

God's Got This

A sermon by Rev. Jeffrey Smith

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If God is love, and God is omnipotent, then why do bad things happen? There are some who believe that God actually *does* cause bad things to happen to people in order to test and/or strengthen that person's faith. There are still others who do accuse God of causing evil in their life—people who raise their arms toward the sky and say, “Why me?!”

In our New Church faith, though, we don't believe that God causes evil, even with the intention of testing or strengthening someone's faith. God, who is love itself, simply doesn't do bad things.

Ok, so a loving God doesn't do bad things, but why does an all-powerful God *let* bad things happen? Isn't He all-powerful? I mean, He could stop it, couldn't He??

This line of thinking causes some people to lose trust in God or stop believing in Him because evil does exist in the world, and bad things do happen in our lives.

In the first story from our readings today, Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil after being tempted to do so by the serpent. The Lord had created two trees in the Garden of Eden, and He did so in order to give people a choice. One was the Tree of Life, which symbolizes our choice to listen to the Lord by living a life of love. The other was that Tree of Knowledge, which symbolizes our choice to listen to our self instead of the Lord, deciding that we know better than the Lord; we might say, then, that the second tree symbolizes evil, as anything that leads us away from the Lord is the definition of evil.

Couldn't the Lord have just made that Tree of Life and leave that Tree of Knowledge out of it? The answer is that it is impossible for the Lord *not* to have created both of those things. It is essential that people must be free, and in order to be free there must be choice. If we are not free *not* to love, then we are not really free *to* love, and then the love is not real. If we are not free to not listen to and follow the Lord, thus engaging in evil, then we are not really free to listen to and follow the Lord, then engaging in good.

We are free to choose to love God and the neighbor above all, or we can choose to love our self and the world above all. Does the Lord want us to choose the evil and selfish life? No, He doesn't. But He does allow us to, and this is what our teachings refer to as a *permission*. The Lord *permits* us to choose evil, but He *wants* us to choose good.

And there's another reason that the Lord permits us to choose evil and thus allows evil to happen in the world. As we just mentioned, the first reason was that the Lord had to leave us in freedom and so there has to exist the possibility to choose evil actions and more generally a life of evil, but this second reason is that the permission of evil in this world allows us to experience evil, both our own and that of others. If we are not free to express our evil inclinations and desires, then those evil habits stay hidden in the depths of our hearts, and they never come out to be seen and processed.

When we are permitted to act on our evil desires by hurting someone or by using hurtful words, then we can observe it more rationally with our own eyes and ears. We get to experience its effect on others and on ourselves, and we get to consider whether the action that came from selfish loves in our hearts is something that really brings happiness to us and those around us. And then we get to ask ourselves, “Do I want to keep on doing that and feeling that way?”

In our recitation today, we said these words, “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholds him with His hand.” The Lord’s providence permits us to act out the evils in our hearts, but He acts unceasingly to lead us back to Him, not unlike the prodigal son who returns home from a wasteful life of poor choices.

There is a third reason that the Lord permits evil in this world that I want to talk about. The first is that for the sake of our freedom and thus our ability to be human, it is necessary for us to have choice. The second is that, by permitting people to act on their evils, the Lord is able to bring our evils out into the open so that we can be repulsed by them. The third is the culmination of the first and second reasons, and that is that permissions exist for the sake of our salvation.

When you read through the Lord’s Word, there are so many ups and downs from Genesis all the way through Malachi. The idyllic Garden of Eden within just a couple chapters gives way to the fall, and not long after is the great flood. Then we get Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And then there are the Israelites, the 400 years of the Judges, and the 600 years of the Kings. And when was the Lord born? Not at the lightest and brightest time, but at the darkest time. The Lord didn’t *cause* the hardest time, but He *used* the hardest time as an opportunity to come into this world and save us.

The Lord doesn’t allow any evil to occur in this world without bringing some good out of it. In the immediate aftermath of Adam and Eve eating of the Tree of Knowledge, there is this prophecy: “He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” This is a prophecy of the Lord’s coming. A prediction of the good that the Lord would bring out of this evil.

When we are in the middle of difficult experiences or states of life, it can be hard to hear this teaching that is meant to bring us hope. When we are actively experiencing pain or anguish, or maybe in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy and we raise our arms toward the sky and say “Why me?!”, our faith is indeed being tested, but it is not the Lord who is testing us. The Lord is reaching out to us, ready for us to reach back out to Him. Yes, He permits evil in this world, but the only true Comfort from that evil is in the Lord’s embrace. He’s got this.

There are some difficult and evil things that the Lord permits until humanity is ready and willing to be raised up to a higher level of spiritual understanding and living. Our third reading from the Lord’s Word today was about Jesus being tested by the Pharisees about divorce. He tells them that the divorce that was permitted under Moses was only because of the hardness of their hearts, but it was not truly what God wanted. Why was the Mosaic manner of divorce that allowed a man to literally write off his wife permitted? It was in order to preserve the institution of marriage, although imperfectly. If a proper idea of marriage were mandated under Moses, the Israelites likely would have abandoned the institution altogether.

Like this permission of divorce, there are other imperfect doctrines and social and political institutions that the Lord permits either as a temporary lesser evil or as a place-holder for humanity until we are ready to be raised up to higher level of spiritual understanding and living. And I’ll remind you not to let go of trust in the Lord. Remember: He’s got this.

The Lord permitted Christianity for over a thousand years to believe in a trinity with an angry Father and a sacrificed Son, but He was waiting patiently for people to be ready to accept the teachings of one loving God.

God’s got this, too.

The Lord permitted people to believe in faith-alone doctrine for hundreds of years until people were ready to re-learn that faith is nothing without love.

God's got this, too.

We might worry about the wars and political strife both abroad and in our own backyards, with fear about who is or will be running our country next week or in two more years, but maybe, just maybe, the Lord is permitting it as He slowly leads humanity to a place where we can learn to set aside our natural differences and put our spiritual values above our political and worldly values.

God's got this, too.

When we consider social media and artificial intelligence, we might bemoan the detriment to human relationships technology seems to be, but maybe, just maybe, the Lord is permitting this era for a time because this is what people need right now, and technology might just be how the Lord spreads His church to the whole world in order to get humanity ready for the next state where the Lord can bring us higher.

God's got this, too.

Through all the ups and downs that we read about in the Lord's Word, and through all the ups and downs that we experience in our lives and observe in this world, the Lord always has been and always will be in control.

I want to mention just a couple caveats to this doctrine of permissions and the "God's got this" idea.

First, God *does* got this and always brings good out of evil, but that doesn't at all mean that what we do and what others do doesn't matter. For our path toward heaven, our intentions do matter. For making this world a better place, our actions to help others who are struggling through this life do matter. The Lord works through people, and if you take a look at your hands right now, the Lord works in this world through those hands.

Second, we must be careful not to use the teaching about permissions in the form of lesser evils as an excuse. It is dangerous ground to walk on to say, "Well, the Lord does permit this, and so it's okay." Or it might show up like this, "Well, I did hit you, but at least I didn't kill you, and so, you're welcome." The Lord granted us rational minds so that we might choose higher things over lower things, not use permissions and "lesser evils" as excuses for remaining in our selfish loves.

Let's wrap this up with a quick summary.

The Lord wants good for us, not evil.

The Lord permits evil so that we are free to act on our evil loves.

He permits us to act on our evil loves so that they can come out and be changed.

He permits evil to come out so that we can be saved.

The Lord permits evil only insofar as something good can be brought out of it.

God's got this.

And finally, a verse from Isaiah 59: *Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear.*

Amen.

Readings

Genesis 3:1-15. Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" Then the man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." So the Lord God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."

Matthew 1:20-21, 24-25. While [Joseph] thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

Mark 10:2-9. The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

AC 126, 128, 130 (portions). [By these words] "But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it", is meant that it is not allowable to probe into mysteries of faith by means of sensory evidence and factual knowledge. The worldly and bodily-minded man says at heart, "Unless I am taught about faith and about things that belong to faith by means of sensory evidence so that I see for myself, that is, by facts so that I understand for myself, I am not going to believe." This is eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The person who wishes to become wise from the world has for his 'garden' sensory evidence and factual knowledge. His 'Eden' is self-love and love of the world.

DP 237 (Dole). 237. Everyone who worships self and the material world instead of divine providence feels justified in this on seeing so many irreverent people acting out their irreverence in so many ways and even boasting about it, and still not seeing any kind of punishment from God because of this. Such people feel even more justified in their rejection of divine providence when they see the success of manipulation, plots, and deceit, especially against people who are devout, fair-minded, and honest, and when they see injustice defeating justice in legal and business affairs. Above all, they feel justified when they see irreligious people raised to high rank, getting positions of power in government and the church, amply supplied with wealth, and living in ostentatious luxury, while people who worship God are living in disgrace and poverty. People who worship themselves and the material world justify their rejection of divine providence as well when they think that wars are permitted, in which so many people are killed and so many cities, nations, and families plundered. Further, victories come to the prudent side and sometimes not to the just side. It does not matter, either, whether the commander is a person of integrity or not, and so on. All these matters are instances of permission under the laws of divine providence.

AC 10777. The reason why the designs of bad people meet with success is that proper order requires all people to use their reason when they do what they do, and also to act in freedom. Therefore unless a person were left to act in accord with his reason and in freedom, and so unless the designs carried out with the aid of reason and in freedom met with success, no one would ever be in a proper state of mind to receive eternal life. For this life is instilled when people are in freedom and their reason is enlightened. Goodness cannot be forced on anyone, because nothing remains fixed if it has been forced on a person; it is not his. The only things that become a person's own are those done in freedom; for things done in freedom are those that spring from the will, and the will is the person's true self. Therefore unless a person is kept in freedom to do even what is bad he cannot be provided with good from the Lord.