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By David Servant

God's Regrets

The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them" (Gen. 6:6-7).

I [the Lord] regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands (1 Sam. 15:11).

I suppose it is comforting to know that even God has His bad days. But on a more serious level, we can't help but wonder why God would regret something that He himself did. We just read that God said He was sorry that He "made man on the earth." He wished He hadn't done it. But if God is all-knowing, and if He knows everything that is yet to happen, why didn't He decide not to create man on the earth before He got started, knowing that He would regret it otherwise?

Now *that* is an interesting question. I've got an interesting answer, but my informal surveys have shown me that only about 75% of the people who hear it understand it. I'm hoping to improve that percentage in this e-teaching. So put on your thinking cap, and please read slowly!

A Little Knowledge about Foreknowledge

The answer that I'm about to offer requires a little knowledge about foreknowledge and an understanding of some simple logic.

Imagine that you flip a coin ten times, and each time the coin is in the air, I predict if it will land heads or tails. Imagine that all ten times my prediction comes true. Imagine that

you flip the coin one hundred times, and every time, without a single error, I tell you in advance what the outcome will be. Would you be convinced that I have the ability to know the future, at least as far as the outcome of coin tosses is concerned? Probably you would. But just to make sure you are convinced, imagine flipping the coin ten thousand times, and my correctly predicting the outcome ten thousand times. With that, you would be certain I had an ability to foreknow the future outcomes of coin tosses.

Now imagine yourself saying to me, "I'm not going to flip the coin again, but if I did, would it land heads or tails?" What would be my answer?

I would have to answer, perhaps to your surprise, "I don't know." The reason I wouldn't know is because my ability to know the outcome of a future event is, of course, predicated upon there being a future event with an outcome. If a future event never occurs, then there is no outcome, and thus there is nothing for me to foreknow.

Did you get that? If you did, you are probably going to be among the 75%. If you didn't, here is another example:

Imagine that you display an ability to predict, in advance, the final score of every high school, college and professional football game played this season in the United States. Your ability is thoroughly tested and verified. Everyone in the nation knows you have a special gift.

So, near the end of the season, the National Football League decides to cancel the Super Bowl. Why go to all that expense, as well as risk injury to the players, when there is someone like you who has accurately foretold the outcome of every game this season? So instead of playing the Super Bowl, they bring you to the center of the field at the Super Bowl stadium, and before fifty-thousand fans and millions of people watching on TV, they ask you, "Who would have won the Super Bowl today if we had played it? You are never wrong, so we trust you! Tell us, please!"

What would you say? Unfortunately, you would disappoint millions of fans, because you would have to say, "I don't know." The reason is because you have not been foretelling the future by super-intelligently calculating the outcomes of football games in advance, or because you are actually controlling everything that happens on the field and the sidelines. You simply possess the ability to foreknow the future. But in this case, there is no future to know. That is, you can only foreknow the outcomes of games that are actually played at some point in time. If a game is never played, there is no outcome, and thus there is no outcome for you to foreknow.

Just as in the two examples I've offered, God possesses foreknowledge of people's choices, a foreknowledge that is, of course, inherently limited to foreknowing actual choices that are made by people at some point in time. He doesn't foreknow the outcomes of football games that are never played any more than He foreknows the favorite colors of people who never exist. What can't be known can't be foreknown either.

Let's apply this concept to God and His regrets.

God has created all of us with a free will. That is, we choose what we do. We're not programmed robots. That being so, God *can't* foreknow what we will choose unless we are given the chance, at some point in time, to make a choice. Once we choose, an outcome occurs, and there is something for God to foreknow. We therefore must be tested at some point in time, and there must be an outcome of our tests, in order for God to know before time what we will do. *The game must be played in order for the outcome to be foreknown.*

This is why Scripture sometimes informs us that God learns facts from observation (see Gen. 18:21; Ps. 53:2), that He is surprised by what happens (see Is. 59:16; 63:5; Jer. 19:5), that He tests people (Gen. 22:1; Ex. 15:25; Ps. 11:5), and that He even changes His mind based on facts He learns (Ex. 32:14; 2 Sam. 24:16; Amos 7:3, 6). These examples do not contradict God's foreknowledge, but simply underscore the fact that He cannot foreknow decisions of free-willed people unless free-willed people actually make decisions at some point in time.

Let's consider God's initial regret. Imagine going back in time to when He originally created people. Possessing free-wills, those people started making evil choices by their own volition. Now there was an outcome, and thus there was an outcome that could be foreknown by God even before He created them. But unless He had created them and allowed them to make their choices, there would have been no outcome to foreknow. Clearly, by creating people with free will, God *took a risk*---in every sense of that phrase---that they would not obey Him.

All of this being so (now read slowly), God could *not* have decided *not* to create humans based on His foreknowing that they would make evil decisions. Had He *not* created them, He could have never known, or foreknown, how evil they, as free-willed beings, would become. Again, foreknowledge of a future outcome is predicated upon there being a future outcome.

This could be said another way that will make your mind spin a little bit, because it is said from looking forward in time from the beginning, rather than from looking back in time at the beginning: (Read slowly again!) God knew before He created anyone that He would regret creating people, but it was too late to change what He was going to do because He had already done it, which is why He foreknew the outcome. Did you get that? Again, His foreknowing what people would do required that, (1) He had already decided to create them, (2) He had created them, and (3) they had already turned towards evil. Hard to wrap your time-oriented mind around all that, I know! That is why most stories in scripture are told from our time-oriented standpoint.

Abraham's Test

Understanding this concept helps us better comprehend stories in Scripture such as God's testing of Abraham. The idea of *testing* implies a discovery of certain facts of which one is ignorant. So did God foreknow that Abraham would be willing to sacrifice Isaac? Yes, but only because God did test Abraham, a man with free will, by telling Him to sacrifice

Isaac at a point in time. Only as Abraham tied Isaac to the altar and lifted his knife was there an outcome for God to foreknow. Which is why God then said to Him through an angel, "*Now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). It was at that moment in time when an outcome became available to know, and thus to foreknow before time. God could have just as well said, "I've always known that you would prove to Me today that you feared Me, because I foreknow everything that occurs, but I had to test you in time for there to be an outcome for me to foreknow."

This is why all free-willed people must be tested (see Prov. 17:3). In eternity past, God foreknew everyone who would repent and believe, and He wrote their names in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world (see Rev. 13:8). But everyone would have to be tested at some point in time for there to be an outcome for God to foreknow. The game has to be played.

The story of Abraham's testing also helps us to understand why God often seems to intervene in human affairs "at the last minute," as it were. If God had stopped Abraham at any moment before he lifted the knife above Isaac---if the test had ended sooner---then the outcome, which revealed Abraham's fear of God, would have been less trustworthy. For example, let us imagine that as soon as Abraham tied some firewood to his donkey and started up the mountain that God had said, "Stop! Now I know that you fear Me!" That would have ended the test. Abraham would have headed home, having never lifted his knife over Isaac. However, if instead of that God had *not* stopped Abraham, allowing him to continue up the mountain, Abraham might have changed his mind halfway up and turned back, which would have revealed a very different outcome to God. Forgive me for the redundancy, but God can't foreknow the outcome to tests that never occur. So He tested Abraham until the last second. That is when his free-willed heart decision became assuredly manifest, and it could thus be foreknown by God.

Perhaps this also explains why God has allowed millions of His own people to be tested with martyrdom, not delivering them from their trial as they were tempted to renounce their faith to escape death, but refused. "They loved not their lives unto death" (Rev. 12:11).

The concept regarding the inherent limitations of foreknowledge also has ramifications regarding God's permission of evil and suffering in the world. I once heard someone say--in an attempt to explain why God allowed the death of a child---"Maybe God knew that when that little boy would become an adult, he would become a terrible sinner, and so God took him from the earth before that time in order to save his soul from hell." Now think about that in the light of the fact that God can't foreknow the choices of free-willed people if those choices are never made. In order for God to foreknow what choices that child would make as an adult, He would have to allow that child to grow up to be an adult and make his choices. It would be impossible for God to foreknow that child's adult choices otherwise. If God took him to heaven as a child, the child would never make choices as an adult that could be the basis for God's reason for taking him to heaven as a child. Thus it could not be rightly said that He took a young boy to heaven because He foreknew the evil that boy would commit when he grew older.

And why doesn't God stop all evil in the world? This same concept applies to the answer to that question as well. Imagine God observing an evil person repeatedly commit evil deeds that harm others. God could decide to end that person's life, send him to hell, and thus stop his evil deeds. But if God did that, *He would never know if that evil person might have repented one month later had He allowed that person to live.* Again, the game has to be played to know the outcome, or in God's case, to foreknow the outcome. So God generally shows mercy to sinners, allowing them to continue sinning for years, in hopes that they will repent, escape hell, and gain eternal life. Human suffering, however, is the inescapable consequence. Of course, God's mercy and long-suffering eventually end for unrepentant sinners. But aren't you glad He didn't decide to end your life before you repented?

A Free-Willed Mouse

Perhaps one more example might help us to understand foreknowledge's dependency upon time-oriented outcomes:

Imagine putting a mouse in a simple maze that is shaped like the letter "Y." You place the mouse at the beginning of the maze, and he starts down the single corridor that leads to the fork in the road, the place where the mouse will have to make a decision to turn to the left or right. You aren't controlling the mouse. He is free-willed.

Let us imagine that you don't want the mouse to turn to the left, but want him to turn to the right. So you put some cheese at the end of the path that turns to the right, which he can smell and that will give him incentive to take the right-hand path. But you don't know what he will do. You have to wait and see.

Let us imagine that the mouse, against your desire, turns down the left corridor. He has made his choice. Now you know it. (Now read slowly again.) Even if you had the ability to foreknow what that mouse would do, you would still have had to allow him to start down the wrong corridor, because until he started down that corridor, there was nothing to foreknow regarding which corridor he would choose. *Foreknowing that the mouse would go the wrong way requires that you not prevent the mouse from going the wrong way.* Again, because you *foreknew* the mouse would go the wrong way---based on the fact that he *did* go the wrong way---you couldn't stop him from going the wrong way---at least until a short time after he made his wrong decision and started down the left corridor.

Moreover, if you, based on your foreknowledge that the mouse would turn to the left, had made it impossible for the mouse to turn to the left by completely blocking the left path, the mouse would have had no choice to make, and you would have no way of foreknowing that he would turn to the left, and thus no basis to block the left path! Again, hard to wrap our time-oriented minds around all that! But it illustrates why God must allow free-willed people to make evil choices. It explains, at least in part, why God allows so much human evil.

Similarly, we often read in Scripture of God not preventing people from committing evil (even though He foreknew their evil deeds), but rather, making decisions based on their evil deeds *after* those deeds are committed. For example, when God regretted that He had made man on the earth, He determined to send a flood to destroy them all (except Noah's family). When God regretted that He had made Saul king, He decided to find a man after His own heart.

I think it is safe to suspect that God has quite a few regrets beyond just the two that are mentioned in Scripture and that I quoted at the beginning of this article. Surely He is not happy with the state of the world and the evil choices of free-willed humans. Every reader likely agrees with me on that. But the game has to be played---God has to allow outcomes to tests---if He is going to judge everyone righteously, according to their deeds, which He will (see Matt. 16:27).

And when atheists argue that God cannot exist because if He did He would not allow all the evil in the world, they reveal that they haven't thought much about human free will and the inherent limitations of God's foreknowledge. When God created free-willed humans, He took a risk, and consequences, good or bad, were inevitable. Only when those free-willed humans actually made their evil choices was an outcome available to be foreknown, and when it was, God set a redemptive plan in motion. That plan will one day be fully accomplished, and God's redeemed children will be living in a perfect world---having proven their worthiness by passing His tests. They'll be rejoicing forever over the final outcome, and so will He---with no regrets.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea....And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:1, 3-5).

But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (1 Pet. 3:13).