

QuickPod 3 - What *Can't* God Do? The Could-He-Would-He Principle

It sounds very “churchish” to insist that God can do *anything*. He is, after all, omnipotent. We also describe him as unlimited, unbounded, absolute, and perfect.¹ But are there things that God simply can't do?

Immediately the old philosophy class argument comes to mind: *Can God create a stone so big that he can't lift it?* The question itself reveals faulty thinking about God and his attributes. Even the word *attribute* is problematic when applied to God. When referring to a human, we can think of these separate components of who we are. But God by his nature has no constituent “parts” (not referring to trinitarian Persons here). He is simple unity, indivisible. The attributes he has revealed serve in a small way to describe him in terms our human minds might understand.

Being a perfect unity, any one of his perceived attributes can't negate or diminish any other attribute. For example, why can't he simply pardon my sins just because he wants to? Because that application of his *mercy* would contradict his attribute of *justness*.² God is also holy, or “set apart” from all his creation. This requires that he *not* be some things. He isn't equivalent to anything he has created. God can't be the same as something he created, so there are many things his nature forbids him from being.³

God is also unable to do something that can't be done. This may sound like a limitation or just plain silliness, but it's really only a language problem. The stone-lifting enigma is a logical impossibility. In other words, it isn't logically possible for “A” to be “not A”, or for $1 + 1$ to not equal 2.⁴ In simplistic terms, logical contradictions and absurdities don't exist in reality, thus whether God can “do” them is a non-question. *This doesn't mean that logic and mathematics are things that transcend God, but that logical consistency itself is based in the nature of God. C.S. Lewis states it very well...*

You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to His power. If you choose to say, “God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,” you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words, “God can.” It remains true that all things are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities... nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.⁵

Scripture gives several clear truths about God's limitations. Hebrews 6:18 tells us that it's “impossible for God to lie.” For him to be untruthful would be in opposition to his character. A

¹ I don't use the term infinite because I consider his attributes qualitative rather than quantitative. Infinity implies too many paradoxes and mathematical problems.

² Thus, Christ had to be sacrificed as an atonement.

³ And his nature is not a separate force. It is *of* him. He is completely free from anything outside of himself.

⁴ Some add “at the same time and in the same sense,” but God is actually outside of these parameters.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, “The Problem of Pain,” *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 561.

study of Scripture reveals other impossibilities for God, such as changing, being unfaithful, acting unjustly, and anything else contrary to his nature.

I've made an effort here to emphasize God's limitations because in dealing with paranormal phenomena in some of our episodes, the question will frequently arise: "But *couldn't* God do it that way?" Our knee-jerk response is usually "Of course. God can do anything." However, our conclusion must be based on the reality of God's potential actions and consistent with his revealed nature.

Could God send an angel to tell me a lie? No, his nature wouldn't allow him to lie.

Could God punish me for a sin for which Christ has already atoned? No, God is completely just.

Could God change from the Old Testament to the New? No, God may deal differently by his choice, but he's perfectly unchanging.

In addition to considering God's *nature*, we must also take into account his typical *mode* of operation. Within the limitations of his nature, God is utterly sovereign. John Piper says...

Whenever God acts, he acts in a way that pleases him... He is never backed into a corner where his only recourse is to do something he hates to do. He does whatever he pleases.⁶

At the heart of this, though, we find that even in two similar situations, God isn't bound to deal identically. He is completely free and just in punishing the sins of one nation immediately and delaying punishment for the same sins of another nation. He is equally free to bless you and not bless me, *simply because he chooses*.

However, God created a universe that is orderly, consistent, and for the most part predictable. Scientific reasoning depends on this *repeatability*. Likewise, God reveals to us through his Word that he is generally quite consistent in his interactions with us.⁷ For example, the vast majority of people who have ever lived have eventually died. Enoch, however, "... walked with God, and he was not, for God took him..."⁸ God was sovereignly free to "break the rules" and allow his friend Enoch to bypass death. But I don't base my expectations on Enoch's uncommon experience. I expect to meet God by his usual mode. *Could* God take me, as he did Enoch? Of course! God is free to choose whatever he wishes, and there is nothing in his nature that would preclude it. *Yet, I must base my expectations on God's usual actions and not on the rarest of events*.

Could God send an angel to answer one of my questions? Yes, but would he? Probably not. It's much more likely that he will use an earthly method.

Could God perform a miracle to solve one of my problems? Yes, but would he? Probably not. He will probably use normal, everyday means.

Could God give me a new revelation through a dream or vision? Yes, but would he? Probably not. It's *extremely* likely that he will simply show me a truth already in his Word.

So, as we offer solutions for various phenomena, our first step is to determine whether that proposition is in any way contrary to God's *nature*. If it isn't, then the next step is to determine

⁶ John Piper, "The Sovereignty of God," www.desiringgod.org, Accessed Feb 19, 2020.

⁷ Some make a distinction between God's *principles* and his *promises*. He always act according to his promises. Principles are more general, applying most of the time, but not always.

⁸ Genesis 5:22.

whether the proposition is consistent with God's *usual mode of operation*... We'll be referring to this as the **Could-He-Would-He Principle**.

As humans observing unusual events, our tendency will almost always be to assume we are observing the exception to the rule. We see ourselves as the outliers, the anointed, or the chosen. As we'll find, that's a dangerous starting point for discerning the paranormal.