

# **Why Does God Act?**

*By*

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## **Introduction**

One of the most mysterious aspects of life, I think, is the mystery that involves the interaction of God with man, which can be explained by a lack of training, systematically. Questions like, "why does God intervene or not intervene in the activities of men?" or "Are we able, through our prayers, to affect or alter what God does?" These are very important questions when people wrestle with the tensions of life. Especially as they concern the realm of suffering. Through the authors of the poetic books, I will try to discover the foundational impetus for God's actions or non-actions in the lives of men. It is possible that we may gain a new sense of God's purpose as expressed through what He does. It is in the poetic books that the greatest expression of worship, joy, longing, suffering and the tensions that are time and space oriented. However, there is one necessary caveat that needs to be addressed. That is this; all actions taken by God must be viewed in light of His perfections. One would think that this fact goes without saying, but the imprecision of language and our inability to know God exhaustively, may tend to diminish, from our perspective, the majesty of God's actions.

## **The Job Perspective**

The testimony of God concerning Job, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil," (Job 1:8 and 2:3) would suggest that Job was able to resist evil through the power of his own righteousness. Yet, on the other hand, the accusation of Satan that Job's devotion to God does not come without a price (Job 1:9-10 and 2:6), suggests that Satan's accusation caused God to give Satan permission to afflict Job. However, the last sentence at the end of Job 2:3, "You incited me against him to ruin him without any reason", has a great deal to say about God and His actions in the lives of His saints

The word "incite", used in this sentence is an anthropopathic, another instance in scripture where God uses language that we can understand in order to communicate something about Himself to us. This language, as all attempts to describe God, does not express God's motivation any more than "without a reason", speaks of purposelessness in God. Hence, if God cannot be motivated by any operation outside of Himself and can find no source of purpose outside of Himself, then it is Himself and Himself only who has the power to sway God in any course of action.

"God does what he does, not begrudgingly or under external constraint as though he were boxed in or trapped by some unforeseen or unplanned situation. On the contrary, because he is complete and exuberantly happy and overflowing

with satisfaction in the fellowship of the Trinity, all he does is free and uncoerced. His deeds are the overflow of his joy. This is what it means when the Scripture says that God acts according to the "good pleasure" of his will (Ephesians 1:5). It means that nothing outside God's own pleasure—the pleasure he has in himself—has constrained his choices and his deeds."<sup>1</sup>

If God is uncoerced in His actions, then the first question in God's exchange with Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? (Job 1:8 and 2:3) appears to be quite arbitrary. But it isn't. Satan's response omits a true description of himself he merely provides a description of his actions. However, God does not leave us with partial information as to the character of Satan, He says, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour". Again, if God is uncoerced and not arbitrary in His actions, then He is always aware of Satan's character. Therefore, I agree with the Piper quote, above, that God does what He pleases.

### **The Psalmist Perspective**

Every action that God takes is filled with his glory. Every effect produced by His actions is produced by virtue of and inclusive of all of His perfections. We, in our culture, tend to compartmentalize efforts of any subject and we look at the effects produced by such efforts, severally. This tendency infers that the subject acts in ways that bring about ends that can include all or omit some of its essential powers. God and His actions cannot be interpreted that way. So, when I speak of the actions of God, I am saying to the reader, all of God's perfections are involved in the effects that you are witnessing. God's perfections are involved even in the calamitous effects in our lives. We refer to divine action in the universe as providence.

"Providence may be defined as that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end."<sup>2</sup>

Evildoers persistently plague the believer. And as persistently as he was plagued, he must call upon the Lord for relief. As in the case of Job, relief does not always come immediately and sometimes not at all. However, the psalmist

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, (Multnomah Press, 1991) 50

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Combined Edition, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 166

offers these words as the disposition that the believer must attain to. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him." (Psalm 115:1-3).

The unbeliever is puzzled when confronted with a statement like, "he does whatever pleases him", because the power of his god must be such that it provides immediate relief. For he, the unbeliever ascribes the actions of God, unknown to him, to luck, chance, fortune or fate. God, however, is free and is unrestricted in deciding to act immediately or delay his action.

"However all things may be ordained by God's plan, according to a sure dispensation, for us they are fortuitous. Not that we think that fortune rules the world and men, tumbling all things at random up and down, for it is fitting that this folly be absent from the Christian's breast! But since the order, reason, end, and necessity of those things which happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion, those things, which it is certain take place by God's will, are in a sense fortuitous. For they bear on the face of them no other appearance, whether they are considered in their own nature or weighed according to our knowledge and judgment. Let us imagine, for example, a merchant who, entering a wood with a company of faithful men, unwisely wanders away from his companions, and in his wandering comes upon a robber's den, falls among thieves, and is slain. His death was not only foreseen by God's eye, but also determined by his decree. For it is not said that he foresaw how long the life of each man would extend, but that he determined and fixed the bounds that men cannot pass (Job 14:5). Yet as far as the capacity of our mind is concerned, all things therein seem fortuitous. What will the Christian think at this point? Just this: whatever happened in a death of this sort he will regard as fortuitous by nature, as it is; yet he will not doubt that God's providence exercised authority over fortune in directing its end."<sup>3</sup>

### **Prospective From The Proverbs**

Life today is measured in terms of the amount of happiness that can be obtained. Generally, happiness is quantified by the amount of "something" outside of one's self that can be gotten that can provide some measure of amusement. It's no wonder that the activities and operations of life are utterly fleeting, in terms of satisfaction, for there is always a frantic search for happiness. The rule of life, in this age, is that there are no rules. In the prologue to the book of Proverbs, Solomon does not mention happiness, amusements that is, as the end to life. But he does declare the means to a

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<sup>3</sup> John T. Neill, Ed., Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, (Westminster Press, Philadelphia) 208-209

moral life. "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair"(Pr. 1:1-3). And it is a life that rests on a moral foundation that is a satisfied life. For life without morals restricts nothing and permits everything, but has no ground for permanency. The person who does not restrict himself, is permissive of everything and has no fixity in his life is termed a fool in Proverbs. The pleasure that God takes in wisdom is the very ground upon which a moral life stands. It is this life that God takes pleasure in.

"God also loved his Son in the very act of creating the universe. He enjoyed his Son as his own Word of Wisdom and creative Power in the act of creation. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made' (John 1:1-3). The Son was the Wisdom of God creating, with God, all that is not God. And, as the Proverbs say, 'A wise son makes a glad father' (Proverbs 10:1; 15:20). God was glad in the wisdom of his creative Son.<sup>4</sup>

### **Perspective From Ecclesiastes**

Ecclesiastes is pregnant with the word "meaningless". The knowledge that we are created with purpose and significance goes counter to the definition of this word. How can these two be reconciled? God, who is and has always been happy, must find some pleasure in the world "under the sun". We constantly face the tension of a fallen world that is in opposition to God and blinds us to His goodness. But, God has given us laws in the universe, physical, civic and moral, that have bounds and times of application. Along with the above-mentioned laws, we have the contents of creation to bring enjoyment to us. The fallenness of human nature has a tendency to obscure the fact that even with the shadow of death looming over all men, God provides relief from the stress.

"Eating and drinking are clearly regulated by Biblical law. The laws of diet, or kosher laws, are generally well known, but unfortunately, here as elsewhere man in his perversity sees law, which was ordained as a principle of life, instead as a restraint on life. Moreover, the Biblical principle of eating and drinking is not ascetic: the purpose of food and drink is not merely to maintain life, important as that is, but is a part of the enjoyment of life. The usual picture of a robust, jolly medieval monk or priest as somehow reprobate as against the emaciated ascetic as a saint is probably in need of revision. According to Scripture, 'every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor, it is the gift of

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, (Multnomah Press, 1991) 28

God' (Eccles. 3:13). Note that it reads 'every man.' Again, 'Behold, that which I have seen: that it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor that he takes under the sun all the days of his life, which God gives him: for it is his portion' (Eccles. 5:18). However, it should be noted that 'every man that strives for the mastery is temperate in all things' (1 Cor. 9:25).<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion of Ecclesiastes is that though all men meet the same end in time, it is obedience to the commandments of God that is man's duty and God will judge the value of all that man does "under the sun."

### **Perspective from the Song of Songs**

From Job we see that God is free to act in ways that may be considered, by us, as unbearable. In the Psalms we find that in our suffering, many times, the world cannot see the workings of an almighty God. Proverbs shows us that in good times or bad, there is no substitute for wisdom. Ecclesiastes says that though all in time and space will come to the same end, God does not leave us despairing. In all of these books God is central in the operations of the universe. His name is invoked, His character praised, His power is demonstrated and He speaks. However, in the Song of Songs, there is no mention of God, His actions, His name, His character or any direct quotes from Him. The book is filled with language that arouses sexually. The descriptive language between the lover and the beloved excite the senses and awakens passion.

"<sup>1</sup>May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your <sup>a</sup>love is better than wine. "Your <sup>a</sup>oils have a pleasing fragrance, your <sup>b</sup>name is *like* <sup>1</sup>purified oil; Therefore the <sup>2c</sup>maidens love you. "Draw me after you *and* let us run *together!* The <sup>a</sup>king has brought me into his chambers." <sup>1</sup>We

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<sup>5</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, Institutes of Biblical Law (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.) 297

<sup>1</sup> BRIDE

<sup>a</sup> Song 1:4; 4:10

<sup>a</sup> Song 4:10; John 12:3

<sup>b</sup> Eccl 7:1

<sup>1</sup> Lit *oil which is emptied* (from one vessel to another)

<sup>2</sup> Or *virgins*

<sup>c</sup> Ps 45:14

<sup>a</sup> Ps 45:14, 15

<sup>1</sup> CHORUS

will rejoice in you and be glad; we will <sup>2</sup>extol your <sup>b</sup>love more than wine. Rightly do they love you."

"<sup>1</sup>To me, <sup>a</sup>my darling, you are like--My <sup>b</sup>mare among the chariots of Pharaoh. "Your <sup>a</sup>cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of <sup>b</sup>beads." "<sup>1</sup>We will make for you ornaments of gold with beads of silver."

What would this say to us about God and His actions. We know that there was relationship in eternity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And in that relationship was perfect happiness, communion and love. And we know that God was pleased. We know that in creation, God saw that His created work "was good". We know that God has not acted to destroy all of the works of His hands, that He has made remedy for the curse. Further, Scripture tells us and we witness that God is pleased to act in order for the remedy to fully complete its work.

God is relational and we as image bearers are relational. In this way, Song of Songs expresses something of how God acts. God is covenantal, requiring that relationships have order and therefore boundaries. And the sexual relationship between a man and a woman can only be shared in a covenantal bond. It has boundaries. In some sense, the book infers that marriage is instructive to knowing what can be known about communion with God.

"As for celibacy, OT Hebrew has no word for a bachelor. There were not supposed to be any. Every patriarch was married. The priests were all married. Every prophet was married, as far as we know, except for Jeremiah. He was commanded by God not to marry (Jer. 16:2). Yahweh's wife (Israel) had forsaken him. Why should Yahweh's spokesman enjoy connubial bliss? The prophet's lonely life was to be seen as a parable of Yahweh's tragic divorce from Israel. Even the high priest in Israel was to be married, since the office was to be hereditary. Instead of marriage and the cohabitation that normally goes with it being a hindrance to communion with God, this was a prerequisite for the person who was to enter the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. Only a married man could experience the most intimate communion with Yahweh. Perhaps the most symbolical fact of all is that from Abraham to Paul,

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<sup>2</sup> Lit *mention with praise*

<sup>b</sup> Song 1:4; 4:10

<sup>1</sup> Lit *I have compared you to*

<sup>a</sup> Song 1:15; 2:2, 10, 13

<sup>b</sup> 2 Chr 1:16, 17

<sup>a</sup> Song 5:13

<sup>b</sup> Gen 24:53; Is 61:10

<sup>1</sup> CHORUS

circumcision, the mark that a man was in covenant with Yahweh, was at the point of intimate contact of his body with his wife."<sup>6</sup>

In many ways marriage is a difficult relationship to maintain. In marriage, individual and collective focus must be on the covenant. Unlike the members of the Trinity, we do not possess the beauty of being forever. Whatever beauty that we possess in our fallen state is ravaged by the years, like an old piece of cloth left out in the elements. Therefore, there must be a binding and enforceable law in place to ensure fidelity.

## **Conclusion**

What can we say about why God acts in such a short paper? We can say this. God is not bound by niches that lock Him in as we go about being holy. He is the one who decrees and it comes to pass. He is the one who uses any and all aspects of the created order to His ends. And though He is kind, gracious and merciful, he continues to be, even when we are afflicted, there is never a time when he abdicates His sovereign providential authority over His creation.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin, Ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan Publishing House) 1206-1207