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## The Exercise of Free Will

### Navigating the ship of the soul

So, too, our perfection does not come to pass without our doing anything, and yet it is not completed as a result of our efforts, but God performs the greater part of it. And in order to produce a clearer conviction that this is the meaning of the passage we will take an illustration from the art of navigation. To what extent should we say that the navigator's art helps in bringing the ship back to the harbour, when compared with the force of the winds and the favourable state of the atmosphere and the shining of the stars, all of which co-operate to preserve those who sail? Why, even the sailors themselves from feelings of reverence do not often venture to claim that they have saved the ship but attribute it all to God; not that they have performed nothing, but that the efforts of God's providence are very much in excess of the effects of their art. So indeed with our salvation the effects of God's work are very much in excess of the effects of what we can do.<sup>1</sup>

### The same Sun illuminates and hardens

Perhaps it is in this sense that God is said to have hardened the heart of Pharaoh, because the substance of his heart was obviously such as to elicit from the Sun of Justice not His illumination, but His power to harden and to scorch; that no doubt was the reason why this same Pharaoh afflicted the life of the Hebrews with hard works, and wore them out with clay and bricks. And certainly the works that he devised came from a heart as miry and muddy! And, as the visible sun contracts and hardens the substance of clay, so with the selfsame rays wherewith He enlightened the People of Israel by means of those rays' selfsame properties, the Sun of Justice hardened the heart of Pharaoh, that harboured muddy devices.<sup>2</sup>

### God's "rain" stimulates the production of our "fruit" or "thorns"

Now it seems almost irreverent to represent the giver of the rain as saying: 'It is I who made the fruits and the thorns that are in the earth'; yet in spite of this it is true. For if there had been no rain, there would have been neither fruits nor thorns, but after the rain has fallen in due time and measure, both spring up. For it says: 'the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, if it beareth thorns and thistles, is rejected and nigh unto a curse'.<sup>3</sup> So then the blessing of the rain comes also on the inferior land, but this, being neglected and untilled, brings forth thorns and thistles. Thus the marvellous works done by God are as it were the rain, while the differing wills of men are like the tilled and the neglected land, though as land they are both of one nature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.19 (p.199)

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.2 (p.111)

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 6:7,8

<sup>4</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.10 (pp.173-4)