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God Is Good I

Last Sunday in our Bible class the problem of evil raised its ugly head once again. We were looking at the forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet of the Lord speaks to Cyrus of the singular divinity of the God of Israel. "I am the Lord and there is none else, there is no God beside me. I girded thee though thou hast not known me...I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things." (45: 5,7)

The reaction of the class was as it should have been. What does it mean, they asked passionately, for God to create evil? We know that He is perfectly and immutably good. Indeed, as Jesus said, "There is none good but one, that is, God." (Mark 10:18) So how can God be the cause of evil?

The point of the chapter was clear. The God of Israel is the only God. He is the omnipotent, omniscient creator, who guides the history of nations, and moves their kings to do His will. They are created in His personal wisdom. He knows them while they have not known Him.

The King James Version translates the troubling part of verse seven, "I make peace and create evil." If we turn to the Revised Standard Version we find, "I make weal and create woe." The New American Standard renders this in participial phrases, "causing well-being and creating calamity." And the New English Bible puts it, "author alike of prosperity and trouble."

The prophet understands the God of the Jews to be the most powerful of mysteries. But unlike the prophet, we try sometimes to skirt the mysterious implication of this verse by saying that the prophet does not really mean evil. For instance, one commentator on Isaiah asserts that this evil does not apply particularly to persons, but rather to a broad impersonal sense that would cover the course of nations.

I am afraid that such a distinction is, in fact, useless. Whether we translate this "evil" or "woe" or "calamity" or "trouble," the experience is always personal. It makes no difference if the context applies to the sovereign rule of God over the nations. A nation includes a collection of individuals, and it is the individual who suffers from evil. Not much can be accomplished with this verse by evading its depth of mystery.

As for the translation, in this case as so often happens, the King James Version is to be preferred. If the meaning of this word can be rendered

as it is in the various translations, "woe" or "calamity" or "trouble," then it is the word "evil" that serves as a logical genus for all of them together. What is woe but the grief and lamentation of affliction? What is calamity but the deep distress of some adverse circumstance or event? And what is trouble but disturbance of mind, perplexity, and vexation? The translation "evil" connotes all of these, all definitely personal.

"Evil" is the term that best renders the meaning of the text. And so our problem remains, and indeed comes more into focus. What can it mean that God causes evil?

The great Reformer, John Calvin, makes yet another distinction. What the prophet is speaking of, says Calvin, is the evil of punishment, not the evil of guilt. God is the author of punishment, which He brings upon sinful nations, especially His chosen, Israel and Judah. But God is not the author of sin.

Calvin's distinction is useful, albeit not full enough. The context of this part of the Book of Isaiah is that of the Jews in exile, awaiting deliverance at the hands of Cyrus. Babylon will be punished through the Medo-Persian Empire, just as Judah was through the Babylonian Empire. Calvin is right in saying that God often uses the agency of men to do His will. But it must be said, as something to which we will return later, that God's punishment is not arbitrary. He punishes in order to correct according to His inherent goodness and justice. His punishment has an intended end, which is always good. He will save Judah through Cyrus in order that the promise to Abraham and to His Seed, who is Christ, may extend to all the Gentiles.

Still the problem persists. God does indeed use the agency of men to do His will. (This says nothing about the event of natural calamity, which the Bible sometimes attributes to the work of God as well.) But the fact remains that there is need for punishment at all, that there is the actuality of sin provoking punishment. And here the inevitable, perennial question arises. How can such evil happen in the creation of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and good God? And if we assign the cause of evil to men and fallen angels, how can a good God permit this to happen?

The Christian answer to this question lies in the realm of creation, freedom, and love. The possibility of sin is necessary in a universe where rational creatures are given the potentiality of love. Love is a choice of the will.

I will continue with this difficult question in hope that what others, wiser than I, have said will help me to give credible answers. In the meantime, we remember one unalterable truth - God is good. Indeed, He is goodness itself.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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