

CHAPTER
EIGHT

The Death of Evil upon the Seashore

And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore.
Exodus 14:30

Is anything more obvious than the presence of evil in the universe? Its nagging, prehensile tentacles project into every level of human existence. We may debate the origin of evil, but only a victim of superficial optimism would debate its reality. Evil is stark, grim, and colossally real.

Affirming the reality of evil in unmistakable terms, the Bible symbolically pictures the conniving work of a serpent that injects discord into the harmonious symphony of life in a garden, prophetically denounces callous injustice and ugly hypocrisy, and dramatically portrays a misguided mob hanging the world's most precious Person on a cross between two thieves. Crystal clear is the biblical perception of evil. Nor was Jesus unmindful of the reality of evil. Although he never offered a theological

explanation of the origin of evil, he never attempted to explain it away. In the parable of the tares, Jesus says that tares are tares, not illusions or errors of the mortal mind. Real weeds disrupt the orderly growth of stately wheat. Whether sown by Satan or by man's misuse of his own freedom, the tares are always poisonous and deadly. Concerning the choking weeds, Jesus says in substance, "I do not attempt to explain their origin, but they are the work of an enemy." He recognized that the force of evil was as real as the force of good.

Within the wide arena of everyday life we see evil in all of its ugly dimensions. We see it expressed in tragic lust and in ordinate selfishness. We see it in high places where men are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest. We see it in imperialistic nations crushing other people with the battering rams of social injustice. We see it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars that leave men and nations morally and physically bankrupt.

In a sense, the history of man is the story of the struggle between good and evil. All of the great religions have recognized a tension at the very core of the universe. Hinduism, for instance, calls this tension a conflict between illusion and reality; Zoroastrianism, a conflict between the god of light and the god of darkness; and traditional Judaism and Christianity, a conflict between God and Satan. Each realizes that in the midst of the upward thrust of goodness there is the downward pull of evil.

Christianity clearly affirms that in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually will emerge as victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, inexorable forces of good. Good Friday must give way to the triumphant music of Easter. Degrading tares choke the sprouting necks of growing wheat for a season, but when the harvest is gleaned the evil tares will be separated from the good wheat. Caesar occupied a palace and Christ a cross, but the same Christ so split history into A.D. and B.C. that even the reign of Caesar was subsequently dated by his name. Long ago biblical religion recognized what William Cullen Bryant affirmed, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again," and

what Thomas Carlyle wrote, “No lie you can speak or act but it will come, after longer or shorter circulation, like a bill drawn on Nature’s Reality, and be presented there for payment—with the answer, No effects.”

I

A graphic example of this truth is found in the early history of the Hebrew people. When the children of Israel were held under the gripping yoke of Egyptian slavery, Egypt symbolized evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation, and crushing domination, and the Israelites symbolized goodness in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Egypt struggled to maintain her oppressive yoke, and Israel struggled to gain freedom. Pharaoh stubbornly refused to respond to the cry of Moses, even when plague after plague threatened his domain. This tells us something about evil that we must never forget, namely that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of a persistent, almost fanatical resistance. But there is a checkpoint in the universe: evil cannot permanently organize itself. So after a long and trying struggle, the Israelites, through the providence of God, crossed the Red Sea. But like the old guard that never surrenders, the Egyptians, in a desperate attempt to prevent the Israelites from escaping, had their armies go in the Red Sea behind them. As soon as the Egyptians got into the dried-up sea, the parted waters swept back upon them, and the turbulence and momentum of the tidal waves soon drowned all of them. When the Israelites looked back, all they could see was here and there a poor drowned body beaten upon the seashore. For the Israelites, this was a great moment. It was the end of a frightful period in their history. It was a joyous daybreak that had come to end

the long night of their captivity. The meaning of this story is not found in the drowning of Egyptian soldiers, for no one should rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being. Rather, this story symbolizes the death of evil and of inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation.

The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a vivid reminder that something in the very nature of the universe assists goodness in its perennial struggle with evil. The New Testament rightly declares: “No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: *nevertheless afterward* it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” Pharaoh exploits the children of Israel—*nevertheless afterward!* Pilate yields to the crowd that crucifies Christ—*nevertheless afterward!* The early Christians are thrown to the lions and carried to the chopping blocks—*nevertheless afterward!* Something in this universe justifies Shakespeare in saying:

There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will,

and Lowell in saying:

Though the cause of Evil prosper,
Yet ‘tis Truth alone is strong,

and Tennyson in saying:

I can but trust the good shall fall,
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.

II

The truth of this text is revealed in the contemporary struggle between good in the form of freedom and justice and evil in the form of oppression and colonialism. Of the approximately three billion people in our world, more than 1.9 billion—a vast majority—live on the continents of Asia and Africa. Less than two decades ago most of the Asian and African peoples were colonial subjects, dominated politically, exploited economically, and segregated and humiliated by foreign powers. For years they protested against these grave injustices. In nearly every territory in Asia and Africa, a courageous Moses pleaded passionately for the freedom of his people. For more than twenty years, Mahatma Gandhi unrelentingly urged British viceroys, governors general, prime ministers, and kings to let his people go. Like the pharaohs of old, the British leaders turned deaf ears to these agonizing pleas. Even the great Winston Churchill responded to Gandhi's cry for independence by saying, "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire." The conflict between two determined forces, the colonial powers and the Asian and African peoples, has been one of the most momentous and critical struggles of the twentieth century.

But in spite of the resistance and recalcitrance of the colonial powers, the victory of the forces of justice and human dignity is gradually being achieved. Twenty-five years ago there were only three independent countries in the whole continent of Africa, but today thirty-two countries are independent. A short fifteen years ago the British Empire politically dominated more than six hundred fifty million people in Asia and Africa, but today the number is less than sixty million. The Red Sea has opened. The oppressed masses in Asia and Africa have won their freedom from the Egypt of colonialism and now move toward the promised land

of economic and cultural stability. These peoples see the evils of colonialism and imperialism dead upon the seashore.

In our own American struggle for freedom and justice, we are seeing the death of evil. In 1619, the Negro was brought to America from the soils of Africa. For more than two hundred years Africa was raped and plundered, her native kingdoms disorganized, and her people and rulers demoralized. In America the Negro slave was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine.

But there were those who had a nagging conscience and knew that so unjust a system represented a strange paradox in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal. In 1820, six years before his death, Thomas Jefferson wrote these melancholy words:

But the momentous question [slavery], like a fire-bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. . . . I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away . . . and my only consolation is to be, that I live not to weep over it.

Numerous abolitionists, like Jefferson, were tortured in their hearts by the question of slavery. With keen perception they saw that the immorality of slavery degraded the white master as well as the Negro.

Then came the day when Abraham Lincoln faced squarely this matter of slavery. His torments and vacillations are well known, yet the conclusion of his search is embodied in these words: "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honourable alike in what we give and what we preserve." On this moral foundation Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order that brought an end to chattel slavery. The significance of the Emancipation Proclamation was

colorfully described by a great American, Frederick Douglass, in these words:

It recognizes and declares the real nature of the contest and places the North on the side of justice and civilization. . . . Unquestionably the first of January, 1863, is to be the most memorable in American annals. The Fourth of July was great, but the First of January, when we consider it in all its relations and bearings, is incomparably greater. The one had respect to the mere political birth of a nation; the last concerns the national life and character and is to determine whether that life and character shall be radiantly glorious with all high and noble virtues, or infamously blackened forevermore.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not, however, bring full freedom to the Negro, for although he enjoyed certain political and social opportunities during the Reconstruction, the Negro soon discovered that the pharaohs of the South were determined to keep him in slavery. Certainly the Emancipation Proclamation brought him nearer to the Red Sea, but it did not guarantee his passage through parted waters. Racial segregation, backed by a decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1896, was a new form of slavery disguised by certain niceties of complexity. In the great struggle of the last half century between the forces of justice attempting to end the evil system of segregation and the forces of injustice attempting to maintain it, the pharaohs have employed legal maneuvers, economic reprisals, and even physical violence to hold the Negro in the Egypt of segregation. Despite the patient cry of many a Moses, they refused to let the Negro people go.

Today we are witnessing a massive change. A world-shaking decree by the nine justices of the United States Supreme Court opened the Red Sea and the forces of justice are moving to the other side. The Court decreed an end to the old Plessy decision of 1896 and affirmed that separated facilities are inherently unequal and that to segregate a child on the basis of race is to deny the

child an equal legal protection. This decision is a great beacon light of hope to millions of disinherited people. Looking back, we see the forces of segregation gradually dying on the seashore. The problem is far from solved, and gigantic mountains of opposition lie ahead, but at least we have left Egypt, and with patient yet firm determination we shall reach the promised land. Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation shall not survive forever. A Red Sea passage in history ultimately brings the forces of goodness to victory, and the closing of the same waters marks the doom and destruction of the forces of evil.

All of this reminds us that evil carries the seed of its own destruction. In the long run right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Historian Charles A. Beard, when asked what major lessons he had learned from history, answered:

First, whom the gods would destroy they must first make mad with power. Second, the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small. Third, the bee fertilizes the flower it robs. Fourth, when it is dark enough you can see the stars.

These are the words not of a preacher but of a hardhearted historian, whose long and painstaking study of history revealed to him that evil has a self-defeating quality. It can go a long way, but then it reaches its limit. There is something in this universe that Greek mythology referred to as the goddess of Nemesis.

III

We must be careful at this point not to engage in a superficial optimism or to conclude that the death of a particular evil means that all evil lies dead upon the seashore. All progress is

precarious, and the solution of one problem brings us face to face with another problem. The Kingdom of God as a universal reality is *not yet*. Because sin exists on every level of man's existence, the death of one tyranny is followed by the emergence of another tyranny.

But just as we must avoid a superficial optimism, we must also avoid a crippling pessimism. Even though all progress is precarious, within limits real social progress may be made. Although man's moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, his never-ceasing strivings may bring him ever closer to the city of righteousness. And though the Kingdom of God may remain *not yet* as a universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in his universe. He is not outside the world looking on with a sort of cold indifference. Here on all the roads of life, he is striving in our striving. Like an ever-loving Father, he is working through history for the salvation of his children. As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it.

But why is God so slow in conquering the forces of evil? Why did God permit Hitler to kill six million Jews? Why did God permit slavery to continue in America for two hundred and forty-four years? Why does God permit bloodthirsty mobs to lynch Negro men and women at will and drown Negro boys and girls at whim? Why does not God break in and smash the evil schemes of wicked men?

I do not pretend to understand all of the ways of God or his particular timetable for grappling with evil. Perhaps if God dealt with evil in the overbearing way that we wish, he would defeat his ultimate purpose. We are responsible human beings, not blind automatons; persons, not puppets. By endowing us with freedom, God relinquished a measure of his own sovereignty

and imposed certain limitations upon himself. If his children are free, they must do his will by a voluntary choice. Therefore, God cannot at the same time impose his will upon his children and also maintain his purpose for man. If through sheer omnipotence God were to defeat his purpose, he would express weakness rather than power. Power is the ability to fulfill purpose; action that defeats purpose is weakness.

God's unwillingness to deal with evil with an overbearing immediacy does not mean that he is doing nothing. We weak and finite human beings are not alone in our quest for the triumph of righteousness. There is, as Matthew Arnold wrote, an "enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness."

We must also remember that God does not forget his children who are the victims of evil forces. He gives us the interior resources to bear the burdens and tribulations of life. When we are in the darkness of some oppressive Egypt, God is a light unto our path. He imbues us with the strength needed to endure the ordeals of Egypt, and he gives us the courage and power to undertake the journey ahead. When the lamp of hope flickers and the candle of faith runs low, he restoreth our souls, giving us renewed vigor to carry on. He is with us not only in the noontime of fulfillment but also in the midnight of despair.

In India Mrs. King and I spent a lovely weekend in the State of Kerala, the southernmost point of that vast country. While there we visited the beautiful beach on Cape Comorin, which is called "Land's End," because this is actually where the land of India comes to an end. Nothing stretches before you except the broad expanse of rolling waters. This beautiful spot is a point at which meet three great bodies of water, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal. Seated on a huge rock that slightly protrudes into the ocean, we were enthralled by the vastness of the ocean and its terrifying immensities. As the waves unfolded in almost rhythmic succession and crashed against the base of the rock on which we were seated, an oceanic music brought sweetness to the ear. To the west we saw the magnificent sun, a great cosmic ball of fire, appear to sink into the very ocean

itself. Just as it was almost lost from sight, Mrs. King touched me and said, "Look Martin, isn't that beautiful!" I looked around and saw the moon, another ball of scintillating beauty. As the sun appeared to be sinking to the ocean, the moon appeared to be rising from the ocean. When the sun finally passed completely beyond sight, darkness engulfed the earth, but in the east the radiant light of the rising moon shone supreme.

To my wife I said, "This is an analogy of what often happens in life." We have experiences when the light of day vanishes, leaving us in some dark and desolate midnight—moments when our highest hopes are turned into shambles of despair or when we are the victims of some tragic injustice and some terrible exploitation. During such moments our spirits are almost overcome by gloom and despair, and we feel that there is no light anywhere. But ever and again, we look toward the east and discover that there is another light that shines even in the darkness and "the spear of frustration" is transformed "into a shaft of light."

This would be an unbearable world were God to have only a single light, but we may be consoled that God has two lights: a light to guide us in the brightness of the day when hopes are fulfilled and circumstances are favorable, and a light to guide us in the darkness of the midnight when we are thwarted and the slumbering giants of gloom and hopelessness rise in our souls. The testimony of the psalmist is that we need never walk in darkness:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

This faith will sustain us in our struggle to escape from the bondage of every evil Egypt. This faith will be a lamp unto our weary feet and a light unto our meandering path. Without such faith, man's highest dreams will pass silently to the dust.