

WHY DOES GOD HAVE TO ACT MYSTERIOUSLY?

by Rev. Donald L. Rose

Maybe you have noticed that almost everyone seems to know the saying that God acts in mysterious ways. The source in literature goes back over 200 years. It was penned by a poet named William Cowper, who lived from 1731 to 1800. That one line in a hymn he wrote seems to be familiar around the world. "God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." The next line is, "He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm."

Presumably people quote or paraphrase the saying about the way God acts because it rings true in their experience. In the history of the world and in the story of an individual's life one can look back and remark that God has been at work, not in an obvious way, but in a hidden way. Over and over again people observe that what seemed unfortunate, turned out to bring blessings. How many people tell about the way they met their married partner with a kind of retrospective awe. At the end of Cowper's poem are the words, "Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."

Why should there be the hidden or mysterious ingredient in the ways of God? One answer often repeated by theologian Emanuel Swedenborg is "for the sake of freedom." In his book *Divine Providence* he says that it is a fundamental law of providence that people shall be free in spiritual matters. Their worship and their faith should not be compelled. Their acknowledgment of God should be a free response of mind and heart.

The following quotation from Swedenborg sums it up.

"The Divine Providence works invisibly and incomprehensibly in order that a person may in freedom ascribe an event either to providence or to chance." Swedenborg then quotes Scriptural passages on the way God prevents us sometimes from seeing and understanding. He keeps some people, as it were blind, "lest they should see with their eyes and understand with their heart" (John 12:40).

All of us are relatively blind to the present workings of providence. But when we look back on what has taken place we are able freely to acknowledge that something has been behind it all. It is something wonderful and beautifully mysterious.

One of the headings of the book *Divine Providence* says, IT IS GRANTED TO SEE THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN THE BACK AND NOT IN THE FACE. It goes on to explain what is to see "in the back" and "in the face." We are allowed to see providence "after it operates and not before."

This calls to mind a drama in the Bible that has a special mysterious quality. It is at the end of the 33rd chapter of Exodus. Moses dared to ask to see the glory of God. And God said that He would pass by Moses and while so doing would put His hand over his eyes. "Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."

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