

# Where Is God? Free will and Divine Intervention

## God is in Total Control – Part 1

After every catastrophe, tremendous loss of human life, or national crisis, someone asks the inevitable question: “Where was God?”

There are three possibilities for God’s role in humanity. The first is that God is in complete control of everything that happens. The second is that God does intervene but only at select times. The third possibility is that God – for whatever reason – has no role in humanity, and we control our own lives. Let’s examine all three.

From at least the Christian perspective, there is a school of thought that God is in control of everything that happens in our lives. This conviction may not include most Christians but it does have a sizable following in the Christian community.

But if God is controlling all events in our lives then some natural dilemmas arise.

The first problem is that of free will. If God constantly intervenes, then how is it possible to have free will? If God determines our friends, spouse, employment, finances, and health, then what is left for us to decide?

Some things do seem predetermined. Where we are born, our parents, our height, skin, eyes, and natural hair color are all determined at birth. These factors clearly influence how we start out in life.

Many people are born into poverty but some struggle through the lean times, work hard, and lead successful lives. Did their hard work and determination shape their success or did God simply choose them to succeed?

There are unsettling implications if God is solely responsible for our success. It would mean that every one of our accomplishments is the result of God’s intervention. Many people of faith do give glory to God for their achievements. They see His hand in job promotions, stock market gains, purchasing a dream home, and even sporting events. Does God actually alter the trajectory of a ball in motion so that it goes through a hoop, past a goalkeeper, over a fence, or through metal uprights to manipulate the score of a sporting event? Some fans believe this.

Is God also the source of our failures? If ten people applied for a

job and all were righteous and moral, does that mean that the nine who did not get the job failed because God played favorites? Did God give the job to the one He judged to need it the most? Does He have better jobs in mind for the other nine applicants? If years pass and those nine still cannot find employment, is that also God's will?

Is a person overweight because they consume more calories than they metabolize or because God rendered that person overweight? Does God favor a thrifty person because they have more money in the bank than someone who spends extravagantly? Or did the thrifty person's actions play a role in their accumulation of wealth?

What of great tragedies? Are tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes all the result of God's will? Did He create smallpox, polio, cancer, the Bubonic plague, or any of the countless, crippling diseases that afflict humanity? Was God behind 9/11 or did He just allow it to happen? We could ask the same questions of the two horrific World Wars or the tens of millions slaughtered by Stalin and Mao.

One common Biblical argument is that humanity unleashed evil upon itself by committing the original sin in the Garden of Eden. However, even if that is true and our suffering is both just and due to our own transgressions, it still suggests that God allows terrible things to happen. If God is in total control of every detail of our lives and tragedy strikes, then God either allowed it to happen or caused it to happen. Both possibilities are troubling.

I am not sure how anyone can accept the premise that God decides every detail of our lives. His intervention on behalf of one person would nearly always affect someone else. If He chose one person to win then another would almost certainly have to lose. It means that God selects those who achieve or acquire anything in life, and for those who struggle with little it means God did not select them.

In addition, I have never been convinced that all things work out for good for those that love God – certainly not while we are here on Earth. Ask a rape victim, a child rendered paralyzed by a drunk driver, or anyone molested as a youth. Human beings persevere, move on with their life, and overcome tremendous obstacles. They may even lead productive lives that inspire others. Yet, if we believe in the premise of the original argument, we are still left with the disturbing realization that God either directed or allowed these tragedies to happen.

If we learned that the atrocities and failures that highlight our existence were either the direct or the indirect hand of God, would we ever again regard God as moral, loving, or just? I believe that

humanity's faith would be permanently shattered in disillusionment.

Personally, with all the considerable suffering in the world that could be alleviated by divine intervention, I would be sincerely disappointed if I learned that God was even determining the outcome of sporting events.

### **God is Partially in Control – Part 2**

I was once at a Bible Study where one of the members remarked how God was with him that morning on his way to work. He had been running late and began to pray for green traffic lights. Sure enough, most of the lights he encountered were green, and he was able to make it to work on time.

I openly questioned his interpretation of the events to the group and was surprised to hear them agree with him. God somehow altered the lights to allow the man to make up lost time. I continued to argue, saying that would mean that other drivers, traveling in other directions would encounter more red lights and might run late. Consequently, God's intervention on behalf of one person would negatively influence others. They shrugged as if to say, "So what?"

In Christendom, it is almost universally accepted that God answers prayers. How He answers them is open to debate.

I believe most rational people would understand that it is neither possible nor wise for God to answer all prayers. If two men pray for the same woman's hand in marriage, it is impossible for God to answer the requests of both men. Because of free will, she would have a say in the matter. It would also be unwise for God to answer prayers asked in anger, as someone might pray for another to die or to become ill.

Consequently, God cannot and should not – at least in human understanding – answer all prayers. Many believe though that God does answer some prayers and selectively intervenes at critical moments in our lives. This understanding allows God to be in control (at least partially or selectively) and for free will to exist. It also leads to a belief that God does answer all prayers but sometimes the answer is "No."

In addition, it releases Him from culpability for acts of evil, personal failures, and other negative happenings in our lives. Tragedy may strike but God neither created nor directed that tragedy. In this Christian perspective, all manifestations of evil emanate not

from God but from Satan. Good things are the blessings of God; bad things are the result of Satan.

This belief is probably the most satisfying in relation to God's influence on our lives. It allows us to elevate God above the daily suffering that we endure. Like my friend driving to work, it permits us to credit and praise Him even in the most minute positive aspects of our lives. And like my friend, we can blame a series of red lights rendering us late for work the very next day on Satan or the devil.

However, this belief cannot reconcile God's interference in our lives with the negative consequences in other's lives. If God actually intervened and manipulated traffic lights to allow my friend to save time, then God's actions would influence other people traveling in different directions. God cannot selectively assist one person in acquiring employment, earning a promotion, finding a spouse, or stumbling into a financial windfall without somehow influencing others.

We also do not require Satan or any evil force in this line of thinking. Instead of blaming Satan for our inability to secure a new job or a promotion, we could simply think of setbacks as times when God's favor went to someone else.

But if we accept the fact that God selectively intervenes we stumble upon an unanswerable question: Why does God intervene at certain times and not others? Why are some accident victims left paralyzed while others walk away? Why did one woman escape rape while another was not as fortunate? Why is one happy couple the parents of a beautiful, healthy baby while across the street another couple's baby is tragically born with serious birth defects?

In each of the aforementioned questions, why did God choose not to grant these people the "green lights" in life? It is impossible to say.

People of faith resign themselves to accept the many challenges in life, with the confidence that whatever their fate, God knows what He is doing and what is best for them. However, even when we understand God to be in partial – or selective – control of our lives, we cannot reach any satisfying conclusions or better understand His actions.

### **God is Not in Control – Part 3**

A few years ago a video surfaced that showed a stray wildebeest stalked and then captured by a group of lions. They dragged the

helpless animal to the water where a hungry crocodile got into the act, hoping to steal a meal away. The wildebeest's tragic fate appeared decided – until, surprisingly, the herd of wildebeests returned, attacked the lions, and freed the captured wildebeest. I would never have believed the events that transpired if I had not seen that video.

What did the herd of wildebeests gain by returning to free one of its members? Each of them risked injury and perhaps even death. Yet, there they were, fighting together, and risking their own lives in their determination to save a fellow wildebeest.

What if humanity learned that God plays no role in our lives? He does not answer prayers. He does not intercede. He allows evil to defeat good. God either cannot or will not intervene, and through His absence, events play out on their own.

Although most religions would not accept this line of thinking, it may corroborate what most agnostics believe: God may or may not exist but even if He does, He does not play a discernible role in our lives.

I have addressed the concepts that God is in complete control of our lives and God selectively intervenes in our lives. However, in many ways, the concept that God has no role in our lives arguably makes the most sense.

How else can we explain the evil that inundates our world? How else can we explain the unanswered prayers, the tragedies, and the disappointments that plague our very existence? Even if Satan is culpable for the evil in the world, certainly God could prevent his actions.

Let us assume that God exists and that He created the entire universe – as most people in the world believe. A Being with that magnitude of power can intervene at any time. He can right the wrong, punish the evil, and liberate the world of disease, natural disasters, and war. Yet it certainly appears that He does not. God either cannot intervene or chooses not to intervene.

Nevertheless, there is goodness in the world. There is honesty, decency, sacrifice, and assistance. We see it and hear about it all the time. It is not mankind's most prevalent behavior but it exists nonetheless. And it is often during those very periods of tragedy that goodness emerges. It appears after hurricanes and tornadoes when neighbors comb through wreckage seeking life still buried under the rubble; when a large man wades through hip-deep flood water carrying an old woman to safety; and at funerals when we pay respect to those who can no longer do anything for us, and to offer condolences to

those who remain simply to comfort them and ease their grief.

An often-asked question is: Why is there evil? Perhaps the better question is: Why is there good? Why do people make any personal sacrifice for others in a world where there is so much injustice, misfortune, and suffering?

Like the wildebeests, perhaps we realize that we cannot rely on a miracle to rescue one of our own. That unless one of us makes some measure of sacrifice, the forces that oppose us will ultimately overwhelm us. That we are all responsible for each other, and that ultimately God is allowing us to decide our own fates. The wildebeests want to wish away the lions much like we want to pray away evil.

In addition, no one can make a sacrifice without there being something for which to sacrifice. One does not extend kindness or support without a reason. Ironically, the very tragic nature of our existence allows and even necessitates goodness to emerge. God's absence allows evil and tragedy to persist but it also allows us the opportunity to counter evil with goodness.

This observation might be the best explanation for God's apparent absence but it is disconcerting. My original question was: What if humanity learned that God plays no role in our lives? People may accept the premise that humanity will ultimately decide its own fate. They may even accept the argument that God's absence necessitates our interactions on behalf of others, which allows goodness to flourish. However, on a very personal level most of us would be disappointed in a Creator that created us and then never once intervened on our behalf during our lives, despite our frequent requests. In this scenario, we may acknowledge that He is God but most of us would not consider Him good.

#### **Where is God? – Part 4**

Any scientist will tell you that there is no direct evidence of God's existence. God cannot be measured, observed, tested, categorized, or explained. There is no tangible evidence for God, and since scientists cannot insert "God intervenes here" into an equation or hypothesis, science is not necessarily interested in finding God in the natural world.

Where is God? What role does God play in our lives? Does He answer our prayers?

Free will is certainly a factor in any of these questions. If God is to judge us, then He must allow self-determination. Free will makes us accountable for the consequences of our actions. Without it, we would be nothing more than organic robots. A robot or computer does not know the difference between right and wrong, it acts only as programmed. It is not possible to place a moral judgment on something that is incapable of discerning morality. Consequently, God must allow us to make our own moral decisions before He can judge us.

Let us also imagine what we would be like if God answered every prayer. Human nature, being what it is, would grow dependent on Him. We would begin to wait for His divine intervention in everything. Any wise parent realizes that their children must learn to do things on their own or they will be forever dependent on them. A parent can give sage advice (much like God gives us the Bible for guidance and inspiration) but ultimately the children must make their own decisions and lead their own lives. Unanswered prayers allow us to mature and not depend on Him.

In addition, God is not a Divine butler or maid, Who exists only to serve us. Any parent with grown children would prefer that their children visit them just to see how they are doing, not because they want something.

God does not appear to play a discernible role in our lives in answer to prayer. A teenage boy may pray for x-ray vision but he is not going to receive it. There is always one winning lottery ticket, so someone's prayers will be answered. However, most participants will be disappointed. People do claim that God intervened and helped them find the perfect spouse or a great job. However, if the marriage or the job does not go as anticipated, they wonder if God intervened at all.

Yet, lack of tangible evidence does not necessarily exclude Divine intercession. God can still support us, comfort us, guide us, and heal us in an undetectable manner. Many claim that the means by which God assisted them the most was through their mind. They prayed for comfort, guidance, acceptance, and serenity, and they received it.

When God answers such prayers it does not violate any rule of free will. This type of response actually makes the most sense. Visible signs of answered prayer will be infrequent. God cannot stop a spouse from cheating, a determined criminal from thievery or assault, or a student who does not wish to learn from flunking, without violating that person's ability to act as they choose.

In fact, God cannot intervene in almost anything where there is more than one person involved, without transposing His will on one of

them. While this may seem depressing, imagine if God pushed you back into a marriage of physical abuse in answer to the abuser's prayers. You would hardly consider that reasonable.

In addition, with God as a guide, we may not always get what we prayed for but He will direct us toward His plans for us.

Perhaps this explains many acts of goodness. Those who allow God to guide them should be more likely to intervene for their fellow-man. They might be more likely to comfort a tearful coworker, assist a stranded traveler, or risk their lives for a stranger. God's role in our personal lives is largely intangible and not manifestly visible. It is not something that science will ever acknowledge, because God acts indirectly through His willing, faithful believers. He comforts them, guides them, strengthens them and through them He helps those who need assistance, and fights evil, tragedy, and injustice.

Where is God? We see God indirectly through the righteous acts of those who seek Him and choose to represent Him.

What role does God play in our lives? Does He answer prayers? God may intervene and answer some prayers but He does so sparingly and judiciously. He will not violate our free will, and He cannot give us everything we desire. Like a wise father, God wants us to seek Him and love Him not for anything that He gives us but for Who He is.

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