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## THE WORKINGS OF GOD (II)

Read all of Hebrews chapter 11 and notice that at verse 35 and following the writer breaks off the summary of great rescues and victories to remind us that some of the faithful have had to endure great hardships – that’s right, sometimes the “faithful” suffer because they are faithful! From 2 Chronicles 32:31, we learn that God may “leave us alone” for a while in order to see what we will do with the circumstances we face.

There is no question that both believers and unbelievers often wrestle with conceptions of God’s nature (loving, concerned, etc.) in the face of confusing realities that we encounter in this life. However, I believe we can recognize and categorize Biblical information so as to get a handle on this problem. The Biblical information suggests at least four different categories necessary for explaining what is going on.

**1. Divine Purpose and Decision** – First, the Psalmist believed that God possesses the power, intelligence, and will to do whatever He chooses (Psalm 115:3; 135:6). Thus, there are things which God chooses to do and these will happen regardless of how humans feel/think/act. Here, you could think of events such as Creation, the first coming and death of Jesus (Acts 2:22,23), and the end of the universe/final judgment. Some events take place because God wills them to happen and humans cannot thwart God’s sovereign purposes.

**2. Divine Purpose and Human Decision** – Then, there are those situations in which God has a stated desire or intention, but leaves the outcome up to human response. God wants all people to repent (2Peter 3:9b) and “be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Timothy 2:4), yet Jesus said that many would not be saved (Luke 13:23,24). God wants His commands and laws to be obeyed, yet Biblical history reveals that He has given man the freedom to make choices, of which rebellion is a possibility. In such cases, God’s “will, desire, wish” is expressed to, but not forced upon us! Numerous passages demonstrate that humans have the capacity to choose courses of actions that are not what God really desires and it disappoints God (Genesis 6:5,6; Exodus 16:28). Hosea (6:6) was cited by Jesus (Matthew 9:13; 12:7) in reference to how human religion can miss the divine intention. Several times we read about people who could have enjoyed blessings which God wanted to give, but they were “unwilling” (Matthew 23:37), “rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:30), or “repudiated God’s purpose and judged themselves unworthy” (Acts 13:46).

**3. Human Desire and Divine Permission** – There are things that originate in human thinking and God allows them to occur. A variation on the previous category, human sin and the unpleasant things that humans do to others begin with the decision and choice of creatures (Satan & humans). The Bible traces the “earthly kingdom” notion (Deuteronomy 17:14) and the permanent “Temple” building (2Samuel 7:1-7) to human sources, with God setting limits on and “allowing” these things to occur. I would include here also the little details of life which God has

not given specific revelation concerning, nor may He care exactly where/how each person serves (1Corinthians 16:7; James 4:13-15) as long as their talents are used to promote His purposes. Paul told an audience in Lystra that God had allowed many nations and peoples to wander culturally and spiritually in past times (Acts 14:16), while in Athens he said that God had “overlooked” things in the past (Acts 17:30).

**4. Human Desire and Divine Refusal** – Fourth, there are also situations where God refuses to allow human freedom to develop and intervenes to end what would have happened otherwise. Examples of this would be God's response to Adam and Eve's rebellion (Genesis 3:22-24), post-flood mankind's plan to stay in one place (Genesis 11:1-9), Israel's aborted attempt to enter Canaan after God had determined 40 years of wandering (Numbers 14), God's use of foreign armies (Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman) to discipline or destroy Jewish kingdoms, Jerusalem, and the temple, and Paul's inability to preach in Bithynia or Asia Minor (Acts 16:6,7). God sometimes "bars the way" for some course of action we want to take that never opens to us and it is here that we need to remember Romans 8:28 and Philippians 2:12-15, be flexible to the realities of life to the degree that our spiritual abilities are put to work in the best available situation, and let God handle the long-range planning and over-all strategy.

**5. The Natural system** - Finally, apart from Divine and human choice and decision (consider here also the Tempter's work), there is another element at work – the reality of natural forces and laws. There are some natural realities in this world (death, diseases, accidental injuries, weeds, gravity, centrifugal force, inertia, etc.) that influence the general consequences of physically living in this world. Some of God's most faithful servants have suffered from diseases<sup>i</sup> that were not attributed to any spiritual deficiency on their part. Some of the righteous suffer as a direct result of the sinfulness of others (persecution). Many events and situations occur with no direct relation to the spiritual status of individuals, nor should we immediately react to every tragedy by wondering what particular sin was committed to bring on such a "judgment." The Bible maintains a consistent testimony against such a notion.<sup>ii</sup>

Truly, the sovereign Creator has the power to make all creation do His will, but the real world which exists and the Scriptural information force me to the conclusion that God does not manipulate all things by use of His power. Nature was created to be semi-autonomous and God has delegated some freedom of action and choice to humans - rebellion demonstrates that God does not exercise total manipulative power over creation. His choice, instead, is to manipulate the plan of redemption so that it was fulfilled and then to store up punishment for a time of final accounting and rewards.

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<sup>i</sup> 2Kings 13:14; Galatians 4:13,14; Philippians 2:25-27; 1Timothy 5:23; 2Timothy 4:20

<sup>ii</sup> Job; Ecclesiastes 8:14; Matthew 5:45; Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3; Hebrews 11