

## THE GRIEF OF GOD GENESIS 6:6-7

Does God grieve? This seems like a relatively easy question to answer. It says in the text that God was “sorry” or “repented” (AV) or even “relented” that he had made man. But as you might know, these little statements cause no small problems when looking at the totality of Scripture. There are other places in Scripture which say that God does not “relent” (or “repent”) because he is not a man that he should “relent” (cf. 1Sam 15:29). But even in that very context we read a few verses earlier, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (1 Sam 15:11). Both of these sentences use the same words to describe the change of emotion or attitude of God or the lack of change of emotion or attitude of God. One says he “grieves” or “relents” while the other says he does not “grieve” or “relent.” So which is it? Or is there a contradiction in Scripture?

One of the problems that has arisen over this issue throughout the centuries concerns the immutability or unchangeableness of God. That is, if God has “emotions” (or “passions” as they have been called), that implies, philosophically, that the immutable God changes. This cannot be. So these emotions are relegated to human explanations of the way God looks to be feeling. (The technical word for this is *anthropopathisms*). Now, there are some who have said, “No, the Bible means what it says about God and his emotions. So, God changes.” And from this a certain group has extrapolated all sorts of errors about God not knowing the future because he is always changing.

On the one hand the former group is on much more solid biblical and theological ground. But there are some extremes to be avoided. For example, there may be a tendency to see God as not much more than an apathetic (i.e., “unfeeling,” “unemotional”) accountant or judge who dispassionately dishes out rewards and punishments according to “the code.” (Certainly many people who hold this view don’t subscribe to this, but there is that tendency.) The other group runs into all sorts of biblical problems as they try to account for God decreeing whatever comes to pass and God knowing the future exhaustively. The extremes in both cases must be avoided. But the biblical evidence must be given full weight at every point.

I will tell you from the start that I don’t have everything all figured out. We are talking about our incomprehensible God. But he has revealed himself to us in his Holy Word in a consistent fashion. There are no contradictions in him, and thus in his inspired revelation. So we must try, as best we can, to understand and know our God more accurately as he has revealed himself. And so, we set ourselves to the mission of beginning to understand whether or not God can grieve and, thus, can change in any sense at all.

In order to discuss the grief of God, we must answer some larger questions that will lead us to the answer of the smaller question. There are two major biblical teachings concerning God that must be explored a bit if we are to understand the grief of God. The first deals with God and his providence. The second has to do with God and his personality.

### 1. PROVIDENCE: WHERE IS GOD AND WHAT IS HE DOING?

#### *Transcendence and Immanence*

Some of the issues that I raised above have to do with the issue of God’s transcendence and immanence. Both of these issues speak about how God relates to his creation. Is God wholly other than his creation and outside of it? Or is God near his creation and part of it in some sense? God’s transcendence concerns issues of his sovereignty, eternity, immutability and the like. God

is not his creation and creation is not God. Kept in biblical context we must affirm the transcendence of God. This raises the issue concerning how God relates to his creation. Is God a God who is far away that cannot be touched by anything in creation? Or is God a God who is near and involved in his creation? Well, kept in proper biblical context we must also affirm the immanence of God. God has not created a mechanical universe from which he stands at a distance simply watching it operate according to some laws outside of himself, only “interfering” every once-in-a-while with a spectacular miracle. God is personally involved in the history of his creation and thus creation itself. God is a God who is near, not far away.

As is the case with many things, people tend to swerve toward the ditches on these issues as well. In churches that emphasize the great transcendence of God, people may tend to believe that God is so far away and relatively unconcerned about the issues of their lives. They become dead, letter-of-the-doctrine, heady, pseudo-theologues who think spirituality is emotionless. Usually in reaction to this (and we are seeing this with the so-called “Open Theism” theology of the present day), people see the Scriptures about God’s nearness, his compassion, his answering prayer, and they are attracted to this. Not wanting an apathetic God, they nearly throw away the transcendence of God all together. This is most certainly an over-reaction.

But how do we account for how the Bible speaks about both of these things with seemingly no tension at all? I mean there is not a theological explanation between the statements in 1 Sam 15 about God’s “relenting” or “grieving” and God’s not being able to “relent.” The Bible poses no tension between these two. The answer to this question is found within the biblical teaching of what we call God’s *providence*.

### ***Providence***

In the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) the question is asked and answered, Q. “*What are the works of providence?*” A. “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful ***preserving*** and ***governing*** all his creatures, and all their actions.” Our Catechism has two basic elements in God’s providence: his preserving and governing. A third element could be added that helps clarify some things: his ***concurrence***. I will briefly explain these biblical teachings.

God’s *preservation* of all things means just what it says. God holds all things together and keeps them running so that they accomplish what he has ordained them to accomplish. The Scriptures are replete with statements to this effect. For example, God through Christ, Hebrews says, “upholds all things by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3). In Christ, Paul says, the whole creation, literally, “holds together” (Col 1:17). In Nehemiah 9:6 we read, “You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.” (Cf. also Ac 17:28; 2 Pt 2:7; Job 34:14-15; Ps 104:29). In short, God is not only the Creator of the universe, but he is also the Sustainer of the universe.

God’s providence is also concerned with his *government* or *governing* of the creation. This has to do with the fact that God has made decrees concerning whatever comes to pass and he is seeing to it that his purpose and plan is being carried out in the world. God controls all things making certain that they reach their appointed goal. Again, the Scripture is clear about this issue in its whole ebb and flow. Paul says to the Ephesians that God works *all things* after the counsel of his own will (Eph 1:11). He says to the Romans in an explosive word of praise, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36). This government is not just over things in general, but over the specifics of how things

are accomplished. Hear what God says through the prophet Isaiah: “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'”<sup>11</sup> *calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country*. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it” (Isa 46:10-11). Even birds and individual men are being governed by God to do his will. Even the “roll of the dice” we might say, is determined by the Lord: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov 16.33). Nothing is outside of God’s sovereign control. Everything is moving toward an appointed end governed by the invisible hand.

The third element of providence that clarifies the biblical teaching concerns God’s *concurrence* with his creation. *Concurrence* means that God moves along with and cooperates with his creation in the way that he has created it, causing it to function the way he has created it. There are a number of examples here that could be cited. Farming is a good example of how God works along with his creation, directing its distinctive properties so that it acts consistently. When you plant for a crop, there are a number of things that have to be “right” in order for a crop to be produced. The soil temperature, the type of seed, fertilizer, tilling, watering, etc. all have to be taken into consideration. Why? Is it because God cannot sovereignly make a crop grow when you throw seeds on cement? Yes, God *has the power* to do that. But God has ordained and works with his creation to incorporate all these various contingencies in order for the plants to grow. Ordinarily if you throw seeds on cement, they won’t grow. It is not because God has lost control. Rather, he works through his creation in the ways that he has ordained in order to see crops grow.

Another example might be that of the birds that eat. The Bible clearly says that God feeds the birds (cf. Mt 6:26). Does this mean that God drops the food in their mouths? No. Birds that refuse to leave the nest and refuse to go find food starve to death. God works along with the creation in the way he has created it in order that the bird will be fed by its mother when it is young, leave the nest when it is older and find food to feed itself. But it is God who directs everything and provides the food. It is not *either* God feeds the bird *or* the bird feeds himself. The relationship is more complex than that. It is *both* God feeds the bird *and* the bird feeds himself. And so it is with all of creation concerning rain, snow, lightning, beasts of the field being fed, etc. (cf. Job 37:6-13; Ps 104; 135; Mt 5:45 *et al.*).

All of this has to do with our Confession calls “secondary causes.” That is, God uses *means* in order to accomplish his sovereign purposes. He not only ordains the end, but he ordains the means to those ends as well. These means or “secondary causes” should not be disregarded as insignificant or unnecessary. The way the Bible speaks about them makes them relatively necessary. God is sovereign over salvation, for example, but you must choose to believe in him. So when the question comes, “Did God choose you or did you choose him?” the answer is “Yes.” He chose me and I believed in him. Activities such as prayer, the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments then are not extraneous activities meant to keep us busy while God does the real work apart from these things. God is working to accomplish his purposes through these things as he has ordained them.

### ***God’s omnipresence***

One thing that really “connects” all of these different aspects about God’s providence is this: God is active within the history of his creation. He is not completely on the outside looking in. Rather he is working within what he has created in order to accomplish his purposes. God’s activity within creation has much to do with his omnipresence. Usually we think of God’s omnipresence in terms of “space;” i.e., God is every *place* at all times in the fullness of his being.

But there is an aspect of that definition which needs to be emphasized also: *at all times*. God is not only present in every *place*. But God is present *now*. God inhabits all of his creation. His creation includes time. Therefore God inhabits our time with us. This is not to say that God is “bound” by time. God is not a creature. He is distinct from his creation. But this does not mean that he cannot inhabit time as well as eternity. In fact, being God means that he can do both.

John Frame in his book *The Doctrine of God*, has a good illustration of this which I want to borrow and expand upon a bit. Everything outside of God has been created by God. If we think about this entire creation like a box or a cube, then we might get a better idea of what I am talking about here. The created order (which is this box outside of God) consists in space and time. The biblical teaching concerning God’s providence and omnipresence essentially affirms that God inhabits both that which is outside of this box and that which is in the box. He is not restricted by time or space, but he inhabits both of them, participating with us in them. As Frame says, “So God is temporal after all, but not merely temporal. He really exists in time, but he also transcends time in such a way as to exist outside it. He is both inside and outside of the temporal box—a box that can neither confine him nor keep him out.” (559) In part, this means that it is just as much Sunday for God as it is for us. (In fact, it is Sunday for us primarily because it is Sunday for God.) He is moving along with us in this space-and-time history. He is not bound by it. But he is in it.

The point to all of this concerning our topic at hand is that God is involved with us in our day-to-day activities. He is not a God who is far off kind of watching everything going on with particular interest. He is a God who is near who moves along with us over time. He is Lord over time; i.e., he is the One who wrote the script of history, so to speak. But he is also a the major character in the story. He has written himself into the script to move along with all the characters, interacting with them in a give-and-take fashion. This was his sovereign plan.

### ***God changing?***

It is within this context that we should understand all those passages which speak about God changing somehow. In one sense we can affirm that God never changes. In another sense and not contradictory to the first, we can affirm that God does change as he moves along with us in history. This is how the Bible speaks. And we should be careful to give the Scriptures their full weight. Much of what goes on in this whole interchange is mysterious. There are some things that we were not meant to explain. If God could be fully comprehended, he would be less than God.

We see some of what I am talking about in those instances in which certain prophecies or declarations are made in which God “relents,” or turns away from executing a declaration in one way or another. One of the more famous of these prophecies is God’s declaration through the prophet Jonah that the city of Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jon 3.4). But what happens? The people of Nineveh, led by their king, repent in sackcloth and ashes and say, “Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish” (Jon 3.9). We do not hear after this, “But the prophecy was firm. In forty days God destroyed Nineveh because God is immutable and cannot lie.” The Bible does not put the prophecy of Jonah in those terms. Here is what the next verse says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (Jon 3:10). Interestingly, this did not come as a shock to Jonah. He did not say, “YHWH did you not tell me to prophesy concerning Nineveh that it would be destroyed in forty days? Why did you not do this? Have you gone back on your word?” Instead, we hear Jonah saying,

“And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jon 4:2). In other words, “I *knew* you would do this!”

Something that must be understood about prophecy is that not *all* prophecies are unconditional, decretive prophecies. While some are the decrees of God (e.g., the decree that the Son will be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, Ps 110:4), not all are of the same nature. God explains himself in this through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Hear Jeremiah first: “Then the word of the LORD came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it” (Jer 18:5-10). God declares his absolute sovereignty over his people with the potter and clay imagery. Then he goes on to tell them that if he gives a prophecy concerning destruction and the people repent, then he will turn from his intention. Also, if he gives a prophecy for good and people turn to do evil (presumption), then God will turn from the good he intended. The prophet Ezekiel says essentially the same thing: “Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die” (Ezek 33:13-15). You might say that built into these prophecies are provisions for repentance and presumption. How people respond determines what God will do. And, of course, it was always God’s sovereign purpose to do what ever is done.

But what about the statement that God makes about himself in Malachi 3:6: “I am YHWH, I change not”? First, that statement is in the context of God’s covenant loyalty to his people. The whole verse reads: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” Nevertheless, it does say something about God’s immutability. God is unchanging in his *essential attributes*. We don’t have to wonder from day-to-day what God will be like. He is consistent. He is holy and will always be holy. He is just and will always be just. He is unchanging in his attributes.

He is unchanging in his *eternal decree*. Whatever God has purposed in his sovereign plan will come to pass. The ways that he accomplishes his plans befuddle us at times because we can’t trace his hand or understand his ways, but his purpose is being worked out. That will not change. That which he has determined will come to pass will come to pass.

God is unchanging in his *covenant faithfulness*. He will not fail his promises. He will fulfill his covenant as ultimately revealed in Jesus our Lord. It is at this point that we are provided with the context of understanding God’s immutability *as he has revealed himself through holy Scripture*. God will not change the way that he relates to man in terms of covenant. The relationship established by God with us in terms of covenant always has provisions in it for God to respond in certain ways to our faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the terms of the covenant. You can be certain, therefore, that when God has declared his love for you and you presume upon that love, the unchanging God will be provoked to wrath and punish the covenant breaker. Those are the sovereign, immutable terms of God’s covenant (cf. above e.g., Ezek 33:13-15).

God is also unchanging in *the truth of his revelation*. What he says will stand. The way he has revealed himself will not change. And the truth of all that he has revealed will not change. There should be no concern at all of whether or not God is the same God that he has revealed himself to be in the Scriptures. He is and always will remain the way he has already revealed himself.

With especially this last truth in mind, we need to ask then, what has God revealed about himself concerning his emotions/grief/relenting/etc.? This brings us to the second major issue with which we must deal:

## **2. PERSONALITY: WHO IS GOD AND DOES HE FEEL?**

### ***The Great I AM***

Concerning our purposes for this paper, God reveals himself to Moses with some particular descriptions that are of interest to us in Exodus 34:6-7: “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’” This is the great I AM describing himself as he passes by Moses. Interestingly, there are at least two “commentaries” on this description in the prophets Joel and Jonah. Both of these interpret God’s faithfulness and forgiveness as his “relenting.”

Hear what the prophet Joel says to the people of God who have been judged: “... ‘and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; *and he relents over disaster*. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God” (Joel 2:13-14)? The same thing, you might remember, was said by Jonah in complaint to God concerning the repentance of Nineveh: “And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and *relenting from disaster*” (Jonah 4:2).

To forgive people means that God changes his disposition toward them from wrath to mercy. This, he declares about himself, is a part of his *unchanging character*. That is, it is a part of God’s unchanging character to be a *relenting God*, a God who changes in this way. He has sovereignly chosen to do this. He responds to people confessing their sins and repenting. He turns from the judgment which he purposed for them and gives them mercy instead. Really, this is the hope of the gospel, is it not? Paul says in Ephesians 2 that we were the objects of God’s wrath, but now we have become the objects of his mercy being made alive together with Christ. Certainly it was determined before the foundation of the world that this would be the case. Every person that would be converted was eternally decreed to be converted. But this does not deny the historical reality of conversion. This does not deny that before Christ we were objects of his wrath and after being brought into Christ we are the objects of his mercy. This affirms once again the fact that God inhabits history with us. God’s disposition does change toward us in history, not only at conversion but throughout our Christian lives. There are times that he is pleased with us and times that he is displeased with us. This simply means that God is involved in history with us.

### *The Trinity and emotion*

But is this just a feeble human way to describe God, or does God really have emotions like anger, joy, love, grief, etc.? That is, are there really *times* in which God is happy and *times* in which God is sad, or are we just describing an emotionless God? Seeking to defend the transcendence and immutability of God, some have tried to explain the emotions attributed to God in Scripture as the way things look from the human perspective (remember: *anthropopathisms*; i.e., ascribing to God human emotions simply for the purpose of description). That is, it just “looks like” God *feels angry* and so we ascribe anger to God, but God really has no emotion of anger. Or it just looks as if God is *grieved* and *turns* (same word usually in Hebrew), but God doesn’t really grieve because that would mean he is mutable. But describing these emotions as mere projections upon God poses all sorts of problems in many different areas of life. I will deal with two major interrelated problems briefly.

#### *a. The Trinitarian relationship as the foundation for our understanding of emotions.*

The Bible is quite clear about the relationship of love that exists between the members of the Godhead. It is made quite explicit in Scripture that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; Mt 3:17; 17:5), not just in time, but before the world was (John 17:24, 26). The Son also loves the Father (John 14:31). Foundational to the nature of God, as John makes abundantly clear in his first epistle, is love (1John 4.8: “for God is love”). Even though love is not a “pure emotion” (i.e., it is not *merely* an emotion), this is not to say that no emotions are involved. The way that Paul describes love in 1 Cor 13 excludes any thought that emotions can be left out of love. Certainly love is *more than* an emotion. But it is not *less than* an emotion.

The love of the Divine Community is expressed toward those who are by nature outside of that Community. God loves his people as he says clearly in Deut 7:7ff.: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today. And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you....”

When the love of God is spurned by his people, he is grieved. Listen to what God says to his people through Hosea: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (Hosea 11:8-9). He can come in anger, but he chooses to show compassion for his people.

b. *The only way we can understand our emotions as humans is because we are God's image-bearers.*

This is important concerning the argument that the emotions ascribed to God in Scripture are simply projections of human emotions upon the actions of God. This, in some sense, has God created in our image rather than the reverse. If emotions are not a part of our humanity—our being in God's image—what do we do with them? Are they sinful? Are they meaningless? Should we seek to become completely emotionless (like the Stoics) as the height of Christian maturity; i.e., since our goal is to “be like God?” If God has no emotions in this way, there is no foundation at all for us to justify any emotions as humans—joy, love, grief, etc. All of these things are mere weaknesses of our humanity at best and sinful expressions at worst.

But we see that *the* image of the invisible God expressed deep emotion while he traversed this earth in his mission. He looked at the crowds in all the villages and Jesus was “moved with compassion” (Mt 9:36). He looked at the Pharisees and was angered and grieved at their hardness of heart (Mk 3:5). Is Jesus just showing his “human side” (even though that formulation is a problem)? But his perfect humanity is a perfect reflection of what it means to be in the image of God.

Emotions are a part of our humanity as image-bearers of God. We derive them from him. He does not receive them from us, so to speak. As we grow we learn how to express them as we learn more and more about who he is. Our God rejoices, or has joy, over us (Isa 62:5; Neh 8:10) and is, at times, grieved with us (Gen 6:6-7; Eph 4:30). We learn joy and grief, happiness and sadness, love and hate, in short, the full gamut of emotions from him.

### *Applications*

So what? Much of this may sound like some high, “ivory-tower” theological exercise with no practical relevance. *Au contraire*. There is much to be learned from this.

a. *God loves you with a passionate love.*

God is not a God who is distant from you, counting up your pennies and dimes seeing if you measure up. He is not the dispassionate accountant somewhere in the sky. God is a God who is near to you. God experiences joys with you. He enjoys you enjoying things. He rejoices with you when you, his child, do well. We might say, he is pleased with you. But God is also near when you experience grief. He knows your pain, he hears your cries. He sympathizes with you. He is involved in your hurts as well as your victories.

It is because of God's passionate love that he is grieved when we sin, spurning his wise commands, ignoring his promises and choosing to go our own way. This is one reason Paul would tell the Ephesians, “Grieve not the Holy Spirit whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). God desires that we have all the fruit of his character with all the emotions that are involved in them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

b. *Being in God's image means that we must learn to feel as God feels.*

We must take the disposition towards things that God takes toward things. We must love the things that he loves, and hate the things that he hates. God loves righteousness and hates



wickedness. We can do no less. We must grieve when he is grieved and rejoice when he rejoices. We must have compassion where he has compassion and be angry concerning the things with which he is angry.

### *Conclusion*

God does grieve, really and truly. As he moves with us through time, he experiences with us the full range of emotions that we have received from him. But the comfort in all of this is that God is not subject to time even though he is involved in it. He remains forever the Lord over time. He controls whatever comes to pass. Much comfort comes from the fact that even though situations change, the eternal plan of God for our good does not change.