

OpenTheo

How Could God Be Perfect If He Regrets Something He Did?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how God could be perfect if he regrets something he did, whether there's a difference between God's sovereignty and God's providence, and what Nehemiah meant when he said God "put it into his heart" to do certain things.

* Does Genesis 6:6 mean God made a mistake since it says he regretted that he had made humans? How could God be perfect if he regrets something he did?

* Is there a difference between God's sovereignty and God's providence?

* When Nehemiah says in 2:12 and 7:5 that God "put it into his heart" to do certain things, is this just another way of describing God's guidance?

Transcript

You're listening to Amy Hall and Greg Koukl on Stand to Reason's hashtag, S-T-R-S-C-Podcast. Alright, Greg, are you ready to get started? Yes, ma'am. Here's a question from Tash Benson.

Matthew 548 says that God's will is good and that he is perfect. But in Genesis 6, 6, it says that God regretted that he had made humans. Does this mean God made a mistake? And how could God be perfect if he regrets something that he did? I'm a strong Christian, but I cannot find an answer to this.

Well, the answer, it's a great question. It does come up with some frequency in light of passages like this. But there is a good answer.

Now, I'm pausing because I realize though there's a good answer, some people don't like the answer. And what they end up doing is choosing an alternative that takes them completely off the reservation. Like Greg Boyd, for example, in other open theists.

So the Matthew passage says, I'm turning to it now, it says here, therefore, and it isn't quite the way it was just characterized. It's probably his moral perfection, because what the first chapter of the Sermon in the Mount focuses in on is the demands of the law. Once you get past the

beatitudes, then Jesus gets into clarifying what the laws demands actually are.

And he says, you have heard it said, but I say to you. Now, what's interesting is when Jesus says, but I say, in other words, speaking as one with authority himself to clarify God's law, and there's an implicit divine claim there about Jesus himself, he is clarifying the demand of the law over and against what humans have said it means. And so he takes on murder, for example, don't murder.

Okay. Okay, that's wrong. He said, yeah, but what you don't understand is that's just talking about the action.

It's talking about the attitude of the heart towards other people. So if in fact you are rude or coarse or harsh towards another person, you call them a fool or an idiot or whatever, you're still guilty. Don't commit adultery.

All right. I never did that. Jesus says paraphrase here.

Have you ever thought about it? Oh, yeah. Well, then you're guilty. And the point there is that the law is much more demanding than the scribes and Pharisees think.

And those were the Jewish, obviously, the religious leaders of the community who felt that they were doing pretty well. Where Jesus leads off in this section by saying your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, or you will not enter in to the kingdom of God. Okay, you can't know the law and you can't satisfy the law.

That's kind of the first, like if you read from, say, verses 17, 18, 19, 20 of Matthew 5, he sets the stage for what follows as he gives the examples and he says how demanding the law is. And then he concludes this section with the statement, you are to be perfect as my heavenly father is perfect. So I conclude from the passage that the perfection that's being described there is a moral perfection that we are to live up to to satisfy the demands of the law.

And if you think about Paul's comment in Romans, chapter 3, where he's talking about the universal state of fallenness that humankind is in that requires their rescue. Paul says all have sinned and that he clarifies what he means and fallen short of the glory of God. All right, so the word sin, Hamartia in Greek means missing the mark.

What is the mark, the glory of God, the perfect, the moral perfection of God. So here you have in the Romans passage a parallel concept being described that Jesus is describing in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 48. So this is talking about God's moral perfection principally.

Isn't God perfect in the other areas? Of course. He's perfect in knowledge. He's perfect in power.

His whole character is perfection. All right. Well then, and this is where the other question comes up, how is it that God could regret something that he did? And this is our passage in

Genesis, chapter 6 and verse 5. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continuously.

And the Lord was sorry that he made man on the earth and was grieved in his heart. All right. Now I just want to make an observation about this particular verse because this is engendered a lot of theological creativity.

That's not necessary. What this is describing and for lack of a better way of putting it is God's emotional response to the rebellion of humankind. It doesn't say that he made a mistake.

How can God make a mistake? There's only two ways he could make a mistake. He doesn't know the future or he doesn't have adequate power to do it right the first time. All right.

So if God is omniscient, that means he knows every contingency that would be faced and he doesn't get surprised by something that pops up. Oh, I didn't realize they were going to do that. And if he is omniscient, but isn't powerful, then he may know what's coming, but he can't fix it.

He can't plan in advance and neither are we worthy of the character of God. So in this case, we have to ask, well, he's omniscient. He knew it was going to happen.

He's powerful enough to make the difference. Why does he talk this way? Because he's describing, and again, for lack of a better word, because there are even some problems with this, he's describing his emotional response. Now I had to qualify it because classically, God has not been understood to have emotions the way we do because emotions come and go.

And it says in James, chapter one, that there is no variation or shifting shadow with God. And so this is classically known as God without passion, or the, there's another word like him something. The impassibility of God.

That means he's steady all the time. All right. And the way Alistair Begg put it once was that he's got a settled disposition about particular things.

So he doesn't go from one state to another state to another state. God always hates sin. He always loves the world that he made.

He always loves the way he did it. It was good. You know how he did it.

But he always knew that things wouldn't happen. So he always had a particular plan for the issue of fallenness of man. Nothing caught him by surprise.

And for me, that's been a helpful way of putting it as settled disposition. What God is describing here in chapter six of Genesis is what is God's disposition to all wickedness. It just applies historically in this circumstance.

And so this could be better understood as an answer for morphism. In other words, God

walked with Adam in the garden. Well, God doesn't have legs.

So he doesn't walk. Something is going on there that is being described in human terms, in language that humans could understand. Okay.

And this is, by the way, the scripture is filled with anthropomorphisms. Okay. And because God is not physical, he's spirit, according to Jesus and other passages.

So he was before anything physical was made. So many of the times that we see descriptions of God, like a human, like you would describe a human being, it's telling us something true about God's nature and his view of the circumstances. But it's allegorical and it's analogical.

That's a better word. Not allegorical. Strike that for the record.

It's analogical. In fact, some theologians, I talked to Mike Horton about this and Mike thinks everything the scripture says about God is analogical, because we're not, we're not able to get to the heart of it with words that can say it just the way it is. And so we're using language that are close and analogical to it, but not exactly precise.

And that's the best that can be done with limited human minds and the limitations of language. And that's what we have here. What we have is an expression of God's grief about what man had become.

All right. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth. By the way, did he learn something new there? No, he knew what was going to happen.

There's no observation. The text is telling me there's an alertness or an observation that's drawing our attention to of an event, something going on, the wickedness of man. And also every intent of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually.

This is acknowledging what was going on in time in that place that God was always knew about. And that state of affairs is the kind of state of affairs that grieves God and has always grieved God in a settled disposition kind of way. But now it's happening right here in this point of history.

And so the text says, the Lord was sorry that he had made ban on the earth and he was grieved in his art. And I think the parallelism is important there. I don't think there's two pieces of information there because if you take it straight up, he's sorry that does seem to imply he made a mistake, but God can't make a mistake.

I think the second line is parallel with the verse. He says he's sorry, i.e., he's grieved. It's just two ways of expressing his grief at man's sin that he knew would always take place.

Now I mentioned Greg Boyd in Open Theism on this issue. And there are theologians largely within the Christian camp who see passages like this and think that God is not omniscient in the classical sense of the word. He doesn't know and believe every true proposition.

That's the way Bill Craig will put omniscience, for example. He only knows everything that he can know. And what he can't know is the free will choices of human beings in the future.

And therefore, when human beings make their free will choices, they are a surprise to God because he didn't know them before. This verse is speaking of that. And that's why God is sorry because he didn't realize this was going to happen.

Now, maybe that's an overly simplistic way of characterizing what's come to be called open Theism, but it really amounts to that. And I think you can immediately see, anybody can immediately see, that this is a sub-standard characterization of God. Because if God doesn't know the free will choices of human beings in the future such that he's surprised and he's got to work around things, figure it out again, then it seems like there's a whole host of things that God is not in control of and it's all a patch up job.

When the scripture seems to clearly teach God's sovereign control of everything and even to the point of decreeing these things to take place, that entail legitimate actions of freedom by human beings who do wrong. So why I say the best way to understand this is as an anthropomorphism and expressing God's fixed disposition towards sin instead of eviscerating the character of God by taking away his omniscience. Yeah, you can't just overthrow all of the explicit statements about God's knowledge of the future because of a passage like this, which can easily be explained in other ways.

What is God communicating here? He's communicating his hatred for sin, the seriousness of sin. His grief. His grief over sin.

He's communicating all of those things using our language and that can be easily understood in light of all the other passages that talk about God knows the end from the beginning. He's the only one. In fact, that's how we know he's God.

That's how we know the idols aren't God because they don't know those things. So even in Genesis, Genesis is set up to show God's power and sovereignty from the very beginning. So why would all of a sudden he just throw in there? Oh, yeah, and God made a mistake.

I don't think that's a reasonable explanation of this verse. He also gives the gospel right there in Genesis. He talks about the coming of the Messiah.

The Satan would bruise his heel and he would crush his head. The seat of woman, right? So he knows where this is heading because this is his plan. The New Testament talks about the cross being his eternal purpose.

So none of this is a surprise. You have to look at things in the context of everything. First of all, in the book, in Genesis, but then in the overall book too, you have to look at everything and see how this fits in.

I think some people will latch onto this and say, oh, well, here's a contradiction. And this proves

Christianity is false. No, you can easily understand this with analogical language.

God trying to communicate his hatred of sin to the people. He's not going to write everything you just said in that paragraph. Well, actually, I know everything and blah, blah, blah, going on and on.

He's still confused at this point. He's communicating his hatred for sin and that's his purpose there. What I think is interesting is the way the book of Genesis ends in light of this question.

It ends with Joseph talking to his brothers and saying, I'm not going to take any kind of revenge on you for what you've done because you meant it for bad, but God meant it for good. All right. And so what's clear is that nothing in the book of Genesis and all of that happened to Joseph in his life and the fact or rescue of the nation of Israel, a fledgling nation who is all dying from starvation until they were rescued by Joseph and brought to Egypt where they could flourish physically.

Though it led to slavery, they still flourish physically. God knew all of that. It wasn't a guessing job for him.

Oh, no, Joseph sold in the slavery. Now what? Yeah. I hope he doesn't go to Potiphar's wife, man.

She is trouble, man. No, God knows all of that. And Joseph was completely confident of that so much so that it could inform his world decisions there at the end of his life.

All right. Let's go to a question from Glogo. Is there a difference between God's sovereignty and God's providence? And if so, what is it? Well, that's a good question.

I'm not thought about this before. So I'm going to start with, with sovereignty is his royal authority over everything. And providence would be his provision, his good provision, I would say.

Okay. So, I mean, just working with those words a little bit, I think there's a distinction there. My suspicion is you've done a lot more thinking about this than I have.

So why don't you jump in? Well, yeah, I think you saved me. I think you've hit on it here. The sovereignty, let me start off by saying this.

I think people use these words interchangeably. If you're going to get really technical, I think you could cite a definition. But I think people often, when they're just using the words, they mean the same thing.

But I think technically the sovereignty of God is his authority and power. And then his providence is God using his sovereignty to orchestrate everything, to bring about his good purposes. A good thing.

Yeah. So that's when we come into God working all things after the counsel of his will and working all things together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose. Yeah.

But I think in general, people tend to use these words the same way. It's like two sides of the same coin, where they're really kind of joined at the hip because they're talking very similar things, but their distinctions could be made. All right.

Let's do one more question here from Krista. In Nehemiah 2.12 and 7.5, he says, God put it into his heart to do certain things. Is this just another way of describing God's guidance and giving clear convictions? Do you think this is what most people mean when they say God speaks to them? I know and agree with your views on God, not whispering.

Yeah. That's a good question. In fact, I was looking at my own notes about this, putting together, you know, reams of material that I have so I could organize it into a book.

And of course, this is something that needs to be addressed. What's interesting about this characterization is it's an acknowledgement of God's involvement in the process without making any reference to revelation. That is, and I'm taking revelation to be here substantive information that guides the decision.

Okay. And God says, go up to the road, you know, and talk to the Ethiopian eunuch. He says that to Philip, you know, and off he goes, you know, or set aside Saul and Barnabas for the task that we have for them.

And this is the launch of the first missionary journey in there in the book of Acts. And so those are all directives. That's instances of specialized revelation.

But that's not what's going on here. What's going on with Nehemiah and there's a number of other places where language like this is used is Nehemiah is moving on something that at some point he recognizes is a result of God moving in his heart. He doesn't say any equivalent of, and God told me XYZ, this was something that he desired to do for really good reasons.

And in fact, sometimes in the text, maybe here at Nehemiah, it describes those reasons. He sees that whatever the walls are broken down and the cities, whatever 70 years have passed, now it's time to do something. You know, he goes to Cyrus or whatever.

I get some of these guys mixed up terms of the history, but that's kind of what happens to rebuilding of the nation of the city and return to the land. And so this notice that this, by the way, is an historical account written presumably by Nehemiah about what he did. And others, he's looking back on what took place and he's attributing the idea in his heart to do this good thing to God as the ultimate source.

Well, that's my view, actually. I could now 31 years later, almost 32, if I were to write the story about the birth of standard reason in 1993, I could say, and God laid it on my heart to do this or

that. Or God laid it on Bobby Gupta's heart to talk to me about it and challenge me and kick me in the pants to get me going or whatever, some of you know the story.

But that's very different than, yes, I was praying about it, or maybe I wasn't praying, and God told me, start this organization, leave the work you have, blah, blah, blah. I think God could do that, and there are times, and I just cited some examples where God did do that kind of thing, but that's not what's happening here. This is just an acknowledgement that God worked internally to motivate something to do something really important.

And I think that's the way it usually happens, that we don't need a directive from God. God is able to get his work done through his sovereign means like that, laying something on our heart without us having to get a direct communication of some sort from God to accomplish that. And I don't think even when our heart feels motivated to do something, I don't think we have to assess is this God speaking to me or not, because I don't see anything like that being done in the texts.

Rather, I think what we do is assess the thing itself. Okay, I have this idea, you don't even know where is that me or is that the devil or is that God, you don't have to figure that out before you can act on it. Is the thing itself sound and good and wise and right in the sense that it's appropriate to the circumstances.

And sometimes you're going to need some counsel to help you out with that, but that's the way I think God works most of the time. Yeah, it seems to me like this is, this could just be an expression of God's providence. God is behind what is happening here and what he's doing here.

And just to add on to the idea that he's not saying this is something you have to figure out or he heard God telling him to do something or anything like that. There are other examples of God putting things into people's hearts to do things that are not even followers of God. So in Revelation 17 17, it says God has put it in their hearts to execute his purpose by having a common purpose.

But these are the enemies of God and God's putting it in their hearts to execute a certain purpose. So they're obviously not thinking, oh, well, now I'm going to listen for God and do something. No, it's an expression of God of God's providence and of God moving in people to accomplish his purpose.

The providence. Yeah, I gotcha. No, that's a good point.

What it does is strengthens the notion that the kind of putting it on their heart kind of thing is a certain sense of raw statement of God exercising sovereignty or providence in a circumstance. And not an example of someone getting subjective guidance that they have to sort out or decipher in order to do the right thing. It's something you can look back on later too and see what God was doing, which is what I think he was doing.

Nehemiah, in this case, yeah. All right. Well, thank you, Greg.

Thank you, Krista, and Glogo, and Cash. We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, sit it to us on X with the hashtag STRS or go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.