

The Mystery of Evil

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God is good and all His creatures are good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, etc.). But the presence of evil in and around us baffles us and defies any rational explanation. God is not the author of evil. Instead of blotting it out entirely from the created realm, God tolerates evil and uses it to serve his plan, in which the evil has a positive role to play. What follows below is a reflection on this role of evil in the mystery of God's salvific plan for mankind.

1. Inscrutable Plan of God

Paul the Apostle goes into ecstasy as he reflects on the inscrutable plan of God: "Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his adviser? Who has given anything to him, so that his presents come only as a debt returned? Everything that exists comes from him and is caused by him and exists for him. To him be glory for ever" (Rom 11:34-36)! God's plan/will is absolute - "Nothing can be added to them, nothing subtracted, it is impossible to fathom the marvels of the Lord" (Sir 18:6) and, "with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow caused by change" (Jas 1:17). Therefore, "There is no change of mind on God's part about the gifts he has made or of his choice" (Rom 11:29). The Apostle writes to the Corinthians on the mysterious plan of God: "It is of the mysterious wisdom of

God that we talk the wisdom that was hidden, which God predestined to be for our glory before the ages began. None of the rulers of the age recognised it; for if they had recognised it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but it is as scripture says: What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualise; all that God has prepared for those who love him; to us, though, God has given revelation through the Spirit, for the Spirit explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:7-10).

God’s sovereignty is supreme and no one else can challenge it. God is “far beyond our reach. Supreme in power, in equity, excelling in saving justice, yet no oppressor” (Job 37:23). As king David extols, “Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the splendour, length of days and glory, everything in heaven and on earth is yours. Yours is the sovereignty, Lord; you are exalted, supreme over all” (1 Chron 29:11). And, “You have no right to demand guarantees where the designs of the Lord our God are concerned. For God is not to be threatened as a human being is, nor is he, like a mere human, to be cajoled. Rather, as we wait patiently for him to save, let us plead with him to help us. He will hear our voice if such is his good pleasure” (Jdt 8:16-17). Therefore, the Apostle Paul declares: “If God wants to show mercy on someone, he does so, and if he wants to harden someone’s heart, he does so. Then you will ask me, ‘How then can he ever blame anyone, since no one can oppose his will?’ But you - who do you think you, a human being, are, to answer back to God? Something that was made, can it say to its maker: why did you make me this shape” (Rom 9:18-20)?

Man is subject to his Creator’s plan, according to which “a hard lot has been created for human beings, a heavy yoke

lies on the children of Adam from the day they come out of their mother's womb, till the day they return to the mother of them all" (Sir 40:1). Each one has to make his choice: "A human being has life and death before him; whichever he prefers will be given him" (Sir 15:17). God is not the author of evil but he uses it to our advantage as our Saviour. As his creatures, it is not for us humans to challenge God's wisdom which will triumph in any case.

2. Evil in the Plan of God

The Sacred Scripture says: "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). But "Death came into the world only through the Devil's envy" (Wis 2: 24a). God, in his wisdom, had anticipated the fall of Adam and that was in the plan of God; for "mere human nature cannot inherit the kingdom of God: what

is perishable cannot inherit what is imperishable" (1 Cor 15:50). Therefore, "this perishable nature of ours must put on imperishability, this mortal nature must put on immortality" (1 Cor

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15:53). And, "while we are still alive, we are continually being handed over to death, for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may be visible in our mortal flesh. That is why we do not waver; indeed, though this outer human nature of ours may be falling into decay, at the same time our inner human nature is renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:11, 16).

God subjected the entire creation to futility in order to redeem it: “it was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it- with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God” (Rom 8:20-21). The ‘disobedience’ here is an obvious referred to the sin of, Adam through whom “sin came into the world, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned” (Rom 5:12). Thus, although God “created human beings to be immortal, he made them as an image of his own nature” (Wis 2:23), “human beings are not immortal” because of sin that brought death (Sir 17:30) and, “flesh and blood think of nothing but evil” (Sir 17:31). God uses the envy of the Devil to realize His salvific plan: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom 11:32). The Apostle exclaims: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom 11:33)!

The purpose of enslaving all human beings to sin was “only to show mercy to them all” (Rom 11:32b). Having affirmed this, Paul the Apostle goes into an ecstatic mode on the inscrutable plan of God: “How rich and deep are the wisdom and the knowledge of God! We cannot reach to the root of his decisions or his ways. Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his adviser? Who has given anything to him, so that his presents come only as a debt returned? Everything there is comes from him and is caused by him and exists for him. To him be glory for ever? (Rom 11:33-36)! God’s mysterious plan encompassed not only human beings but also the whole creation: “the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to

be revealed. It was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it - with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God. We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains” (Rom 8:19-22).

The Apostle Paul gives us a graphic description of the human condition enslaved to sin: “I do not understand my own

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behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate. While I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the Law as good, so it is not myself acting, but the sin which lives in me. And really, I know of nothing good living in me - in my natural self, that is - for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want - that is what I do. But every time I do what I do not want to, then it is not myself acting, but the sin that lives in me. So I find this rule: that for me, where I want to do nothing but good, evil is close at my side. In my inmost self I dearly love God’s law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which battles against the law in my mind. So I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body” (Rom 7:15-23).

God alone can deliver man from his enslavement to evil: “Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? God - thanks be to him - through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom

7:24b-25a). According to God's master plan, Christ "was marked out before the world was made, and was revealed at the final point of time for your sake" (1 Pet 1:20). Christ's mission was directed to freeing the human race "from the slavery of sin" (Rom 6:6) and become children of God and "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory" (Rom 8:17). To be eligible for redemption, one finds oneself enslaved to sin "as Saviour of the world." (1 Jn 4:14). God let the whole human race fall into slavery to sin so that he would reveal himself as God of merciful love: "God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved" (Jn 3:17). For, "love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins" (1 Jn 4:10).

3. The Role of the Evil

The evil is not just an accidental but rather an indispensable means to the realization of God's plan. He "wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4) and "the point of all our toiling and battling is that we have put our trust in the living God and he is the Saviour of the whole human race but particularly of all believers" (v. 8). Saint Luke has Paul the Apostle say in *The Acts*: "We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Ben Sirach would say: "Gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation" (Sir 2:4-5). Saint Peter reverberates the same view when he writes: "The merit in the sight of God is in putting up with it patiently when you are punished for doing your duty. This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow in his steps"

(1 Per 2:20-21) To crown it all, we have the categorical declaration of Jesus: “No one who does not carry his cross and come after me can be my disciple” (Lk 14:27).

The evil, thus, plays a pivotal role in God’s salvific plan for human beings. God the Potter tests his work of art in the kiln of varied afflictions, just as “the kiln tests the work of the potter, the test of a person is in conversation” (Sir 27:5), One day the disciples of Jesus asked him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?” ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered, ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him’ (Jn 9:2-3). Evil is overcome by “the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord” won by his Self-emptying that culminated on the cross (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Heb 5:7-8).

Reassuring his disciples, Jesus said: “Be courageous: I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33) and “every child of God overcomes the world. “The victory that

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has overcome the world - our faith - . . . (by) the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 Jn 5:4-5), “because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). Therefore, “the Evil One has no hold over him” (1 Jn 5:18). Any victory over evil would mean overcoming the world and the Evil One in it because “the whole world is in the power of the Evil One” (1 Jn 5:19) and “everything there is in the world - disordered bodily desires, disordered desires of the eyes, pride in possession - is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 Jn 2:16).

Using trials and hardships, “God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good” (Rom 8:28), as he does with the branches of Christ the true Vine: “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more” (Jn 15:2). The cleansing is done “by means of the word that I have spoken to you” (Jn 15:3), “something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgement on secret emotions and thoughts” (Heb 4:12).

A very important consideration is that God, for whom nothing is impossible, can convert what is evil into good. Bible offers us a number of instances to substantiate this; God turns the evil designs of the brothers of Patriarch Joseph in the O. T. to their own advantage, as Joseph told them: “The evil you planned to do me has by God’s design been turned to good, to bring about the present result: the survival of a numerous people” (Gen 50:20). Although Adam brought down the whole humankind with his fall, God turned it into a blessing by sending His own Son as the saviour of the whole human race.

4. Christian Response to Evil

God not only tolerates evil but also he uses it in the realization of his salvific will. The Christian has to fall in line with God’s plan. He must tolerate it and learn to live with it, taking every care not to be overcome by it. The Apostle shows us the way: “that I should not get above myself, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself. About this, I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave

me; but he has answered me, ‘My grace is enough for you; for power is at full stretch in weakness.’ It is, then, about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ’s sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong” (2 Cor 12:7-10).

For the Christian, the end does not justify the means. He cannot resort to violent means to redress his grievances. Jesus lays down the norms to deal with evil and its perpetrators: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. To anyone who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek as well; to anyone who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from someone who takes it. Treat others as you would like people to treat you” (Lk 6:27-31). The Apostle Paul codifies Christian response to evil so lucidly: “Never pay back evil with evil, but bear in mind the ideals that all regard with respect. Do not be mastered by evil, but master evil with good” (Rom 12:17, 21; cf. 1 Thes 5:15). “Never repay one wrong with another, or one abusive word with another; instead, repay with a blessing. That is what you are called to do, so that you inherit a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9).

Our attitude towards evil administrators/rulers is to be governed by the norms laid down by the Gospel: “pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and God what belongs to God” (Matt 22:21). The Apostle Paul lays down the following general norm: “Pay to each one what is due to each: taxes to the one to whom tax is due, tolls to the one to whom tolls are due, respect to the one to whom respect is due, honour

to the one to whom honour is due” (Rom 13:7). This is the logical conclusion to the principles he lays down to govern the attitude towards authority and obedience: “Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God. So anyone who disobeys an authority is rebelling against God’s ordinance; and rebels must expect to receive the condemnation they deserve. Magistrates bring fear not to those who do good, but to those who do evil. So if you want to live with no fear of authority, live honestly and you will have its approval; it is there to serve God for you and for your good. But if you do wrong, then you may well be afraid; because it is not for nothing that the symbol of authority is the sword: it is there to serve God, too, as his avenger, to bring retribution to wrongdoers. You must be obedient, therefore, not only because of this retribution, but also for conscience’s sake. And this is why you should pay taxes, too, because the authorities are all serving God as his agents, even while they are busily occupied with that particular task” (Rom 13:1-6). This position has been reiterated the Apostle Peter: “For the sake of the Lord, accept the authority of every human institution: the emperor, as the supreme authority, and the governors as commissioned by him to punish criminals and praise those who do good. It is God’s will that by your good deeds you should silence the ignorant talk of fools” (1 Pet 2:13-15).

No distinction is made between an upright ruler and an evil ruler who occupies the chair of authority. Resistance to a legitimate authority, whether upright or wicked, is resistance to God, who is the sole source of human authority. Then, what about obedience to the unjust or sinful dictates of the lawful ruler? Christian response is submission and patient endurance

to unjust treatments. Violent resistance is totally foreign to the radical nonviolence of the gospel as symbolized by the cross. The only justifiable violence for the disciple of Jesus is self-inflicted violence to discipline oneself (cf. 1 Cor 9:27; Matt 11:12), involving patient endurance.

Persevering in patient endurance of “hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope, and a hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:3-5). Our perseverance under various trials and hardships, we prove our authenticity as the Apostle Paul did: “in everything we prove ourselves authentic servants of God; by resolute perseverance in times of hardships, difficulties and distress; when we are flogged or sent to prison or mobbed; labouring, sleepless, starving; in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness; in the Holy Spirit, in a love free of affectation; in the word of truth and in the power of God; by using the weapons of uprightness for attack and for defence: in times of honour or disgrace, blame or praise; taken for impostors and yet we are genuine; unknown and yet we are acknowledged; dying, and yet here we are, alive; scourged but not executed; in pain yet always full of joy; poor and yet making many people rich; having nothing, and yet owning everything” (2 Cor 6:4-10).

The principles of communism are taken from the lifestyle of the Proto-Christian community as described in *The Acts of the Apostles* (2:42-47; 4:32-35): no private property, everything held in common, and distribution according to each one’s need. But use of violence as means to bring desirable the social change is totally foreign to the gospel

with which a Christian cannot compromise. The end does not justify the means. With its atheistic slant, the use of violent and unjust means to bring about social change, denial of individual right, etc., Marxism is un-Christian.

In the Parable of the wheat and the darnel in Matt 13:24-30, 38-41, Jesus makes it clear that God is not the author of evil, but the devil, the Evil One (vv. 25 & 38). *The Book of Wisdoms* corroborates this: “Death came into the world only through the Devil’s envy” (Wis 2:24). God tolerates evil. The darnel grows along with wheat until harvest when it will be separated from the wheat and consigned to blazing furnace: “Let them both grow till the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn” (Matt 13:30). On the Day of Reckoning, the Evil and its perpetrators will be brought to judgement: “This is how it will be at the end of time: the angels will appear and separate the wicked from the upright, to throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth” (Matt 13:49-50). “The Son of man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of falling and all who do evil, and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. Then the upright will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Anyone who has ears should listen” (Matt 13:41-43)!

The time of testing and purification will be short-lived. “You will have to suffer only for a little while: the God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will restore you, he will confirm, strengthen and support you” (1 Pet 5:10). It is nothing when compared to the eternal glory that will follow it: “In my estimation, all that we suffer in the

present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us” (Rom 8:18).

However, in his foreknowledge and providence, God has made definitive accommodation to evil in his eternal plan. Instead of becoming insecure and frightened because of the enormity of evil around us, we must take refuge in God and wait in pertinence for the unveiling of his plan for the salvation of the human beings. As we tread along our path to God, we must steer clear off the lure of evil, “for the fascination of evil throws good things into the shade, and the whirlwind of desire corrupts a simple heart” (Wis 4:12). One must not “Turn neither to right nor to left, (but) keep your foot clear of evil” (Prov 4:27). And, “Stand at the crossroads and look, ask for the ancient paths: which was the good way? Take it and you will find rest for yourselves. But they have said, “We will not take it” (Jer 6:16). Adversity is endured patiently until the end: “anyone who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt 10:22; cf. Lk 21:19).

Conclusion

As Ben Sirach observes, everything that exists has God as its source: “Good and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, all come from the Lord” (Sir 11:14). So Job would ask: “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too” (Job 2:10)? And, “the fear of the Lord leads to life, it brings food and shelter, without fear of evil” (Prov 19:23). Therefore, “whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainties of your humble state, be patient, since gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation” (Sir 2:4-5).