

*GOD NOT THE AUTHOR OF EVIL, BUT
OF GOOD.*

“Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect boon is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, in whom is no change, nor shadow cast by turning. Of His own will begat He us, by a word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruit of His creatures.”—JAMES i. 16-18.

THE origin of evil is a problem which, in all probability, will never be solved until we reach the world in which there is no evil. But though we cannot solve it, and do not much hope to solve it, it is a problem to which our thoughts will recur; it presses itself on us at every turn, and we are grateful for any hint that lightens the pressure. If only we knew how to state the problem, or even how to approach it, that would be something; it would be much, for a question rightly asked is already half answered. And I think we should do well to approach this problem from its brighter, rather than from its darker, side. I see more hope of our learning what evil is, and even whence it came, if, instead of at once attacking these questions, we first ask ourselves what goodness is and whence that came.

Now by “goodness” we mean moral goodness; goodness as it exists, or may exist, in man. And by human or moral goodness we mean, not a mechanical and involuntary conformity to law, but a free and willing choice of the righteousness which the law ordains. A compulsory rectitude, a mechanical and necessary conformity to law, is *not* rectitude; it implies no goodness, no virtue, in the sense in which we apply those terms to men. If I do what is right, not of my own free will, but simply because I cannot help it, because there is some force or law in my nature which irresistibly compels me to do it, I am no more good than the stars are good for keeping their orbits, or the

flowers for opening their leaves. Moral goodness implies free choice, and how can there be a free choice of that which is good if there be no possibility of choosing evil rather than good? The will of man *must* have this solemn alternative before it—good or evil—if it is ever to become a good will.

God does not *make* us good therefore, but He has so made us *that we may become good*; and in order that we may become good, we must be free to choose evil. How can He *make* us good if goodness means a free choice of that which is good? If He were to constrain our will, leaving us no alternative, we might have the goodness proper to the inanimate or irrational creation, but we could not have the goodness proper to humanity. *He* is good, perfectly and absolutely good, because His will is fixed in its choice of goodness; and only as our wills rise to that steadfast attitude can we become good.

Now if we start from this conception of goodness, we shall define its moral opposite, *evil*, as the wrong choice of the will; we shall say that, just as men become good by freely choosing and doing that which is right, so they become evil by freely choosing and doing that which is wrong. And we shall not blame God for their bad choice, nor for leaving them free to make it; we shall admit that He must leave their will free if they are to be really good, and that, if the will is to be left free, it must be possible for them to choose evil rather than good. Thus we shall reach the conclusion that evil is from man, not from God; that it is no fatal necessity imposed upon them from above, but a wrong choice which they have made when a right choice was open to them.

This, as you know, is the conclusion of St. James. He will not hear of evil being from God, of its being "a lower form of good," or "goodness in the making." God, he says, is unversed in evil, incapable of it. It has no seductions

for Him. He is too wise to be deceived by it, too pure to feel any charm in it. Evil does not come, and cannot come, from Him, because it has no existence in Him. It comes from men, to whom evil may assume the form of good, betraying them into a wrong choice. Every man, says the Apostle, has some craving in him which may grow into a lust; some craving which, though innocent in itself, may be allowed to run to excess and demand an unlawful indulgence. That which is pleasant to our eyes may become so pleasant and desirable that, to gratify our longing for it, we break through all the restraints of law and reason and conscience; and thus we may be enticed by our lust into a sin, and the sin may breed a habit of sinning, and this habit may unknit all the energies of life till at last we lapse into death.

But all this is not the will of God for us. He has appointed us unto life. He is ever seeking to restrain the passions and lusts that work death in us, to draw our wills into harmony with His pure and righteous Will, that we may become as incapable of evil as He Himself.

That evil springs from human lust, not from the will of God, St. James has shown us in the verses which precede these; and he now goes on to show how impossible it is that evil should come from God by considerations drawn from what God is in Himself, and from what He has done for us.

Even his opening phrase, "*Do not err*, my beloved brethren," indicates that he is about to resume and carry further the argument with which he has already dealt; for the words rendered "*do not err*" occur in other places in the New Testament, though in every other passage they are translated, "*Be not deceived*"; and wherever the phrase is used, it implies not only that the theme in hand is of grave moment, and one in which we may easily fall into grievous mistake, but also that it is about to be pushed

a step further, that a new aspect of it is to be placed before us, or a new argument brought forward to confirm it.

Now on this question of the origin of evil men do perpetually err. They ascribe it to a Divine origin. They attribute the force of passions, which they have not learnt to rule, to their constitution and temperament; *i.e.* to Him who, as they put it, "made them what they are," forgetting how much they have done to make or unmake themselves. Or they ascribe the indulgence of these passions to the force of circumstances; *i.e.* to the providential arrangements of God. The old excuse, "The woman whom *Thou* gavest to be with me, she tempted me, and I did eat," takes a hundred different forms on the sinner's lips, but always rings out with the tones of that ancient reproach. Nay, even good men, basing their opinion on passages of Scripture which they have not studied in their original connexions—such passages, for example, as "I (the Lord) form light and *create darkness*, I make peace and *create evil*," which have nothing to do with the question before us—often conceive of evil as being, in some sense, the work of God, and bow before a mystery they cannot explain.

St. James will have no part in such opinions as these. He affirms that they are "deceived" who frame and hold them. Evil only too certainly *is*, but he is sure that it is not from God. And he tries to make us sure by giving us the facts and arguments which had most impressed his own mind.

His first argument is drawn from the conception he had formed of the nature of God. God cannot be the author of evil, he argues, because He is the author of good, because He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. "*Every good gift and every perfect boon*" is from Him; or, as the Greek implies, all that comes to us from God is good, and every good gift of His bestowal is perfect as well as good, perfect in kind and degree. But if all He gives is

good, and even perfect, how can evil and imperfection spring from Him? "Doth the fountain send forth, from the same jet, sweet water and bitter?" And if we cannot have bitter water and sweet from the same spring, how can good and evil flow from the same source? As Bishop Sanderson has it, "We are unthankful if we impute any good but to God, and we are unjust if we impute to Him anything but good."

St. James, however, is not content with the argument from the acknowledged and absolute goodness of God. With the ease and simplicity which we so much admire in the proverbs and parables of our Lord, he rises into a fine illustration of his argument. The illustration comes to this: "You might as well, and much more reasonably, attribute darkness to the sun, as impute evil to God." But mark for a moment with what a natural and unforced ease he passes to his illustration. He had said, "Every good gift and every perfect boon is *from above*," from yonder fair, pure world on high. And as, in thought, he glances upward to that world, he sees the sun which God has set to rule the day, the moon and the stars which He has set to rule the night. Of these lights God is "the Father," and of all lights. But can the source and fountain of all light be the source and fountain of all darkness? Impossible. The sun gives light, and only light. If we are in darkness, that is only because the world has turned away from the sun, or our hemisphere of the world. And, in like manner, God gives good gifts, and only good. If we are plunged in the darkness and misery of evil, that is not because He has ceased to shine, or has ceased to be good and to do good, but because we have turned away from Him, and abused His gifts to our hurt.

Thus, and so naturally, does St. James bring in his illustrative thought. But even yet he is not content with it. The thought grows as he considers it, grows somewhat

thus. The Father of the lights must be more perfect than the lights He has called into being. They vary; even the sun for ever shifts its place, and its relation to the earth. They move and revolve; the sun seems to forsake the earth and leave it in darkness, and the moon turns on its axis, averting from us its bright face, and casting its shadow over the world. But whatever inconstancy there may be in them, there is none in Him who made them. The original Source of light must be all light, and pure, unchanging light. The Light which kindled the sun must be above that of the sun. There can be no darkness in Him or from Him. From Him there ever streams down the influences which enlighten and fructify the world. He is good, and doeth good only and continually.¹

So that St. James's first two arguments against attributing evil to God are the negative and positive aspects of one and the same argument. He argues, first, that evil cannot be from God, because there is no evil in Him; and, secondly, because He is the sole Source of all good, because none but good and perfect gifts come down from Him.

And now he advances another step. He argues that evil cannot be of God, because, of His own free will, God sets Himself to counterwork the death which evil works in us, by quickening us to a new and holy life: "*Of His own will begat He us, by a word of truth.*" We may find it difficult to frame any conception of the nature and character of God that will always be authoritative to us, and unimpeachable. How then shall we come to know Him, and even to know Him as He is? Nature and Providence speak, or seem to speak, of Him with questionable and conflicting voices. If at times they reveal His lovingkindness, at other times

¹ St. James's words, *without shadow or turning*, are capable, in the original, of an interpretation ("without parallax or shadow cast by revolution") that accords more or less with the technicalities of modern science, and have often been forced into accordance with it. But it is an obvious anachronism to credit him with a knowledge of the terminology of modern astronomical science.

they reveal His severity. Where shall we find an authority that will end the strife?

Well, if we are perplexed about the character of any great man, can we do better than take the greatest action of his life, that which he did most freely and in his most characteristic way, and infer the prevailing bent of his character from that? If, for example, you doubt, from what you see of the petty details of his life, whether a man be stingy or generous, and can reach no certain conclusion about him; and if, while you hang in doubt, you learn that on a certain critical occasion he freely gave or risked all that he had in order to save from ruin a neighbour who had no claim upon him, nay, who had injured and maligned him,—would you thereafter have any doubt what his true character was? From that time forth you would hold him to be of a noble and generous spirit.

Somewhat in this fashion would St. James have us reach our conception of the Divine character. He would have us ask, “What event is there in the history of the world in which God most spontaneously and most fully revealed Himself to men?” And, of course, if we ask that question, the answer must be, that in all which is connected with the gift of His Son for the redemption and renewal of mankind, we have God acting most freely—for what was there in us to induce such a sacrifice?—and most clearly and fully disclosing His character—for what greater thing than this could even He do for us?

Take then this salvation, this new birth of the spirit in man, and what light does it throw on the question, “Whence does evil spring? can it come from God?” It we, when we were sinners, were redeemed and made anew by the free action of the Divine will, can we for a moment suppose that evil sprang from the will which delivered us from evil? Must we not gratefully confess that when we see the will of God acting most freely, it works for a good

so vast and undeserved as to be well-nigh incredible? We must and do confess it. We acknowledge with joyful certainty and gratitude that He who begat us to a new and holy life, when we were "dead in trespasses and sins," must hate the evil from which He delivered us, that He cannot have been the author of that which He sent His Son to destroy.

But here, finally, an objection may be urged to our conclusion which, though it would not suffice to overthrow it, might, if it could be sustained, deprive us of the pleasure with which we rest in it. It may be said, "You who are redeemed, and born anew by the grace of God, at the word of His truth, may have reason to believe in His goodness: but what reason has the world at large, the world which is not saved as yet?"

Perhaps, in logic, it would be a sufficient answer to this objection were we to say: "The world *may* be saved if it will; God is always trying to save it; but, as we have seen, good as He is, He cannot make men good against their will. Goodness is a free choice of that which is good. And hence, if the world is not saved, it is not because God is not of an absolute goodness, but because the world is of an evil will, and will go after its lusts."

Logically, the answer is fair enough; but our hearts are not to be satisfied by mere logic, and they crave a more tender and hopeful answer than this. Happily, St. James supplies the very answer they crave. God, he says, has begotten *us*, by some word of truth which met our inward needs, into a new and better life; and therefore we are sure that He hates evil and death. But He has begotten us, not simply that we ourselves may be saved from evil, but also "*that we should be a kind of firstfruit of His creatures.*" Now the consecration of the firstfruits of the earth was a recognition of God's claim to the whole harvest, and a pledge that it should be devoted, in various ways, to

His service. This was the great lesson of the firstfruit offering. It was not a tax on payment of which the harvest was to be exempted ; it was a confession that it was all the gift of God, and was all due to Him. When, therefore, St. James says that the regenerate are a kind of firstfruit of the creation, so far from implying that they alone are to be saved, he implies that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," and that "the whole creation" shall have a part in their redemption. How the mercy which is *over* all is to come *to and upon* all, is a mystery we cannot fathom. But our hearts do not insist on apprehending that mystery, though they desire to look into it. They are content with the hope, the consolation, that in some way their own new life is the pledge of new life to untold myriads of mankind. To be saved from the clutch of evil is much ; but, oh, how much more if our redemption implies a redemption which extends through the entire universe ! To be ourselves brought into the temple and laid on the altar of God were much ; but that which completes our blessedness is that we are brought in as a kind of firstfruit, a pledge of the coming harvest.

St. James, then, has four arguments against attributing evil to God. Evil cannot be from God, (1) because there is no evil in Him ; (2) because all that comes from Him is good ; (3) because of His own free will He has quickened the life that conquers evil in many souls ; and (4) because it is His design that, at the last, evil shall be overcome of good, and death be swallowed up of life.

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