

*This is a book for all of us who are overwhelmed by global and personal tragedy. Christopher Ash understands the heart wrenching reality of the question, and how the Bible provides an answer that does not gloss over the pain but addresses it at the deepest level. He writes for ordinary people crying out for answers, but especially for Christians who don't know what to say when asked. I intend to give a copy to the many people I know who are struggling with these questions in the face of real suffering, pain and terror in the world.*

**Mark D Thompson,  
Principal, Moore Theological College, Sydney**

*If there is a God, how could he let (fill in the blank) happen? Whether we trust him or not, all people wonder how God runs the world. Once again, Christopher Ash writes with understanding while teaching us that there is a God, he is in control, intensely involved in every detail, and he is good.* **Aimee Byrd, author and broadcaster**

*Christopher Ash tackles with great clarity and sensitivity the toughest questions about suffering. Against views which try to derive comfort by denying God's existence or sovereignty, he shows that the only true comfort is in a thoroughly scriptural vision of who God is. This is a book which warms the heart and feeds the mind.*

**Dr Peter J Williams,  
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*This is exactly what readers of Christopher's books would expect: clear, succinct, and written with a charming simplicity that yet rests upon profound theology. Using examples from everyday pastoral ministry, he provides biblical answers to the kind of questions which all believers ask and also offers firm responses to the various common errors and mistakes which people make concerning such matters as God's providence, evil, and suffering. A great book to have on your church book table, to give away, and, of course, to read for yourself.*

**Carl R Trueman, Pastor and  
Professor of Church History at  
Westminster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania**



# Where was God when that happened?

And other questions about God's goodness,  
power and the way he works in the world



**Christopher Ash**

the**goodbook**  
COMPANY

## Questions Christians ask

Where was God when that happened?

*And other questions about God's goodness, power and  
the way he works in the world*

Part of the *Questions Christians Ask* series

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*Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

# Is God really in control?



Daniel stares at his divorce papers. How did it come to this? All those hopes and dreams... and now, just a solicitor's post-it note: "Sign here". And it's over. *Where was God when **that** happened?* I thought he was in control; not any more.

Lakshmi looks at her country, once beautiful, now torn by civil war, village after village the scene of unspeakable atrocities. *Where was God when **that** happened?* I thought he was in control; not any more.

Peter wonders about his broken church. The pastor had an affair and left. A group were disgruntled and left. Those left behind are discouraged and weary. *Where was God when **that** happened?* I thought he was in control; not any more.

Keith and Julia weep on the anniversary of their lovely young daughter's death from a childhood cancer. Memories flood in of sweet beauty spoiled by agony, and now silence. *Where was God when **that** happened?* I thought he was in control; not any more.



Angie is exhausted after years of seemingly fruitless relief work for an agency working in the aftermath of a terrible earthquake. So much distress, so many needs, so few resources, so little hope. *Where was God when **that** happened?* I thought he was in control; not any more.

This book is for those who ask that question. The series is called *Questions Christians Ask*, but this is a question asked by any thoughtful person. What do you think? Is God really in control? Some ask from the safety of a late-night student discussion or TV chat show; for them it is an “armchair question”. Others—like Daniel, Lakshmi, Peter, Keith, Julia and Angie—ask from agonised perplexity; for them it is a “wheelchair question”. This book may help armchair questioners; but it is mainly for wheelchair questioners: those who cry with tears of pain and perplexity in the misery of a messed-up world.

We were visiting a nursing care home during their Christmas party. This older man and I were surrounded by very frail and elderly men and women, many with dementia. We got to talking about Christian faith. “No,” he said to me, “I’m afraid I can’t bring myself to believe in a higher power.” Our conversation was interrupted by the Father Christmas entertainer leading us, as Tom Jones wannabes, in singing *Delilah* (the connection with Christmas was not obvious). But I would have liked to have been able to follow it up. Why could he not bring himself to believe in a higher power, as he called it?

Perhaps he would simply have pointed to the people around us. This man over here used to be a high-court



judge; now he can neither stand nor speak. That man over there used to belong to MENSA, the society for those of very high intellect; now his head droops, he dribbles, he cannot speak intelligibly. And look at that poor woman... And so we could go on.

How can we be expected to believe in a good, almighty God, when we live surrounded by such decay and ugliness? On a large scale, as I write, Europe struggles with the misery of hundreds of thousands of destitute refugees from civil strife and “Islamic State” atrocities in Syria. On a small scale, a young former student of mine dies suddenly and unexpectedly, leaving a husband and two young children, the day before one son’s birthday and four weeks before Christmas. And we are expected to believe that there is a good God in control? A caring Christian friend comes to the first anniversary of her sister’s suicide. We cry out, “Why did God let that happen?” Every reader of this book will have moments when we want to say, “I’m afraid I can’t bring myself to believe in a higher power. Not now.” *Or can I?*

Is God really in control? This question conceals other, deeper, questions. What does “really” mean? Is there some kind of control that may be true but falls short of “real” control? What does “control” mean? How does it tie in with our real human decisions and power? And who, or what, is “God,” if God exists?

Human beings have answered these questions in many different ways. Here are some of these answers, to get us thinking about the alternatives, before we look carefully at what the Bible teaches.

### **Model 1: Blind fate**

*Que sera sera*: what will be will be. There is no personal higher power. There is just blind fate. “That’s just how it had to be.”

A journalist asked the twentieth-century British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan what pushes a government off course. To which he is supposed to have replied, “Events, dear boy, events”. Stuff happens. Just get on with life. What you do won’t and can’t make any difference to what happens. Resign yourself to that; get used to it! Don’t bother yourself with silly questions about God.

### **Model 2: Nature is all there is**

What we can detect with our senses is all there is. It is make-believe to imagine there is some hidden world beyond. So stop looking for “God”, as if this will solve your problems. No, be honest and realistic, and get on with living in this world as it actually is. Don’t expect there to be a deep coherence, let alone a purpose, in it all. Sometimes this is called “materialism” or “naturalism”: the material universe is all there is.

### **Model 3: God within nature**

Nature is God and God is Nature. There is a world spirit animating the universe. This we may call “God” (or perhaps “the spirit of Mother Earth”). This idea is called “pantheism” from the Greek words *pan* (everything) and *theos* (God).

Or—a variant of this—Nature is *a part* of God and God includes Nature. Here God is bigger than the universe,

but the universe is included within God's *Godness*. Here the Greek word *en* (in) has been added, so we get "panentheism": everything is within God, a part of God.

In both of these approaches, God moves along within time and changes as the universe changes, since the universe is—or is part of—God.

#### **Model 4: God the referee**

If closeness characterises the previous philosophy, distance defines this next one. Rather than being inside nature, or including nature, God is outside the universe. God is not a player on the field, but more like a referee or umpire.

Perhaps God set up the game in the first place, with some structure: a playing field and boundaries, some laws. Perhaps he leaves the players to play as they see fit. Or maybe from time to time he blows a whistle, intervenes to correct something, to punish or reward somebody, to change the direction of the game. However God relates to the world, it is at some distance and at best sporadic. These ideas of a distant God are sometimes called "deism", after a (mainly) eighteenth-century movement with that name.

#### **Model 5: gods (polytheism)**

Or maybe the simplest solution is to suppose that there *are* invisible supernatural powers above the world, but to reject the idea that there is one sovereign one. No, there are many such powers—call them spirits, demons, gods and goddesses if you will. Perhaps trees, mountains, and rivers have spirits associated with them. Maybe the sun,

the moon, the planets and the stars each has a god or goddess, such as Mars the god of war, Venus the goddess of love. Perhaps one of these gods or goddesses is in some way the senior one, but it would be an exaggeration to say that any divinity is almighty. What we experience are the echoes on earth of the soap opera of the divinities on Mount Olympus, or wherever they live. In which case it will not surprise us that the world we experience lacks coherence, let alone simple goodness. This is called animism, polytheism, or dualism (with just one good and one bad divinity).

### **Model 6: God the puppet-master**

The simplest and, at the same time, perhaps the most problematical solution is to suppose that there is just one real and sovereign God, who rules the whole universe directly by his almighty power. This is very simple; it is easy to understand. Many think it is the Christian view; but it is not.

We shall see as we unpack the Bible's teaching that the Bible agrees with none of these viewpoints.

### **The structure of this book**

One Bible text stands at the head of our studies. It's a well-known request made every time the Lord's prayer is prayed: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The first half of this book (chapters 1 – 4) looks at how God's will is already done on earth, here and now. The second (chapters 5 – 7) considers how and why the time will come when God's will is done on earth in the same way that it is done in heaven.

# God over all



**W**e begin with the Bible's headline answer: **Yes, God is in complete control**; if anything happens, it happens because God *makes* it happen. This sounds like God the puppet-master (Model 6), but we shall see that it isn't.

You may find this a frustrating chapter. Again and again, you will want to interrupt and say, "Yes, but..." However, it is important first to try to understand what this headline Bible answer *does* and *does not* mean. We shall look first at what the Bible teaches about the scope of God's control: just how much does God control?

Scripture makes some sweeping statements. For example:

The Lord does whatever pleases him.

*Psalm 115 v 3*

[God] ... works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

*Ephesians 1 v 11*

[God] ... does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. *Daniel 4 v 35*

God is utterly and completely in control. No restrictions, no limitations. Extraordinary claims!

The Bible also focuses on what this means in specifics.

### **Does God control natural processes and the weather?**

Yes, the Bible says he does. God “makes grass grow ... and plants” (Psalm 104 v 14). Jesus says God “causes his sun to shine ... and sends rain”; and decides when, and upon whom, the sun will shine and the rain will fall (Matthew 5 v 45). “Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds”—even hurricanes and typhoons—“do his bidding” (Psalm 148 v 8, and see also Job 28 v 25-26; 37 v 3-15).

### **Does God control the natural world of animals, birds, fish and insects?**

Yes, the Bible says he does. Jesus says he “feeds” the birds of the air, and not a single little bird falls to the ground outside of God’s care (Matthew 6 v 26 and 10 v 29). Every step of each foot of all the centipedes in history is controlled by God! Even the violent predator-prey relations of animals within the food chain are under his control (Psalm 104 v 21, 27).

### **Does God control human beings?**

This is a very big question, because we at least appear to have wills and make our own decisions. But the answer is still **yes**, the Bible says he does.

The book of Proverbs says:

in the LORD's hand the king's heart is a stream of  
water that he channels...                      *Proverbs 21 v 1*

In a similar way, in the middle of Old Testament history, we read that God changed the heart of the king of Assyria, and later of the Persian King Cyrus (Ezra 6 v 22, and Isaiah 44 v 28 and 45 v 1). Neither king knew or cared about the God of the Bible; and yet each freely decided to do what the God of the Bible had decided he would decide to do! These kings—indeed *any* king, or *any* human being for that matter—make decisions. And they are real decisions. The king is probably not conscious of God and may not care for God; he is not a puppet; and yet the decisions the king makes are precisely the decisions that God has decided that the king will decide!

We need to try to get hold of what it means for God to be God. God's decisions are made at a higher level than our decisions. They do not make our decisions into play-acting or puppetry; our decisions are real decisions and they make a real difference. But this is what it means for God to be God: that he decides at the highest level, above our human level, and decrees what we then freely decide! The reason we find this hard to stomach is that our default is to think of God as just a bigger, stronger version of us. But the God the Bible reveals is utterly different from us, and his decrees happen at a higher level than our decisions.

## **Does God control nations?**

Yes, the Bible says he does. “He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them” (Job 12 v 23, and see Psalm 22 v 28).

[God] ... made all the nations ... and he marked out ... the boundaries of their lands. *Acts 17 v 26*

The God who shapes each human heart fashions the ups and downs of groups of human hearts, whether they be nations, or ethnic groups, or cultures. I love old maps and looking for the changes over the years. In my lifetime the map of the world has changed radically, with the end of the British Empire and the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Bible says God shapes all the ups and downs of nations, in every detail.

## **Is God in control in every place?**

Yes, the Bible says he is. In Psalm 139, David sings that if he goes “up to the heavens”, God is there and if he makes his bed “in the depths”, God is still there (Psalm 139 v 8). The Bible teaches that God is not a substance that is somehow spread throughout the universe; God is a spirit who is fully present in every place. Sometimes there are no-go areas for the police in a troubled city; there are no no-go areas for God. In the most terrible, dark and violent place, God is fully present and entirely in control.

## **Does God control random events?**

A retired professor of biochemistry told me the reason



he does not believe the Bible is because genetic mutations are random. And they are—so far as we can see. Much of what happens in the world appears random to us. If you have studied chaos theory, you will know that the tiniest of random events can have huge consequences; the classic example is how the flapping of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon rainforest can trigger a typhoon on the other side of the world.

And yet the answer is still *yes*, the Bible says he does. A proverb puts it vividly:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is  
from the LORD. *Proverbs 16 v 33*

Behind what we experience as randomness, there is the hidden hand of the sovereign God. Each toss of the coin, every mutation of every gene, is under his direction.

Randomness frustrates us. We can plan, strategise, make preparations—and find all our hopes dashed by some unforeseen event. As another proverb puts it, “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD” (Proverbs 21 v 31).

### **Does God control the future?**

*Yes*, the Bible says he does. The Bible repeatedly speaks of God as dwelling beyond and outside time, being entirely in control of time past, present, and future. Just as God created all space, so he created all time. Time is—as we know from modern physics—merely one dimension of existence. Far from being carried along *inside* time,

God stands beyond and above time. He “marked out” the “appointed times” of the nations (Acts 17 v 26). Jesus spoke of “the times or dates” which “the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1 v 7). When God speaks of himself by the strange name, “I am”, he means he is fully present at every time, just as he is fully present in every place. God does not travel to different times in a time machine or a divine DeLorean—a kind of *Back to the Future* God; no, he is fully present at every time. There is no such thing as the past or the future with God, but only the present. With him...

a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand  
years are like a day. 2 Peter 3 v 8

So it is not that God is *like* us, but starting a lot earlier and going on a lot longer. No, God is *not like us*. He is not merely “everlasting” (going on a long time) but “eternal” (above and beyond time).

Those who think God is present in all things—pantheists or panentheists—suggest that God is carried along, like us, within time. Perhaps, it is suggested, he is like a chess grandmaster trying to beat a roomful of chess amateurs. Mostly he wins. He is very clever, much cleverer than us. But every now and again he loses a game. In the same way—it is suggested—God cannot actually know the future, let alone control it. He takes risks, just as we have to do. But the Bible will not agree with this limited view of God’s control. The God of the Bible controls all time, just as he controls all space.

### **Does God control evil?**

Yes, the Bible even says this. This is perhaps the most astonishing part of the Bible's answer, and we shall spend much of the rest of the book exploring it. It's not going to be easy; many of us have found it a real struggle to get our heads and hearts around this. One of the bluntest statements of this is in the book of Isaiah, where God says, through the prophet, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster" (Isaiah 45 v 7). According to the Bible, even evil itself cannot have an existence independent of the control and direction of God.

### **Does God control everything?**

Yes, this really is what the Bible consistently claims. Putting all the Bible's teaching together, we find that God controls each and every event, from the tiniest to the greatest, from the most predictable to the apparently random, visible and invisible, in every place, at all times, from the least complex to the most intricate, right up to human beings with all our wonderful capacity to think, to reason and to make decisions. From the growth of a single blade of grass in the era of the dinosaurs to the firing of each neural pathway of a brilliant scientist pushing back the boundaries of physics, God's control is complete, detailed and unfailing. This is the scope of God's control.

Far from being a distant God who either sets the universe in motion and leaves it or occasionally blows his referee's whistle to interfere, God is intimately in-

volved in the universe, atom by atom, nanosecond by nanosecond.

And yet he does what he does in a way that does not destroy our ability to make real decisions. God is not the puppet-master, who just pulls the strings. He governs at a much higher and greater level than that. This is perhaps the most important thing to grasp: that God is not a bigger, stronger, cleverer version of us. His greatness is not comparative; it is not even superlative (the biggest, strongest, cleverest version of us). No, God is utterly unlike us; completely different to us; beyond us in every possible way, not just in measure but in quality.

It is so hard to grasp this, not just with our minds, but with our emotions. You may be confused by it, even angry, perhaps nervous about where this is leading. If things are tough for you just now, this may be especially hard to swallow. I want to encourage you to hang on in there as we unpack the Bible's teaching. We are in for some surprises!

## *What is open theism?*

“Theism” is shorthand for belief in God. “Open theism” is shorthand for a relatively recent theological movement that seeks to redefine the Bible’s understanding of God. Instead of God being outside of—and sovereign over—time, open theism says God is *inside* time; his knowledge of the future is provisional and “open” to different outcomes. God takes risks. He doesn’t know for sure what will happen.

So—those who hold this position claim—it is not God’s fault when things go wrong. This would seem to be a benefit; after all, we struggle with the idea that God decrees that bad things shall happen. But this apparent gain comes at a terrible price, for evil now exerts its power independent of God; he does not and *cannot* fully control it. So the world becomes a scarier place. Instead of being able to trust the God who knows and directs the future, we have to trust a God who is doing his best—and taking risks. We can never be quite sure that events won’t take this rather small God by surprise. When comforting a friend whose wife has died, all we can say is that God didn’t mean it to happen; he was doing his best and we can’t blame him for her accident or cancer. Small comfort that is!

Two well-known advocates of this way of thinking are Clark Pinnock in his book *The Openness of God*, and Gregory Boyd who wrote *God of the Possible*. For a clear explanation of this teaching and why it is wrong, see Bruce Ware: *God’s Lesser Glory*.

When things go wrong, it is very easy for us to slip into this way of thinking. We quickly forget that God

really is in control even of this disaster, sadness, or shock. Remember: if God is not in control, evil can do what it wants with only partial restraint from God. That is a terrifying thought and one the Bible says is wrong. We must never forget that God “works out everything in conformity with to the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1 v 11).