

“Divine providence works in an invisible,  
unfathomable way in order to allow us  
the freedom to ascribe events to either  
providence or chance.”

— Emanuel Swedenborg,  
*Secrets of Heaven* 5508

# CHANCE, GOOD FORTUNE, DIVINE PROVIDENCE

*Highlights from the Works of*

**EMANUEL SWEDENBORG**

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WHEN IT GETS RIGHT DOWN TO IT, Emanuel Swedenborg declares, “There is no such thing as chance.” That is, there is not an entity devoid of any cause. But “chance” is a handy word when we describe the way human events seem to play out.

When it comes to Fortune, we have an entity that does exist. Swedenborg writes, “For many years I have carefully observed whether fortune is anything.” Then the good news: “and I have found that it is!” (*Secrets of Heaven* 6494)

It is something. We begin our quotations with an appeal to the reader arguing that fortune exists and saying what it really is. The Latin word *fortuna* can be rendered either “fortune” or “luck.” Our first highlight speaks of luck, and even “Luck” with a capital “L.”

Consider the phenomenon of luck:

Is there anyone who does not talk about luck, anyone who does not acknowledge it? After all, we do talk about it and we know something about it from experience—but does anyone know what it is? No one can deny that it is something, because it does exist and it does happen, and nothing can be something or happen without some cause.

The passage continues,

Think of dice or cards, and either play or talk with players. Do any of them deny luck? They play with it, and it plays

with them, in quite wonderful ways. Can any succeed against it if it is against them? It laughs at prudence and wisdom then. When you roll the dice or deal the cards, does it not seem as though luck knew and managed the rolls and the deals of your wrists and for some reason favored one player more than another? Can the reason be found anywhere but in divine providence in outermost matters, where in constancy and in change alike it is working with our prudence in marvelous ways, all the while remaining hidden?

It is common knowledge that non-Christians once recognized Luck and built a temple to her, as the Romans did. Luck is not a figment of our imagination or a trick of the material world or something with no reason: that would actually be nothing at all. Rather, it is a visible witness that divine providence is present in the slightest details of our thoughts and actions. If divine providence is at work in the slightest details of such trivial and inconsequential matters, what else can we expect in the details of matters that are not trivial and inconsequential, in matters of peace and war in this world, and in matters of salvation and life in heaven? (*Divine Providence* 212)

We will come to the specific matters of war and peace. For now we turn from trivial games to the view of nature around us, the universe in which we live. In that universe, we grow and develop as trees in a garden. Of such a tree we now read as follows:

Just look at a fruit tree. See how it is first born from a tiny seed as a delicate sprout, how this gradually develops into a trunk that sends out branches, how these are covered with leaves, and how it then produces flowers, bears fruit, and sets new seeds in the fruit that provide for its endless future. It is the same for all shrubs and all the meadow grasses. Every least

thing involved in this process is constantly and wonderfully moving from its purpose to its goal according to the laws of its design. Why should the primary purpose, a heaven from the human race, be any different? Can there be anything in its process that is not going on at every instant in accord with the laws of divine providence?

Since there is this relationship between our life and the growth of a tree, we may draw a parallel or comparison. Our early childhood is like the delicate sprout of the tree emerging out of the ground from its seed. Our youth and young adulthood are like that sprout growing into a trunk with slender branches. The earthly truths that we all take in at first are like the leaves that cover the branches—this is exactly what “leaves” mean in the Word. Our first steps into the marriage of what is good and what is true, the spiritual marriage, are like the flowers that a tree brings forth in spring, and the spiritual truths are the petals of the flowers. The beginnings of the spiritual marriage are the fruit in its early stages. The spiritual benefits—good deeds done from a caring spirit—are like the fruit, and are what “fruit” means in the Word. The propagation of wisdom from love is like the seeds whose fertility makes us like a garden and paradise. In the Word, we are in fact described as trees, and our wisdom, which arises from love, is described as a garden. This is exactly what the Garden of Eden means. (*Divine Providence* 332)

It is because we are of more value to God than many sparrows or many plants that Swedenborg pictures this tender care of a simple fruit tree.

I offer this comparison to show that if the process of divine providence is so unfailing in the growth and reproduction of trees, it must by all means be unfailing in our own reformation and regeneration. We are far more important than trees,

as the Lord said: “Are not five sparrows sold for two little coins? Yet not one of them is left forgotten in the presence of God. No, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not be afraid; you are much more important than sparrows. Then too, who of you can with care add a cubit to his or her stature? So if you cannot do the least, why are you anxious about the rest? Look at the way the lilies grow. If God so clothes the grass in the field that is there today but is thrown into the oven tomorrow, how much more [will he clothe] you, O people of little faith?” (Luke 12:6, 7, 25, 26, 27, 28). (*Divine Providence* 332)

We see the tree in its place in the universe. A dozen times Swedenborg calls the universe “a kind of theater representing the glory of the Lord.” That universe as a whole and in every detail was created out of divine love, by means of divine wisdom.

**EVERYTHING THAT MEETS OUR EYE  
IN THE UNIVERSE  
BESPEAKS LOVE AND WISDOM**

Swedenborg writes:

Everything that meets our eyes in this world can serve to convince us that the universe and absolutely everything in it was created out of divine love by means of divine wisdom. Take any particular thing and look at it with some wisdom, and this will be clear. Look at a tree—or its seed, its fruit, its flower, or its leaf. Collect your wits and look through a good microscope and you will see incredible things; and the deeper things that you cannot see are even more incredible. Look at the design of the sequence by which a tree grows from its seed all the way to a new seed, and ask yourself, “In this whole process, is there not a constant effort toward

ongoing self-propagation?” The goal it is headed for is a seed that has a new power to reproduce. If you are willing to think spiritually (and you can if you want to), surely you see wisdom in this. Then too, if you are willing to press your spiritual thinking further, surely you see that this power does not come from the seed or from our world’s sun, which is nothing but fire, but that it was put into the seed by a creator God who has infinite wisdom. This is not just something that happened at its creation; it is something that has been happening constantly ever since. Maintenance is constant creation, just as enduring is a constant coming into being. This is like the way labor ceases if you take the intention out of the activity, the way speech ceases if you take thinking out of it, or the way motion ceases if you take the energy out of it, and so on. In short, if you take the cause away from the effect, the effect ceases.

A force is instilled into everything that has been created. However, the force does not do anything on its own; it depends on the one who instilled it. Look at some other subject on our planet. Look at a silkworm or a bee or some little creature and examine it, first physically, then rationally, and finally spiritually. If you can think deeply, you will be stunned at everything. If you listen to the inner voice of wisdom, you will exclaim in amazement, “Can anyone fail to see Divinity here? These are the marks of divine wisdom!”

Beyond this even, if you look at the functions of everything that has been created, you will see how they follow in sequence all the way to humanity and from us to our source, the Creator. You will see how the connectedness of everything depends on the Creator’s union with us; and if you are willing to admit it, the preservation of everything depends on this as well. (*Divine Providence 3*)

Take the formation of the human embryo:

The truth that the Lord's Providence is infinite and has what is eternal in view may be seen from the formation of embryos in the womb. The rudiments of things that have yet to exist are constantly being laid down there, so that one thing is always a basis for the next, faultlessly so, until the embryo is fully formed. Afterwards, too, once birth has taken place, each thing in succession is prepared with a view to the next and for the benefit of the next, so that a perfectly formed person may develop and at length be such as can receive heaven. If every detail is taken care of in this way when a person is conceived, born, and grows to maturity, what then of a person's spiritual life? (*Secrets of Heaven* 6491)

Angels tell of an order different from what we can see, but existing in the mind of the architect:

I have heard angels talking together about the Lord's providence, but of what they said, though I understood it, little can be described, because their speech was continually joined to heavenly representatives, but little of which can be expressed. They spoke wisely, saying that the Lord's providence is in the veriest singulars of all things, but not according to such an order as man proposes to himself, because things to come are both foreseen and provided; and that the case is like that of a person building a palace, who first collects materials of every kind, and lays them together in heaps, where they lie without order, while the kind of palace to be formed from them exists solely in the understanding of the architect. (*Secrets of Heaven* 6486)

**NOTHING IS PERMITTED THAT CANNOT  
BE TURNED TO GOOD**

Why doesn't the Lord prevent evils? He prevents them all the time! He is protecting people from evil in their waking

hours and in their sleep. When he does permit something to happen that is not according to his love, it is only to the extent that some good may result. This teaching is important.

At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph speaks to his brothers who had seemed to have ruined his life. Joseph said, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). At this point in the Genesis story *Secrets of Heaven* speaks of evil spirits who bring about harm. “But not one whit is permitted them by the Lord, except to the end that good may come of it” (§6579). Swedenborg teaches that “nothing” is allowed that cannot be turned to good. The hells are not permitted to bring forth “any other evils than such as can be turned into good” (§6663).

“God meant it for good.” How emphatic is the declaration here in *Secrets of Heaven*: “In the universal spiritual world reigns the end which proceeds from the Lord, which is that nothing whatever, not even the least thing, shall arise, except that good may come from it. Hence the Lord’s kingdom is called a kingdom of uses” (§6574).

Yet the worldly individual does not see this, and the materialist’s thoughts are here put into words:

Materialists who do not believe in divine providence think privately, “What is divine providence when evil people are promoted to high office, when their efforts are rewarded more than those of good people, when so many things go better for people who do not believe in divine providence than for people who do? Not only that, faithless and irreverent people can wreak harm, do damage, and cause misfortune to faithful and reverent people, and sometimes even murder them with their vicious schemes.” So they wind up thinking, “Can’t I see as clear as day from my own experience

that as long as we use our subtle skills to make our devious plots seem honest and fair, they will defeat honesty and fairness? What is left but necessity, consequences, and chance, with no visible trace of divine providence? Is necessity anything but a characteristic of the material world? Are consequences anything more than causal chains that flow from physical or civil order? Is chance anything more than unknown causes or no cause at all?" This is how materialists think, people who attribute everything to the material world and nothing to God; because people who ignore God ignore divine providence as well. After all, God and divine providence are inseparable.

Spiritual people think and speak differently, though, within themselves. Even though they do not sense the ongoing workings of divine providence in their thoughts or see it with their eyes, they still know and acknowledge it. (*Divine Providence* 175)

Despite the materialist's arguments, the question remains whether the material world, which is spiritually dead, can govern anything.

People who are completely materialistic say to themselves, "What is divine providence? Is it anything but a word that the masses hear from the clergy? Has anyone ever seen a trace of it? Aren't our planning and wisdom and deceit and malice the real causes of everything that happens in this world? Is the rest anything but needs and deductions and a lot of accidents? Is divine providence hidden away somewhere in all this? How can it be present in trickery and deceit? Yet these people say that divine providence is in control of everything. Show it to me, and I'll believe it. Can anyone believe in it otherwise?"

This is the voice of the strict materialist, but spiritually-minded people speak differently. Since they acknowledge God, they acknowledge divine providence too. They see it as well, but they cannot show it to anyone who thinks only in physical terms, on the basis of physical events. These people cannot raise their minds above the material world and see the signs of divine providence in its outward appearances. They cannot figure out anything about it on the basis of its laws, which are laws of divine wisdom. So if they were to see it with any clarity, they would make it material and thereby not only becloud it with distortions but also profane it. Instead of recognizing it, they would deny it; and anyone who at heart denies divine providence is denying the Lord as well.

We either think that God is governing everything or that the material world is governing everything. If we think that God is governing everything, then we think that this is love itself and wisdom itself and therefore life itself. If we think that the material world is governing everything, though, we think of physical warmth and physical light, which in and of themselves are dead because they come from a lifeless sun. Does what is essentially living not govern what is dead? Can what is dead govern anything? If you think that what is dead can give you life, you are out of your mind. Life must come from life. (*Divine Providence* 182)

### **SOMETHING IN PLACE OF RICHES AND HONORS**

Swedenborg says the following about people who think of prosperity in terms of worldly and bodily things, that is, honors and riches:

When they see many of the evil [people] abound in such things, and not so much the good, they reject from their heart and deny the divine providence in individual things,

not considering that divine blessing is to be happy to eternity, and that the Lord regards such things as are of brief duration, as relatively are the things of this world, no otherwise than as means to eternal things. Wherefore also the Lord provides for the good, who receive his mercy in time, such things as contribute to the happiness of their eternal life . . . (*Secrets of Heaven* 8717)

Swedenborg follows this with an indication that some people can handle riches without a problem and some people cannot. The Lord, he says, provides “such things as contribute to the happiness of their eternal life; riches and honors for those to whom they are not hurtful; and no riches and honors for those to whom they would be hurtful. Nevertheless to these latter he gives in time, in place of honors and riches . . .”

What could the Lord give in place of honors and riches? The final lines of this passage say his gift is “to be glad with a few things, and to be more content than the rich and honored.”

#### **CAN THE LOWLY BE HAPPIER THAN THE “FORTUNATE”?**

We will quote here from the book *Divine Providence*. It is addressing doubts about providence, specifically the doubts of those who complain that the unbelieving people often live in luxury while faithful people may be in poverty.

What is higher or lower rank; what is more or less wealth? Is it really anything but something we imagine? Is one person more contented or happier than the other? Look at a government official or even a monarch or emperor. After a few years, does their rank not become simply commonplace, something that no longer brings joy to the heart, something

that can even seem worthless? Are people of higher rank any happier on that account than people of lower rank, or even than people of no rank at all, like commoners or servants? These can be even happier when things go well for them and they are content with their lot. (§250)

#### ESCAPES FROM DANGER AND “CLOSE CALLS”

“Thank God,” people may say after a close call. Swedenborg says that in such cases what people say is far truer than they realize. “Who does not say when apparently by chance he comes out of some great danger, that he has been preserved by God, and also gives God thanks? And likewise when he is exalted to honors, and also when he becomes wealthy, he calls it a blessing from God” (*Secrets of Heaven* 5508). But he does not realize how true this actually is.

The eloquent rhetoric at the end of a war is also much truer than is realized even by those who compose the speeches. Here is what is said in *Divine Providence*:

Spiritual-minded people realize that the Lord is governing wars in this world by his divine providence, but materialists do not, except when a holiday is declared because of a victory. Then they may get down on their knees and thank God for giving them the victory; and they may have said a few prayerful words before the battle began. When they come to their own senses, though, they credit the victory either to their leader’s skill or to some decision or event in the middle of the battle, something that they did not think about at the time, but that led to the victory. (§251)

The passage then refers to fortune in the details of trivial games. “If you recognize divine providence in these matters, you must surely recognize it in affairs of war.”

## THE PERMISSION OF WAR

Quoting *Divine Providence*: “It is not because of divine providence that wars happen, because wars are inseparable from murder, plunder, violence, cruelty and other appalling evils that are diametrically opposed to Christian caring” (§251).

So, they are not of divine providing, not of the Lord’s will. But obviously they happen. They are allowed to happen. They are permitted. Swedenborg says that evil in the world and in ourselves is very real, and that if it was not allowed to break out, we would not see it and so could not be delivered from it. If you and I did not see objectively the effects of hatred or the love of domination, we would tend to deny that they exist. We would slide into an illusion about the human condition.

The heart of man is deceitful and “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). We might shrug this off as mere religious talk. The Gospels speak of the heart of man, saying that out of it proceed evil thoughts, murders, and other ugly things (Matthew 15:19). Again, we might be inclined to take this with a grain of salt and assume that things are not really so bad. But again and again, we are confronted with evil in its ugliness. The extremes are violent crimes against the innocent and actual war with its horrors and human suffering. Hell is real, and we need to pray every day, “deliver us from evil.” The aim of divine providence is that we shall be led out of evil and into the life of heaven.

Is it as simple as that? Notice what Swedenborg says:

There are several reasons hidden in the treasury of divine wisdom why the greater wars, with all their inevitable murder, plunder, violence, and cruelty, are not suppressed by the Lord, acting on the monarchs and leaders, either at the outset or while the wars are in progress. They are suppressed

only at the end, when the power of one side or the other has become so weak that there is a threat of extinction. Some of these reasons have been revealed to me. (*Divine Providence* 251)

Here the passage speaks of a future connection. There is “a connection between things past and things future that are known only to the Lord.” We cannot see a present incident in the light of what happens next, because we don’t know what is going to happen. Our ignorance of the future is one of the reasons we do not pretend to know or comprehend the whole of divine wisdom.

#### TAKING THE LONG VIEW

We discussed earlier how apparent misfortune is turned to good. It is useful to think of good in the long term. Here is what is said in the section on providence in the book *New Jerusalem*:

Divine providence does not regard that which soon passes away, and ends with a person’s life in the world, but it regards that which remains to eternity, thus which has no end. . . . Let anyone who can, think whether a hundred thousand years are anything compared to eternity, and he will perceive that they are not; what then are a few years of life in the world?

Everyone who rightly considers may know that eminence and opulence in the world are not real divine blessings, notwithstanding man, from his pleasure in them, calls them so; for they pass away, and also seduce many, and turn them away from heaven; but that eternal life, and its happiness, are real blessings, which are from the Divine; this the Lord also teaches in Luke:

*Make to yourselves a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where the thief approacheth not, neither the moth corrupteth;*

*for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Luke 12:33–34). (*New Jerusalem* 269–270)

### THE REAL MEANING OF CHANCE

On the first page of this booklet we noted that if “chance” means something without any cause, then there is no such thing. It is a handy word to use. There is a description in the book *Marriage Love* of boy meeting girl in the other world. They meet somewhere as if by chance, and he thinks, “She is mine.” She thinks, “He is mine.”

A definition of chance appears in *Secrets of Heaven* 6493, which says that chance is providence in the ultimates or outermost things of order. Or there is *Divine Providence* 212, the famous passage about dice and playing cards that we quoted on page two. The definition there says that chance is “a visible witness that divine providence is present in the slightest details of our thoughts and actions.”

So chance is something we can actually observe in life, while providence is something unobserved, like the motion of the earth beneath our feet or the hidden ocean current that bears our ship along. You may say that we see chance, but not providence. We see events influenced by chance, and this outward observation helps remind us of invisible reality—divine providence. For example, in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, the New International Version translation uses the word chance in the declaration that “the race is not to the swift.”

In usual circumstances, we are confident that the faster horse wins the race. You can bet on it. That is to say, you could confidently bet on it, were it not for life’s ingredient of chance.

But let us ask, can divine providence itself be visible to us? Can we ever see it? Actually, in a grateful state of mind, we see it all around us. We look at the way our life story

has unfolded and see that the Lord has protected and guided us. He has been working. And the working or operation of God is providence. One passage in *Divine Providence* 187 speaks of “seeing events in some wonderful series” and inwardly confessing providence. A humble person sees a wonderful sequence, a beautiful coincidence. He does not take credit for the good things that happen, for he sees providence in things great and small (*Divine Providence* 189).

### DIVINE PROVIDENCE IS COMPLEX BEYOND OUR IMAGINING

When confronting the happenings of life, some attribute them to “dead causes and not to the living cause” (*Secrets of Heaven* 8717). Or perhaps they think of “no cause at all” (*Divine Providence* 175) and use chance as a merely “empty word” (*Divine Providence* 70). But divine providence is wonderfully complex and beyond understanding. Just consider the following:

The Divine providence moves so secretly that scarcely a trace of it is seen, although it acts upon the most minute things of a person’s thought and will. . . . Love with its affections, which are manifold and innumerable, is perceived by man only by a most general feeling, and thus so slightly that there is scarcely anything of it; and yet that one may be reformed and saved one must be led from one affection of love into another according to their connection from order, a thing no man and even no angel can at all comprehend. (*Revelation Explained* 1153)

This passage goes on to say that the Lord acts “in infinite ways, that appear like a labyrinth even before the angels of the third heaven.”

In *Secrets of Heaven* 5894, Swedenborg adds: “With every man there is a concurrence every moment of more things of providence than can be comprised in any number. This I know from heaven.”

#### SEEING IT FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP

It is said that one can see providence in retrospect, and when one is in a spiritual state of mind rather than in a natural state (*Divine Providence* 187). A spiritual state is an elevated state in which we are lifted above merely worldly concerns. These states are like mountain outlooks rising out of a valley or dark forest. The individual may be compared to “one who is on a high mountain, in a watchtower, who is able to look around for many miles upon the things below; while they who are below, especially if they are in a valley or in a forest, can scarcely see as many paces” (*Secrets of Heaven* 2572).

And what if you want to find a way out of the forest? “Those who attribute all things to their own sagacity are like those who wander in dark forests, not knowing the way out, and if they find it they attribute it either to their own sagacity or to fortune” (*Secrets of Heaven* 6485).

There is a joke involving someone desperately seeking something. Let us say it is a parking space. After making an urgent prayer the individual suddenly finds a free parking spot, whereupon he cancels the prayer, saying, “Never mind; I found one myself.” People respond to this joke probably because they know of instances when a way out of the forest, so to speak, was discovered and then attributed to one’s own ability.

One way we lift our minds to a spiritual state is to turn to God in prayer, asking to be shown where we have been mistaken.

**AN INDIVIDUAL SEES IN HIS PAST  
ONLY AIMLESS CHANCE**

In the book *Heaven and Hell* we are given instances in which people who had recently died reflected upon their past thoughts. Some were ashamed at their previous notions and lack of belief. There is a particular incident involving a man who saw life as full of confusion. To quote: "There was a certain one who had confirmed himself in the notion that nothing is of the Divine providence, but that each and all things are of one's own intelligence, and are also from fortune and chance" (*Secrets of Heaven* 6484). That individual was taken back to the state of his childhood, and the angels witnessed that he had been led and protected through the steps of his life.

In *True Christianity* 177 is the following invitation to the reader: "My friend, go to God . . . you will be enlightened. Then, as if you were on a mountain top, you will see the earlier tracks and mistaken turns in the dark forest at the foot of the mountain—not only those of many other people, but also your own."

**WHY THE LORD HIDES  
THE WORKINGS OF PROVIDENCE**

We began this booklet with the saying that providence works invisibly and incomprehensibly, so that we may ascribe an event either to fortune or to chance (*Secrets of Heaven* 5508).

Here is further teaching on this subject:

The Lord, who provides all things and foresees all things, hides the operations of his providence, even to the extent that man scarcely knows whether there be any providence whatever, and man is permitted to attribute what he does to

prudence, and what happens to him to fortune, and even to ascribe many things to nature. (*Revelation Explained* 1159)

It is an actual law of divine providence that nothing of its operation or working should be obvious. But it is also a law that we should know about it and in freedom acknowledge it (*Divine Providence* 175). The knowledge that there is indeed a divine providence is a precious gift.

We have just mentioned ascribing events to “the living cause.” The implications of a living cause are heartening, making possible a deep optimism. Paragraph 6611 of *Secrets of Heaven* notes that our states of life are inconstant, as we seem sometimes to be carried upwards and sometimes downwards. But if we willingly allow ourselves to be regenerated, then through all the ups and downs we are being “continually carried upwards.”

Acknowledging this brings an inward sense of peace with the confidence that the Lord is “directing all things and leading to a good end” (*Secrets of Heaven* 8455). When we taste this kind of confidence, no worries about future things trouble us.

Wishing you such confidence, let me close with a final highlight from Swedenborg.

The divine providence of the Lord extends to the most minute things of a person’s life; for there is only one fountain of life, which is the Lord, for whom we are, we live and we act. (*New Jerusalem* 268). ☞