

# WE CANNOT BLAME GOD FOR THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL

*From the teachings of St. John Chrysostom*

Someone may ask: “Why didn’t God get rid of the devil as soon as he deceived man in Paradise?” This was because of His great concern for us. If the devil had reigned by force, then there would be some grounds for this question. However, since he has been deprived of such power and was left only with the ability to persuade—and it is up to us if we choose to listen to him or not—why do you want to reject the opportunity to prosper and eliminate the cause for crowns? Even if God had allowed the devil to exist, knowing that he would be unbeatable and that he would defeat every single person, this still should not make you skeptical. It would still be up to us whether or not we allow the devil to prevail, and he would be unable to defeat anyone by force—only them who voluntarily submit to him.

Additionally, if there are already many people who overcame his power, just as there are many who will defeat him in the future, why do you want to deprive these people (who will advance in virtue and attain a glorious victory) of such great honor? God allowed the devil to remain in order for man, who had been previously defeated by him, to vanquish him in turn. This will constitute the greatest hell possible for the devil and will bring upon him the worst condemnation.

If one continues with this type of reasoning, one will end up blaming and finding fault with God’s providence, and defaming God’s entire creation. One will criticize God for creating mouths and eyes; for human beings use their mouth to curse God and preach corruptive beliefs, and with their eyes they desire things which they shouldn’t and fall into adultery. Does this mean that God should have created people without a tongue and eyes? With this type of logic, we should also cut off people’s legs and sever their hands, since legs are used to race toward a variety of evils and hands are often covered in blood. Not even the ears can be spared from this savage syllogism, since they accept unbeneficial sounds and convey destructive teachings to the soul. Therefore, we should also cut off the ears. If this were to happen, then we must also do away with food, drinks, the sky and the earth, the moon and all the stars, along with all the genera of irrational animals. What would be the need for all these things if man, for whom they were all created, was cut to pieces and so pathetically dismembered?

Do you see how this lethal train of thought necessarily leads to a laughable and absurd conclusion? The devil does evil to and harms himself, not us. On the contrary, if we want, we can harvest innumerable good things on account of the devil—without, of course, him realizing or desiring this.

## ***From the teachings of St. Basil the Great***

The person who claims that God is responsible for evil resembles the person who doesn't believe in the existence of God at all. The latter maintains that He doesn't exist, whereas the former contends that He is not good. For, if God is the cause of evil, then clearly He is not good. Such people ask: "Why are there illnesses? Why is there death? Why are there natural disasters? Why are there wars? All these things are bad, and they are the works of God." "Therefore," they conclude, "who else can we blame for these events other than God?"

God, of course, decides when He will take someone's life. However, death is not something bad; unless someone is referring to the death of a sinner, for whom departure from this life becomes the beginning of his suffering in Hell. God is not even responsible for the tortures in Hell—we ourselves are! We and our free will are the beginning and root of sin.

There are two types of evil: one is what we ourselves perceive as evil, based on our feelings; the other is indeed an evil in essence. True evil depends on us. Such is injustice, debauchery, hatred, murder, and the like; for these things defile the soul that was created in the image of our Creator. We also label as evil whatever we find difficult and painful. Such are physical illnesses, accidents, lack of the basic necessities, loss of money, and death of family members. Each of these things is permitted by our wise and good Master for our benefit. He takes away the instrument of injustice (that is, wealth) from them who make incorrect use of it. He allows illnesses to come upon people when it is more beneficial to bind their body parts than to have them race unrestricted toward sin. Deaths are permitted to occur when the limit of life is reached, which God's righteous judgment has appointed from the onset for each person; for He foresees well in advance what is best for each one of us. Famine, draughts, and floods commonly plague cities and nations in order to restrict excessive evil and sinfulness.

A physician is a benefactor, even though he induces pain and suffering to the body—for he battles the illness not the sick person. Similarly, God is good because He uses punishments in part to work out the salvation of the whole. You never blame the doctor when he cuts, cauterizes, or even amputates parts of your body. On the contrary, you pay him and call him your savior because he eradicates the disease while it is still in the early stages, before it spreads to the entire body. However, when you hear of an earthquake or that a ship sunk at sea, without hesitation you open your mouth and blaspheme the true Physician and Savior! Just as the illness itself and not the physician is the cause of surgical procedures and cauterization, in the same manner various calamities that strike

cities are the result of the inhabitants' vast sinfulness, and, thus, release God from any and all blame.

Illnesses, draughts, and infertility of the earth, even the most difficult circumstances in the life of each person, all these prevent evil from increasing and spreading. Hence, all these "bad" things that are permitted by God actually remove the cause of the generation of true evil. Both physical ailments and adversities beyond our control have been permitted to distance us from sin. Therefore, God destroys evil; evil does not come from God. Doctors cure diseases; they do not generate diseases within the body.

Sin is the primary and chief evil, and it is indeed worthy of being called an evil. Sin depends on our own free volition. It is up to us to either stay away from sinfulness or to be wicked. All other evils are permitted either to reveal a person's courage and virtue, as in the case of Job, or to heal and rectify sins that have been committed in the past, such as with the prophet David, or to render more careful and prudent them who easily slide into sin, such as in the case of Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:27), who served as a lesson and example for others.

Now that you have come to know the various forms of evil that God allows, now that you have understood well that sin is the only true evil, whereas things that seem evil on account of pain are in fact very beneficial and lead to the eternal salvation of the soul, cease being dissatisfied with God's decisions and divine interventions. In general, never consider God to be the cause of the existence of evil. Do not even imagine that evil is an entity. Evil is not something that exists like some creature, nor can it be viewed as a living substance. Rather, it appears after the soul is crippled.

God created the soul, but not sin. But then, why is the soul generally capable of becoming evil? This is on account of the free will, which is especially befitting to rational beings. "But why don't we have sinlessness embedded in our nature," someone may ask, "so that even if we wanted to, we could not sin?" Because you also do not consider your slaves as friends when you hold them captive by force, but when you see them willingly serving you. Similarly, God is not pleased with things that take place out of necessity, but with what takes place on account of virtue. And virtue takes place through man's free choice—not through force. Free choice depends on us, and we have our free will. Therefore, he who blames the Creator for not making us sinless by nature prefers to have irrational instead of rational souls, and motionless, inert beings instead of ones who can make voluntary decisions and take actions.

Let us therefore stop correcting the Wise God. Let us stop seeking something better than what He has made. If we are unaware of the reasons behind certain things God has planned, let us at least maintain one dogma in our soul with certainty: there is no evil that comes from the Good God.

## ***From the writings of St. John of Damascus***

It is common for the Holy Scriptures to refer to things that God allows as His action and work. Nonetheless, even when it says that “God creates evil” (Isa. 45:7), or that there is no “evil in the city which God has not created” (Amos 3:6), it is not trying to present God as the cause of evil. The word “evil” has two meanings. Sometimes it describes what is inherently evil, that is, whatever is opposed to virtue and God’s will. Other times, it refers to the bad things that we perceive, such as pain, sorrow, and misfortune. All these things seem evil because they cause pain; however, in reality they are good things. For people with understanding, they become the cause of repentance and salvation. These are the “evils” that the Bible describes as taking place through God. Even so, we should realize that we ourselves are the cause of even these evils. Because involuntary evils [i.e. sorrows] result from voluntary evils [i.e. sins].

There is One God Who is the only source of good, and Who is free of all evil. “But then,” some people ask, “where does evil come from? Since it is impossible for evil to be brought forth from good.” Evil is nothing other than the deprivation of good, and the deviation from the natural state to an unnatural state. All things that God created are very good, when they remain as they were created. However, when they voluntarily distance themselves from the natural state and proceed to an unnatural state, they become evil.

In their natural state, all things serve and obey the Creator. When, however, one of these creations willingly flees and becomes disobedient to its Creator, it creates evil within itself. Because evil is neither an entity nor an attribute of any substance. Rather, it is an event; that is, a voluntary turning away from the natural to an unnatural state—which is the same as sin.

From where did sin arise? It is the invention of the devil’s free will. Is then the devil evil? He was not created evil but good. He was created a bright and radiant angel by God; however, as a rational and free being, he willingly distanced himself from the natural state of virtue and entered the darkness of evil after separating himself from God, Who is the only good One and the Creator of light.

God out of goodness created all things out of nothing, and He knows beforehand everything that will occur. If they had not been created, then no one would have become evil...If people who were to come into existence due to God’s goodness were prevented from being created on account that they would become evil as a result of their own choice, then evil would have defeated God’s goodness. And so, everything that God created, He created good and very well. Each person on his own chooses to become good or evil.

## ***From the writings of St. Gregory Palamas***

Why then did God initially create people who would end up being punished? He did so not to punish them, but to save them; this is apparent from the fact that He calls and invites them to salvation. Because if He wanted to punish certain people, He would not call all people to salvation...But what type of logic is this? Whoever does not agree with the above, but merely wants to blame God, such a person by extension maintains that rational beings should not have been created at all. What need would there be for logic if it was not up to man's disposition and free will? How could someone have free will and choice if he was incapable—if he so desired—of also becoming evil? However, if someone cannot become evil, then he certainly is not capable of becoming good either.

Therefore, whoever states that God should not have created all the people who will go to Hell maintains that He should not have created the people who will be saved either, nor any logical and free-willed beings in general. Furthermore, if everything in the universe was created for logical nature [i.e. for man], this argument asserts that God shouldn't have created anything. Do you see the extent of the nonsense? But since through the rational and free-willed generation of man (whom God created), some people would become evil while others good on account of voluntary choice and different use of the free will, what should the truly good God have done? Should He not have created the good people on account of the people who would become evil? No one would be able to come up with anything more unjust than this. Because even if there was only one person who would become good, even then it would not be proper for God to desist from creating. Because one person who does the will of the Lord is worth more than thousands of transgressors...

But let us ask the people (who blame Him Who wants everyone to be saved) about them who do not desire their own salvation: Since we are mortal and physical beings, it is necessary for us to eat. Our body assimilates and stores one part of the food we digest in order to sustain itself, whereas it excretes the other unusable and foul-smelling constituents. Do you avoid eating food altogether because part of it will be converted into feces, or do you consume food in its entirety on account of the portion that (through the digestive system) is extracted, assimilated, and incorporated to sustain your body? Words are unnecessary because we provide the answer in practice, as we eat daily and accept the fraction of food that is unsuitable for our biology on account of the portion of the food that is necessary for us. Why do we do this? On account of the innate love we have for life. In the same manner, on account of His intrinsic and inherent goodness and benevolence, God would not have avoided bringing into existence good people on account of them who would end up being evil on their own; but on account of the good people, He also created them who would become evil.