

BASIL THE GREAT (BASIL OF CAESAREA)

Homily Explaining that God is Not the Cause of Evil

There are many kinds of teaching shown us through the holy singer David by the Spirit who acts in him. For at one time, as the prophet describes to us in full his own sufferings, and how he bears nobly the things befalling him, through his own example he leaves us a most manifest teaching of patient endurance, as when he says, "Lord why have they multiplied who afflict me?" At another time he commends the great goodness of God and the swiftness of his help, which is granted to those who truly seek him, saying, "When I called, the God of my justice heard me; the words uttered by the prophet have the same meaning, which say, "When you are speaking, he will say, 'Behold, I am with you'". That is, he did not call beforehand, and God's hearing anticipated the aim of the invocation. Again, offering supplications to God and entreaties, he teaches us in what manner it is proper for those who are in sin to propitiate God: "Lord, do not reprove me in your anger, nor punish me in your wrath." And in the twelfth Psalm he points out a certain lengthening of temptation in the words that say, "How long, Lord, will you forget me to the end?" Through this whole psalm he teaches us not to be downcast in affliction, that the amount of torment brought upon each to prove him is proportionate to the faith present in him. Then when he has said, "How long Lord, will you forget me to the end?" and, "How long will you turn away your face from me?", straightway he passes to the evil of the atheists. When one of the little things in life gives offense to them, not bearing the more troublesome circumstances, straightway they become doubtful in their minds about whether there is a God who is attentive to things in this world, whether he watches over each person's concerns, whether he distributes to each the things of which he is worthy. Then when they truly endure ill-advised conditions for a long time, they confirm in themselves the evil belief, and they declare in their hearts that there is no God. "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God". Moreover, as this enters into his mind, he then moves freely through every sin. For if there is no overseer, if there is nobody who repays each according to the merit of his actions, what prevents oppression of the poor, murder of orphans, killing of widows and strangers, daring to do every profane practice, wallowing in unclean and abominable passions and all bestial desires? Accordingly, after the psalm says, "There is no God," it adds, "They have become corrupt and abominable in their practices." For one cannot turn aside from the just path unless one's soul is ill through forgetting God.

What are the nations handed over to a reprobate mind, and why do they do what is improper? Is it not because they said, "There is no God?" Why have they fallen into

dishonorable passions, as the females among them have changed the natural usage into what is unnatural, while the males commit unseemly acts with males? Is it not because they have exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of cattle and four-footed beasts and reptiles? Therefore he is a fool, truly deprived of his mind and wisdom, who says, "There is no God." It is one like him, who leaves undone nothing foolish, who also says that God is the cause of evils. For I regard their sins as being of equal rank, since both alike deny the Good One, the one saying absolutely that he does not exist, while the other concludes that he is not good. For if he is the cause of evils, he is not good, so that in both cases there is denial of God. Whence, then, he asks, are diseases? Whence untimely deaths? When the utter destruction of cities? Shipwrecks, wars, pestilences? For these also are evils, he says, and all are creations of God. So do we have anything else other than God to blame for the things that occur? Now therefore, since we have arrived at this much-discussed question, as we bring the discussion to an appropriate starting point and make a further effort to state the problem precisely, let us attempt to explain the issue clearly and without confusion.

This one thing must be held firmly in our mind, that since we are a creation of the good God and are welded together by him, as he manages smaller and greater things concerning us, neither can we undergo anything that is not God's will, nor do we truly suffer anything that is unless it can be understood to bring us something better. For deaths are from God; truly not every death is evil, except if one speaks of the death of the sinner, since his departure from here is the beginning of punishments in hell. And again, the evils in hell do not have God as their cause, but we cause them. For the beginning and root of sin is in us and in our self-determination. For it was possible for those abstaining from evil to suffer nothing terrible, but as for those enticed through pleasure into sin, to state the matter properly, do they not themselves become the cause of their sufferings? Moreover, what our senses perceive as evil is one thing, while what is evil in its own nature is another. What is evil by nature has been produced by us, namely, injustice, licentiousness, folly, cowardice, envy, murder, poisoning, laziness, and passions akin to these, which defile the soul that has come into being according to the image of the Creator and have caused a shadow to pass over the soul's own beauty. On the contrary, we call what is toilsome and painful to our sense perception evil, bodily illness, and blows to the body, and lack of necessities, and disgrace, and financial setbacks, and loss of property..... Each of these is brought to us by the wise and good Master for our advantage. For wealth is taken away from those who have used it badly, thus destroying the instrument of injustice. He sends illness to those for whom it is more profitable to have their limbs constrained than to move unhindered toward sinning. Death is brought to those whose time of life is completed; from the beginning the just judgment of God has appointed this for each person, as he

foresees from long before what is advantageous to each of us. Famines and droughts and floods are in a certain manner common blows to cities and nations, punishing the excess of evil. As therefore, the physician is a benefactor even if he produces distress or pain in the body (for he fights the illness, not the sick person), so also God is good, who provides salvation to all, through particular punishments. And you do not accuse the physicians of any wrong in his cuttings and burnings and complete mutilations of the body; but rather you probably pay him money and call him a savior, since he has produced illness in a small part of the body to prevent the suffering from spreading throughout the whole of it. But whenever you see a city fall down on its inhabitants in an earthquake, or a ship and its whole crew lost at sea, you do not hesitate to wag your tongue in blasphemy against the true Physician and Savior. And further, one must understand that there are moderate and curable illnesses of human beings, which are helped by care, but whenever the disease is shown to be too severe for treatment, it becomes necessary to cut off the part that has become useless, so that the illness does not continue and proceed to spread into the vital organs. Therefore, as the physician is not the cause of the surgery or the cautery, but the illness is, so also, as the obliteration of cities has its source in the excess of those who have sinned, God is acquitted of all blame.

Yet indeed if God is not the cause of evils, it is asked, in what sense has he said, "I fashion light and make darkness, I make peace and create evils." And again, "there came down," Scripture says, "evils from the Lord upon the gates of Jerusalem," and "There are no evils in the city which the Lord did not make." And in the great Song of Moses it says, "Behold, behold that I am, and there is no god but me. I kill and I make to live, I will strike and I will heal." But to one who understands the mind of Scripture, none of these verses contains an accusation against God as a cause and creator of evils, for the one who says, "I fashion light and make darkness," presents himself as artisan of the creation through these things, not as creator of evil. Therefore, that you may not consider one principle to be the cause of light, another of darkness, he has declared himself to be the Creator and Fashioner who has made the things that appear to be opposites. So do not seek one artisan of fire and another of water, nor one of air and another of earth, since they seem in a certain way to lie opposite to each other because of their contrasting properties. Through experiencing this very thing, some have previously turned toward polytheism.

Yet God makes peace and he creates evils. Certainly on the one hand he makes peace in you when through good teaching he pacifies your mind and reconciles the passions that rebel against the soul. On the other hand, he creates evils, that is, he transforms them and brings improvement, so that they cease to be evils and participate in the nature of good. "Create in me a clean heart, O God." Do not make something new, but renew what has grown old through evils. And, "that he may

“make” means not that something is brought out of non-being, but that beings are transformed. And, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” And again, Moses says, “Is not he himself your father who has acquired you, and made you, and created you?” For clearly here the “creation” placed after the “making” teaches us that the meaning of improvement has been assigned, as in many cases, to the term “creation.” Therefore, when it says, “I make peace,” it means that he makes peace out of things that create evils, that is he transforms them and brings improvement.

Yet even if you understand peace as the freedom from wars, and say that evils are the hardships that follow those who make war, service abroad, labors, sleeplessness, struggles, sweats, wounds, slaughters, conquests of cities, enslavements, abductions, the miseries of captives paraded as spectacles, and in a word all the sufferings that follow war, we say they occur by the just judgment of God, who allots punishment through wars to those deserving of chastisement. Or do you wish that Sodom had not been burnt to ashes after those wicked deeds? Or should Jerusalem not have been subdued, nor the temple laid waste, after the horrible insanity of the Jews against the Lord? Could these things have occurred justly in some other way, and not through the hands of the Romans, to whom the Jews, the enemies of their own life, betrayed our Lord? Therefore, there is a time when the evils of war are also approved justly for those who deserve them.

And the words, “I kill and I make to live,” you can accept, if you like, in the obvious sense. For fear edifies the simpler people. “I will strike and I will heal.” This also is understood as useful in the same sense. The blow produces fear, while the healing persuades you to love. Yet clearly a higher way of understanding these words can be found. “I kill” refers to sin, and “I make to live” refers to justice. “To the extent that our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed.” He does not kill one person and make another to live, but through that which he kills he also gives life. And through that by which he strikes, he heals, in accord with what is read in the Proverb: “If you strike him with a rod, you deliver his soul from death.” Therefore the flesh is struck that the soul may be healed, and sin is put to death that justice may be made alive. And the words, “There came down evils from the Lord upon the gates of Jerusalem,” provide their own interpretation. What kind of evils? The clamor of chariots and horsemen. And when you hear, “There are no evils in the city that the Lord did not make,” understand that the word “evils” names the bringing of evils upon sinners for the correction of their faults. “For I afflicted you,” it says, “and I weakened you by hunger” in order to do good for you, to prevent injustice from pouring forth without measure, just as a stream is held back by a strong wall and barricade.