

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 12: The Meaning of Providence

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ROMANS 8:38-89.

These well known words of Paul express the Christian faith in divine Providence. They are the first and fundamental interpretation of the disturbing words in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus commands us not to take any thought about our life and food and clothing, and to seek first the Kingdom of God, all of our daily life and needs are already known by God. We need such an interpretation. For there are few articles of the Christian faith which are more important for the daily life of every man and woman, and there are few more open to misunderstanding and distortion. And such misunderstanding necessarily leads to a disillusionment which not only turns the hearts of men away from God, but also creates a revolt against Him, against Christianity, and against religion. When I spoke to the soldiers between the battles of the last war, they expressed their denial of the Christian message in terms of an attack upon the belief in Providence. An attack which obviously drew its bitterness from fundamental disappointments. After reading a paper written by the great Einstein, in which he challenges the faith in a personal God, I concluded that there was no difference between his feeling and that of the unsophisticated soldiers. The idea of God seemed to be impossible, because the reality of our world seems to be in opposition to the all-mighty power of a wise and righteous God. Once, when I tried to interpret to a group of Christian and Jewish refugees the paradoxical character of the divine world-government in terms of Second Isaiah, a formerly eminent Jew from Western Germany told me that he had received many cablegrams from Southern France informing him of the horrible story of the sudden evacuation, from Germany, of nearly ten thousand Jews, of the age of ninety or more, and of their transportation to the concentration camps. He said that the thought of this unimaginable misery prevented him from being able to find meaning in even the most powerful message concerning the divine Providence.

What answer shall we give, what answer *can* we give to such a crucial problem, a problem in which Christianity as a whole is at stake, a problem which has nothing to do with a theoretical criticism of the idea of God, but rather which represents the anguish of the human heart which can no longer stand the power borne by the daemonic forces on earth?

Paul speaks of these forces. He knows them all: the horror of death and the anxiety of life; the irresistible strength of natural and historic powers; the ambiguity of the present and the inscrutable darkness of the future; the incalculable turns of fate from height to depth, and from depth to height; and the natural destruction of creature by creature. He knows them all as well as we do, who have, in our period, rediscovered them, after a short time in which Providence and reality seemed to be a matter of fact. But it never was, and never will be, a matter of fact. It is rather a matter of the most powerful, the most paradoxical, and the most venturing faith. Only as such has it meaning and truth.

What is its content? It is certainly not a vague promise that, with the help of God, everything will come to a good end; there are many things that come to a bad end. And it is not the maintenance of hope in every situation; there are situations in which there can be no hope. Nor is it the anticipation of a period of history, in which divine Providence will be proved by human happiness and goodness; there is no generation in which divine Providence will be less paradoxical than it is in ours. But the content of the faith in Providence is this: when death rains from heaven as it does now, when cruelty wields power over nations and individuals as it does now, when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now, and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of men as they do now, we can boast in that time, and just in that time, that even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God. In this sense, and in this sense alone, all things work together for good, for the *ultimate* good, the eternal love, and the Kingdom of God. Faith in divine Providence is the faith that nothing can prevent us from fulfilling the ultimate meaning of our existence. Providence does not mean a divine planning by which everything is predetermined, as is an efficient machine. Rather, Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event. Providence means that the daemonic and destructive forces within ourselves and our world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us, and that the bond which connects us with the fulfilling love can never be disrupted.

This love appears to us and is embodied in "Christ Jesus our Lord." By adding this, Paul does not use a merely solemn phrase, as we often do when we use the words. He uses them, rather, after he has pointed to the only thing that can destroy our faith in Providence, which is our disbelief in the love of God, our distrust of God, our fear of His wrath, our hatred of his Presence, our conception of Him as a tyrant who condemns us, and our feeling of sin and guilt. It is not the depth of our suffering, but the depth of our separation from God, which destroys our faith in Providence. Providence and the forgiveness of sins are not two separate aspects of the Christian faith; they are one and the same -- the certainty that we can reach eternal life in spite of suffering and sin. Paul unites both words by saying, "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ Jesus... who maketh intercession for us", and *therefore*, he continues, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." *This* is the faith in Providence, and this alone.

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