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God Is Good III

The fact that God permits evil is very hard to accept, but it is true. The alternative is for us to posit evil as something equal to God, in which case we would ascribe to the universe a dual principle of good and evil, light and darkness. But a dual principle is contrary to the Christian faith, which holds that only God is absolute. "I am the Lord and there is none else, there is no God beside me." God is the absolute and He is absolutely good. "There is none good but one, that is, God."

Christianity does not accept a dualist view. We are considering the goodness of Him whose majesty is pure and unadulterated Light. In the words of St. James, God is "the Father of Lights, with whom is no variability, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

Or, instead of saying that God permits evil, we might say that God is himself responsible for evil. But this also is contrary to Christianity, which claims that God alone is holy. "To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? Saith the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25). "I the Lord your God am Holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

The final alternative is that which Christianity teaches; God permits evil. And so, let us review where we are in our argument.

Our discussion on evil began with the passage from Isaiah; "I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things." We have seen that God does not in fact create evil in the sense that He creates other substances, like the peach and the hippopotamus. Evil is privation of the good, whether of things, such as the blindness of an eye or the deafness of an ear, or of the angelic or human will, such as is the case with the rebellious angels, and disobedient mankind.

We considered first that accidental evil, the privation of things originally whole and pure, was a possibility from the beginning of the created order. With the fall of angels and of men, the created order gave way to disorder, death, and decay. The possibility of accidental evil became an actuality of concrete accidents. Now, daily, we experience the privation of things through accidents. Evil such as this is sufficiently bitter and grim.

We have now to consider the more grotesque form of evil, which led to the corruption of our world, and which now accounts for most of what we commonly think of as evil. It is the privation of the good will, or what we might call the change of the good will into an ill will.

When we look for the first cause of evil, we find that ill will is the occasion and cause of the corruption of man, and of the corruption of man's world. It is because of his ill will that the Scripture calls the devil a liar and a murderer from the beginning. He is a prime mover of evil. He used his inherent freedom to turn away from the light and to prefer the darkness. But his wickedness does not absolve mankind from complicity in the harsh actuality of ill will. When Adam disobeyed the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge, he preferred his own choice, his own will, to the will of the Creator.

We know all too well what the evil will is about, because we recognize it in our-selves. From the false witness of everyday gossip to the intentional act of malicious slander, from slightly felt jealousy to burning envy, from common self-assertion to unashamed egotism, at each and every level it is out of the heart of man that evils come.

It is not possible to emphasize this point too much. Every form of deception and violence, every atrocity of human history, every personal error and sin derives from the common source of the free will turned malignant. Pride, envy, wrath, avarice, sloth, lust, and gluttony are all the offspring of the heart. They are not of God. They are our own making, our private conception and precious possession. Not only do we do them; we approve of them. And to make bad matters worse, out of this malignant offspring develop perverse habits that overtake and enslave in powerful addictions of the soul. Habitual sin takes opportunity from God's good gifts to abuse power and to betray love. Bad habits neglect things left undone which we ought to have done, and bad habits do those things which we ought not to have done. In the words of Thomas Cranmer, "There is no health in us." We are the creators of evil. It is the "devices and desires of our own hearts" that has plunged our world into suffering and sorrow at every level of living creature.

Why, then, has God allowed all the sorrow and pain that issue from our evil? From one point of view, God has allowed this as a form of punishment. For instance, in the book of Isaiah, God uses the rule of Cyrus to punish Babylon and to restore the Jews from exile. But the larger biblical picture goes beyond mere punishment to see the restoration of God's people as the eventual means for the advent of the Savior of mankind.

It is here that we find the true and comforting reason for the divine permission of evil, both accidental and that of the ill will. As St. Augustine taught, and as Christian history has since understood, God allows evil because He intends, He wills, to turn every act of evil to the higher purpose of His goodness. One remembers the story of Joseph who sees the hand of God using the treachery of his brothers to provide ultimately for his and their good. "But as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

God does not turn our evil in the way that robs us of our freedom, but in the way that moves our freedom by love. The purposes of His love are nothing less than to make us good and to make us loveable. God can do this and He wills to do this because He is good and all knowing and all-powerful. We need not despair that God stands aloof from our evil and pain and sorrow. He draws near in the lives of a young maiden

and a carpenter from Nazareth.

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