



MATTHEW TINGBLAD
with JOSH McDOWELL

Why Did
GOD
Do That?

Discovering God's Goodness in
the Hard Passages of Scripture

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Interior Design by Matt Shoemaker Design

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Why Did God Do That?

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-8712-7 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-7369-8713-4 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023932956

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Printed in the United States of America

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 / BP / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface:

The Trial of God Is Now in Session

Today in the Western nations, God is on trial. The charges against him are multiple and include cruelty, insensitivity, severity, racism, sexism, favoritism, and abuse of power. Exhibit A in the trial is the Bible itself, which seems to provide smoking-gun evidence of these charges. It's not surprising that many atheists, agnostics, and other non-Christians are crying out for conviction. In fact, many Christians also wonder if there might not be some substance to these charges.

The purpose of this book is to defend and vindicate the goodness of God by looking hard at the passages in Scripture that seem to convey the opposite conclusion. In the pages that follow, we will take you on a journey from the hovels and palaces of Egypt to the battlefields of Canaan and even to the throne room of God. Not only will we show you reasons why God's actions achieve ultimate good, we will turn the idea of God's badness on its head. We will demonstrate that his every action is motivated by his holiness, his lovingkindness, his graciousness, his righteousness, and his deep and unfailing love for us.

Unless God is truly good, the Christian faith collapses. Christianity is based not only on the reality of God's existence but also

on the reality of his goodness. We don't have to like everything God does any more than we like everything our doctor does to cure a deadly disease. But for our faith to rest firmly in him, we must be convinced of his goodness. The goodness of God is necessary in order for Christianity to make sense. After all, the word *gospel* means "good news," and it is good news because a good God has given us a way out of the finality of death and into a joyous life with him both now and forever.

We commend you skeptics and other non-Christian readers for taking the time to hear us out as you wrestle with these issues that trouble you. We encourage you to take these issues seriously. Turn the pages slowly. We recognize you have the freedom to believe whatever you want. But we hope our defenses and explanations of God's goodness will enable you to see him in a new and clarifying light.

Prayerfully yours,

Matthew Tingblad with Josh McDowell

1

Just How Good Is God?

Properly read, [the Bible] is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived.¹

—ISAAC ASIMOV

When we understand the greatness of God, the stability of His character, the perfection of His justice, the depth of His grace, the limitless nature of His love, the wonder of His holiness, and the sacrifice of His Son, it should not be difficult for us to be moved greatly in our desire to worship God, and worship Him passionately.²

—MICAH LANG

Many unbelievers claim that reading the Bible is what turned them to atheism. It might surprise you that we would open a book written to vindicate the goodness of God with such a lead sentence. But we wrote it because it's true. We have encountered numerous people and read many blogs and magazine articles by writers who were once Christians but turned away because they could not stomach the seemingly erratic nature and severity of God's judgments as recorded in the Bible.

For example, one woman who was raised a Christian decided to read her Bible while feeding her newborn daughter. She wrote

of being disturbed by the Old Testament with its endless wars and wrath of God:

Had the Bible always been so inconsistent, so violent, so sexist? Had it always needed so much adjustment to fit with my own sense of right and wrong? I tried to stretch my faith, twisting it like the rubber band I had looped through my buttonhole to give me a few more weeks in my pre-maternity jeans, but it didn't fit. I tried to ignore my questions and doubts as I had in the past, but there was a new question I could not ignore: What am I going to teach my daughter?

Her answer was to turn away from God and her church.³

A Christian blogger wrote of a recent discussion he had with a woman who was raised in a Christian family. She attended church all her life until she became an atheist in her twenties. When he asked why she had ceased to believe, she replied, "I started reading the Bible."

The blogger then began to list some of the "atheist-maker" passages in the Bible that bring some readers up short. These included not just the big-scale horrors—the mass killings, plagues, and wars deliberately wiping out whole nations—but also the soul-cringing rules for dealing with slaves, the stoning of women who committed fornication, the exclusion of physically defective people from tabernacle worship, and the stoning of children who curse their parents.⁴

Blogger David Plotz, who calls himself a lax Jew, decided to give the Bible a serious read. He finished his reading as a "hopeless and angry agnostic." He explained why:

After reading about the genocides, the plagues, the murders, the mass enslavements, the ruthless vengeance for minor sins (or none at all), and all that smiting—every bit of it directly performed, authorized, or approved by God—I can only conclude that the God of the Hebrew Bible, if He existed, was awful, cruel, and capricious. He gives us moments of beauty—such sublime beauty and grace!—but taken as a whole, He is no God I want to obey and no God I can love.⁵

If you think these nonbelievers are overstating their case against God, all they have to do is shove the pages of the Bible itself in your face. Scripture tells us God hardened Pharaoh's heart against his command and then sent an angel of death to kill the firstborn of every family in Egypt. God ordered the armies of Israel to kill and drive out the Canaanite nations, including women and children, from the land they had occupied for generations. He flooded the earth, drowning all life with the exception of the one family he called into Noah's ark, as well as some animals. He devised a detailed and stringent set of laws that were impossible for his people to follow—many of them seemingly trivial and arbitrary as the "atheist-makers" noted above—and warned them that disobedience would bring severe punishment, even execution. These laws included rules for owning slaves and sacrificing innocent animals.

Popular atheist Richard Dawkins famously wrote,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a

vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.⁶

Dawkins is a little more sympathetic to Jesus in the New Testament,⁷ but honestly, it could be argued that Jesus was not any “better,” so to speak. He told his followers that they must abandon their own families in order to be worthy of him (Luke 14:26). He spoke of his second coming, when he would consign his enemies to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:31-46). He consistently taught what is considered by many to be the most horrifying and offensive doctrine of the Bible—the doctrine of hell (Matthew 23:33; Mark 9:45; Luke 12:5).

These are some of the most difficult challenges that any reader of the Bible will ever face. For many (such as those mentioned in our chapter opening), these challenges to God’s goodness come as a shocking surprise. Others find ways to turn off their consciences as they make their way through certain stories of the Bible. Some may be tempted to downplay the severity of these challenges, as if they can be solved by a couple of snappy answers that would fit on a bumper sticker. Others might attempt to bury or ignore them, hoping that by focusing on more uplifting biblical topics these darker passages will fade into oblivion. When it comes to difficult questions they can’t answer, a lot of Christians hastily chalk them up to the unfathomable mystery of God. “God works in mysterious ways,” they say, and leave it at that.

Who are we kidding? The concerns skeptics raise about God’s behavior in the Bible are more than valid. They deserve proper

attention and careful study to determine whether the goodness of God can be maintained in the face of these disturbing passages.

The Necessity and Nature of God's Goodness

Despite the contrary claims of atheists and the uncertainty of neophyte Christians, the Bible repeatedly proclaims that God is good.⁸ This proclamation is vital because Christianity stands or falls on whether it is true in the most absolute sense. Without the foundation of God's goodness, Christianity collapses into rubble. Who wants to worship a seemingly evil and fickle God? If God is not good, all rationale for moral behavior collapses. As Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Without God and the future life, everything is permitted."⁹

In spite of the Bible's assertion of God's goodness, it seems, as one pastor put it, there are some "skeletons in God's closet."¹⁰ Big, nasty skeletons just sitting there, rotting in the dark. The smell is impossible to ignore and difficult to bear. We might try to keep the closet door closed, but it just doesn't click shut. It swings right back open. That is why we felt compelled to write this book. We will open wide this closet door and shine a clear and bold light on the putrid carrion behind it.

In the face of these troublesome skeletons, you may assume our defense of God's goodness to be so challenging that we will be forced to indulge in a lot of evasiveness—that in many cases, we will merely show that God's severe acts are not really quite so bad as you might think. No! We assure you emphatically that is not our intention. We have spent years wrestling with these questions, reading material from both sides of these arguments, and engaging in conversations about them from many different perspectives. As a result, we are prepared to stand upon and defend the thesis of this book: *God is good*. When we say good,

we really mean *good*. Not just palatable. Not just tolerable. Not just “Okay, I guess I can live with this.” We mean that every act God initiates is always right and is designed to produce the best possible outcome in every circumstance. Furthermore, we mean that every act of God in some way expresses his love, patience, benevolence, mercy, and grace. That is the resounding call upon every page of the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

We emphatically reject the premise that God is good *in spite of* the difficult passages of the Bible. Our aim is to show God is good *within* the difficult passages. This means a great deal more than simply explaining the difficulties and then saying, “So you see, it’s not as bad as it seems.” Suppose I hated the taste of venison, and you told me it was because I had never eaten it cooked properly. So you slaved over a venison dinner for me, and after eating it, I said, “Well, I guess it wasn’t as bad as I expected.” That response would leave a very different impression than if I said, “Wow! This was really good!”

When we say that God is good, we are saying that when we understand the results of his acts and the motivations behind them, he is shown to be not merely “not as bad as we thought,” but absolutely and unwaveringly just, loving, merciful, and morally perfect in all his ways.

Reading the Bible “Properly”

Isaac Asimov was a professor of biochemistry and a prolific twentieth-century author. He was known mostly for his science fiction novels, his seriously impressive sideburns, and his now-famous quote: “Properly read, [the Bible] is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived.”¹¹ This is not the first time we have seen the Bible wielded as a weapon against Christianity.

But we have more often seen people come into Christianity because they dared to brush the dust off that book and open its pages. No doubt Asimov was aware that Bible reading can have that effect as well, so he had to qualify his statement by saying the Bible produces atheists when “properly read.”

Properly read? That is a bold statement from someone with no formal theological training. And yet Asimov is just one voice among many in the atheist community claiming to have a better understanding of the Bible than those who have committed their lives to studying its words. How is it that atheists claim to have the high ground here?

The answer is quite simple: Christians yield the high ground because they lack sufficient knowledge to defend it. They lack this knowledge because most Bible teachers never bother to teach all of Scripture; they teach what they like and gloss over what they don't. So when atheists pick up the Bible and discover Moses commanding the Levites to run around with swords and kill their own people,¹² they condemn God for his murderous vindictiveness and assume they are reading the Bible more perceptively than Christians. Then, when these atheists challenge Christians to defend God's outrageous command, the Christians are caught flat-footed without answers; they were never taught to understand the passage. This only serves to affirm the atheists' claim that they are the only ones who maintain the objectivity needed to read the Bible properly. It may be true that many Christians have avoided or glossed over the difficult passages, but it doesn't follow that atheists have filled this void with valid theology.

Properly read, the Bible—every page of it—shows us a God who is exactly the kind of God we need in this broken world. If we are right about this, then we will not need to resort to

any mutilation of the Bible or semantic gymnastics to make our point. Playing loose with the text is no help to anyone. Many of the acts of God we address in this book are easily explained and defended on the basis of widely accepted logic and morality. We are, however, going to challenge the way you think about the rationale behind some of God's more puzzling acts.

To read the Bible properly, it is necessary to establish three ground rules that all readers ought to find reasonable given the nature of our subject. If you are an atheist or a skeptic, you may find some of these rules challenging. Many of the Bible's claims are based on beliefs you probably would not accept. Yet at the outset, we must lay before you some of these biblically assumed truths because they provide the underlying rationale for certain acts of God that we are setting out to defend. To put it another way, certain overarching beliefs proclaimed in the Bible provide a logic that sets the foundation for all of God's acts. While you may not share these beliefs, we hope you will be fair enough to take them into account for the sake of argument. So before we proceed further, let's look at these three rules for reading the Bible properly.

The first standard for assessing God's acts and judgments is to recognize that if he does exist, his endgame differs from that of the unbeliever. Given the potential for humans to inherit eternal life—a doctrine asserted throughout the Bible—suffering and death are not the ultimate evils. Indeed, death is the passport from a fallen world of pain and suffering into an unending life of unbounded joy and bliss. The recognition of this fact shines an altogether different light on many passages in which God's judgment seems to inflict death on innocent people. A prime example is God's command for the Israelite armies to march into the settlements of Canaan and drive their swords through the hearts of all the inhabitants, including women and children. This

command presents deeper issues that we will address in a subsequent chapter, but it helps to understand that the simple fact of death is not the ultimate evil in God's overarching economy. This recognition that death is not an end but a beginning gives us a vital underlying perspective from which God's judgments can be seen as rational.

Second, to read the Bible properly when probing to find God's goodness in his more puzzling acts, we must have a clear understanding of what goodness really is. Is goodness the same in all circumstances? A chocolate bar is a fine treat for a healthy child but harmful to a diabetic. If we ever hope to discover the goodness of God within the difficult passages of the Bible, we will often need to adjust our understanding of goodness. We will need to see beyond the controversial act we question and uncover the greater but initially opaque good that results from it.

Does adjusting our thinking about goodness mean we will ask you to believe that owning slaves and plundering cities and killing firstborn babies is intrinsically good? No—not at all! But it might behoove us to look beyond these acts—as we will do in subsequent chapters—to see what made them necessary and consider the greater good that came from them.

In our own experience, we witness events that seem tragic, destructive, or counterintuitive but produce good results. Forest fires, for example, are terribly destructive to animals and valuable resources. But fires also keep vital forests from dying by burning away dead and decaying matter, removing deadly plant diseases and harmful insects from the ecosystem, and returning trapped nutrients to the soil.

A story is told of a man who looked out his window one spring day and saw a pair of birds building their nest in a tree across the street. He went out and plucked the nest from the tree

and destroyed it. A neighbor woman saw what he did and was shocked at his despicable act. On the following day, the birds began to rebuild their nest in the same tree, and again the man went out and tore it away. The neighbor woman could hardly believe anyone could be so evil. When he destroyed the nest a third time, the livid woman went out and dressed him down in no uncertain terms for his appalling cruelty. The man explained, "Yes, it's a terrible thing to do, and I wish I didn't have to do it. I love birds, and I hate to cause them stress. But you see, I've learned that in two weeks the city will begin widening our street, and all the trees next to the curb are coming down. Only by destroying their nest could I force these poor birds to build elsewhere in time to raise their little ones."

The only way this man could prevent a grim avian tragedy was to commit an act that looked blatantly evil on the surface. It is often that way with God. Sometimes his severity actually gives evidence of his mercy and love.

The third and final rule for reading the Bible properly is to recognize the obvious fact that higher beings can understand lower beings, but not vice-versa. For example, a dog understands very little of what we humans do. To your canine pet, it must seem a silly waste of time for you to sit immobile in a chair with your thumbs punching a little slab of glowing plastic when you could be tossing a frisbee to him in the neighborhood park. Though your dog knows nothing about what makes you tick, you can understand everything necessary for the happiness and well-being of your dog.

If there is a God, we would expect him to understand all the intricacies involved in the complex workings of the universe, whereas such vast knowledge is beyond the reach of human minds. God, therefore, is in a position to understand how an

act that seems severe may be the only way a good result can be achieved. God's position as creator enables him to see ultimate good outcomes in advance. As we read in Isaiah 55:9, "For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." This passage tells us to expect that some things will never make perfect sense to us. This means there may be times when we must be willing to accept the fact that certain actions will make perfect sense to God but not to us.

This brings up a point we must address. Is there a sure answer for absolutely every challenge to God's goodness? Of course not. Our limited knowledge prevents that. In the cases where we don't have an answer, wisdom dictates we rely on what we do know about God in order to trust him. When we loan a family member \$100, do we know for sure they will pay it back? No, but if we've loaned that person money before and it has always been repaid, that knowledge can make us more willing to extend trust. We can do the same when it comes to trusting God. As you will see throughout this book, there is such ample evidence of his goodness—even in the difficult passages of the Bible—that we can trust his goodness even when we find actions we cannot explain.

Don't worry—in this book, we are not going to invoke the high mysteries of God's ways as an escape hatch in those few cases when the rationale for God's actions cannot be determined with certainty. In those instances, we will give you the options we have gleaned from Christendom's best scholars and leave the choice to you.

We can be thankful, however, that God does not require us to believe without evidence and blindly trust that he is good. He has revealed his goodness in the Bible, even in the places where we would least expect to find it. We may not understand

everything, but we can understand enough. We don't expect that after reading this book you're going to raise your hands and praise God for killing 3,000 Israelites after they made the golden calf at Sinai. But when you discover the larger context for that severe punishment, you may be willing to accept that something deeper was going on in God's mind that would lead to an ultimate good.

God, Hitchens, and the Wizard of Oz

There is a song in the musical *Wicked* where the Wizard of Oz sings in defense of his questionable practices. He plays loose with words to persuade Elphaba that his deceptive lies toward the people of Oz are justified and even noble. It goes to show that people can spin almost anything in whichever way they want. When I (Matthew) started reading the atheist Christopher Hitchens, I couldn't help but notice he was a master of spin. He used colorful adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases to manipulate the feelings of his readers against God and religion in general. Hitchens's extreme bias against religion led him to force a negative spin on biblical accounts that were actually quite positive. He did this even to the point of calling God's wise commandment to rest once a week "a sharp reminder to keep working and only to relax when the absolutist says so."¹³

The last thing we want to do is commit the same error in the opposite direction. Due to the nature of this book, however, we *will* be looking for every opportunity to observe God's goodness even when a surface-level reading of Scripture appears to cast God negatively. This approach, though technically biased, is biased *because* we are following the obvious intent of the Bible's authors. Don't you find it odd that these authors who wrote about God's actions and judgments in ways that seem negative

to us actually believed and taught that God is good, faithful, merciful, and worthy of praise? Why would they so adamantly assert God's goodness while, at the same time, record acts that seem so terrible? Were they just stupid? Barbaric? Primitive?

Let's not assume the worst in people or their beliefs. Let's do the research, climb into their world, and hear them out. Let's actively look into the places where God offends our sense of rightness, morality, and goodness and see if his goodness can truly be maintained. Hitchens put a negative spin on everything religious because that was his agenda as an atheist. We as Christians have an agenda too, but it goes with the grain of the Bible, not against it. If you are genuinely trying to understand what God and the Bible are all about, shouldn't you follow writers who affirm its message rather than disparage it?

God's Open Closet Door

Several months ago, I (Matthew) was invited to lead a Bible study at one of my church's home groups. I was told to choose between one of the two passages listed on that week's Bible reading plan: Joshua 11 or Mark 9. If I chose Joshua 11, we would be looking at a massive battle in which the army of Israel destroyed legions of Canaanite warriors and decapitated a couple of their kings. If I chose to teach from Mark 9, we would be looking at the life and ministry of Jesus. I chose Joshua 11.

On the day I was to teach, one of the leaders turned to me with a quizzical look and asked, "Why did you choose Joshua 11?" I had chosen it for a specific reason, but to be honest, I was now second-guessing myself and asking that same question. It's not as though I am drawn to the violent pages of the Bible. Like most Christians, I naturally gravitate toward the positive stories where love and compassion are readily apparent. Something

G-rated. Joshua 11 does not fit that bill. It is one of the difficult passages of the Bible—difficult because it challenges the belief that God is good.

I chose to teach on Joshua 11 because I knew this difficult passage to be one of the “skeletons in God’s closet.” Christians don’t want to go there in fear of what they might discover, while atheists love to go there to prove that our belief in a good God is indefensible. But for anyone concerned about truth, there is no alternative but to shine a light through that closet doorway and deal honestly with what is there.

When you think about it, doesn’t it seem a bit curious that God has left this closet door open? This troublesome stuff is not hidden in a secret compartment of the Bible. It seems obvious that God is unafraid to show us his past. Maybe there is a reason he has left the closet door unlocked. Maybe there are things going on in these difficult passages that we need to understand. Maybe these challenging accounts show the depths of God’s goodness in ways that our superficial readings miss. As we end this chapter and begin to peer into God’s closet, we make no bones about what we will discover there (pun intended). We will find that once the light of truth hits these skeletons, they will disappear like a mirage. The light will reveal them to have been phantoms without substance—illusions lacking reality, much like the nighttime monsters children imagine hiding under their beds.

We pray the in-depth study of these skeletons in the pages that follow will show our skeptic friends that belief in God’s absolute goodness is rational and defensible. We hope it will give our fellow Christians more effective ways to defend the truth we often so glibly assert—that God is good. Always good. All the time.