.

As with all spiritual endeavors, remedying our experience of troubles is a spectrum and a process. The *spectrum* of troubles ranges from trivial matters like breaking a glass or stubbing our toe to losing a job or witnessing a loved one being hurt by another. And the *process* is what goes on inside us. As we learn to trust the Lord's Providence gradually day by day—trusting that He will provide for our spiritual needs as we live His commandments—then He gradually helps us recognize the source of our troubles, and also the source of our happiness.

As we wrap up here, something needs to be said for those who have troubling or traumatic experiences that stay with them their whole lives. The reality that our thoughts and affections come from within us does not diminish the fact that one person can harm another, or take advantage of another's weakness, and neither does it remove each and every person's responsibility to love their neighbor. And the victim of another's offense is never ever at fault or to blame for what they experience. It is my prayer that knowledge of how these spiritual realities work can be a tool to empower those who have been deeply hurt by another.

We are taught and raised, and we learn through experience in this world that people have power over our emotional state and our ability to find peace in this life. The Lord says they don't. The emotional states that are evoked in us are nothing to feel guilt or shame about. After all, we don't control what brings them up. Emotions and feelings are merely indicators of the landscape of core loves that exist in us. And as those states come up, we can make a choice: we can blame the people and the world around us, or we can ask the Lord to change our loves and bring us ever closer to Him.

Amen.

Readings:

1 Kings 18:1-19

DLW 185 [2] Without a concept of degrees, one can know nothing of the difference between the interior faculties in people which are those of the mind, thus nothing of their state in regard to reformation and regeneration; nor of the difference between the exterior faculties in both angels and people which are those of the body; and nothing at all of the difference between something spiritual and something natural, and consequently nothing of their correspondence.

[3] It can be seen from this that people who are unaware of these degrees cannot with any judgment discern causes. They see only effects, and judge of causes on the basis of these, which is generally accomplished by a process of continuous induction from the effects. And yet causes do not produce effects through a continuous connection with them, but through a discrete one. For a cause is one thing and the effect another. The difference is like that between something prior and something subsequent, or between a formative force and the thing formed.

AC 6057 In the case of a human being, the spiritual world flows into the natural world in so vital a way that a person can discern it if he merely stops to pay attention to it. This also shows what the interaction of the soul with the body is, that strictly speaking it is a communication of the spiritual realities of heaven with the natural things of the world, a communication which is effected by one flowing into the other, yet depends on the way the two have been joined together.

DP 108 We find everywhere three concurrent elements in union, called end [or purpose], cause and effect. One's life's love in this case is the end, its affections with their accompanying perceptions are the cause, and the delights of its affections with their accompanying thoughts are the effect. For just as the end comes through the cause into the effect, so also does love come through its affections to its delights, and through its perceptions to its thoughts.