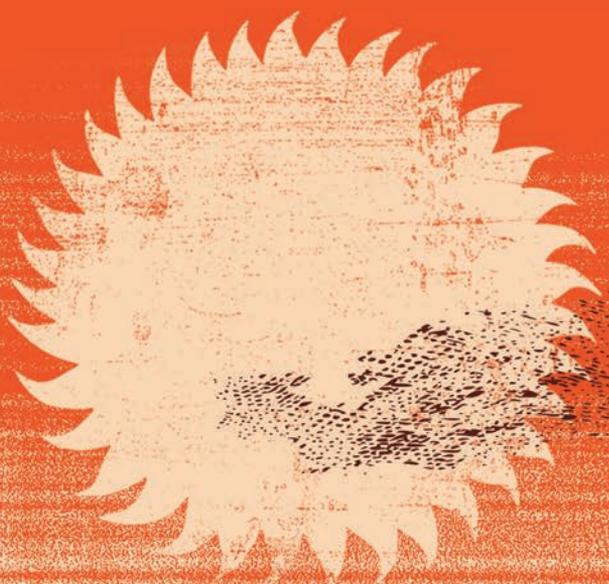


WHY GOD CREATED THE WORLD



A JONATHAN EDWARDS ADAPTATION BEN STEVENS



“Ben Stevens is to be thanked for this herculean effort. This is arguably Edwards’s most influential text among contemporary Christians, yet few have the patience and ability to wade through the original.”

DR. DOUGLAS A. SWEENEY

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“It’s not every day that a book about the meaning of everything is written. It’s also not every day that you find a readable, understandable, and downright fun guide to such a momentous text. *Why God Created the World* by Ben Stevens is just such a book. It’s brainy but eminently accessible, and the prose crackles with electric interest and arresting analogies. I know it will help many hungry Christians to dig into the meat of Edwards’s original text, which is quite simply one of the most important books ever written.”

DR. OWEN STRACHAN

Assistant professor of Christian theology and church history, Boyce College

“The moment ‘why’ passes our lips, we are doing theology. With the mind of a scholar and the heart of a pastor, Ben Stevens directs the voice of Jonathan Edwards to this all-important question. Substantive and clear, this book provides concepts with which to articulate an intelligent answer.”

CHRIS CASTALDO

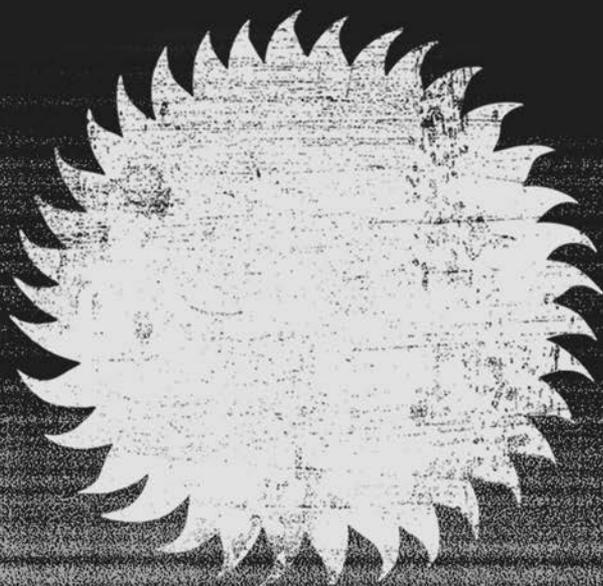
Director of the ministry of gospel renewal, Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College; author of *Holy Ground: Walking with Jesus as a Former Catholic*

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INTRODUCTION

For most of my life, I never thought to ask why God created the world. I had asked myself, “Why did God create me *specifically*?” which seemed like a more practical thing to wonder. But the answers I found to that question always struck me as shallow. I think that’s because it’s impossible to understand what part we play in a story if we have never grasped what the story is about in the first place.

When I did eventually get interested in the more fundamental question of why God created the world, I ran into problems. At first, I concluded that He created the world “out of love for us.” But that answer is not very intellectually satisfying. We haven’t always been here to love. At some point, we had to be thought up too. So what led Him to think anything up in the first place? There is nothing material in creation which He didn’t already have beforehand, and the fellowship He had in the Trinity was better than anything we have to offer.

As I wrestled through these issues, I did so as someone who became a Christian early in life. I had enjoyed decades of Christian community and then studied theology at the graduate

level. In some ways, I assumed I was the only kind of person who could find this kind of theological dilemma intriguing. So you might imagine my surprise at the way the question sparked intense discussions with non-Christian friends here in Berlin, where I live; a place which sociologist Peter Berger has called the “world capital of atheism.”

For a while I found this phenomenon as difficult to explain as the question itself. But then it dawned on me that my non-Christian friends here like debating the question for the same reason I do: It’s the prequel to the gospel story. You see, if the only possible explanation for God’s motives in creating the world is egomania or loneliness, as some might assume, then that shows how incoherent the rest of the story must be. On the other hand, if the story does have a logical and beautiful purpose, that makes sense of the tension Christians see in our rejection of God’s plan. Either way, it’s the place where the coherence of the story rises or falls.

Look at it this way: The gospel is a solution to a problem. What exactly is that problem? The problem is a kind of deviation from God’s design, a deviation from the reason why God created the world. So how are we to understand for ourselves, let alone explain to others, the tragedy of the Fall, or even the joy of redemption, if we fail to understand the genius of creation itself? How are we to make sense of the story, and the God behind it, if we don’t know *why* He got behind it?

As far as I know, there has only ever been one book written on this subject by a Christian. It was a monumental treatise by the former president of Princeton University, the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, called *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (1765, published posthumously). Edwards counts as one of America’s

most innovative thinkers, and for anyone with the patience and skill to wade through his book, he has a great answer. But his tone and grammatical acrobatics make the original text nearly impossible to read.

My sheer curiosity forced me to work through the book, and I couldn't believe what I found. In the midst of these complicated formulations, Edwards cast virtually everything in Scripture in a new light. It was the most arresting thing I had read in a long time, but I didn't think anyone I knew would be interested in laboring through the original. So the idea crossed my mind to turn my notes, which I had made just to understand the book myself, into a shorter work for non-academics. I explained the idea to the folks at NavPress, who knew a few things about paraphrasing because of their work on *The Message*, and we're excited about how this new version will set some of those ideas from the eighteenth century loose in the twenty-first century.

In his original remarks Edwards did not give a long explanation of his motives for writing. He simply dove headlong into this most important of all questions. I find a certain genius in that. I considered adding a bio of him at the front of this book for context, and in fact I have added a short one in an appendix. But I decided to follow his minimalist approach in introducing the topic for two reasons: (1) There are plenty of excellent biographies available about his life, and (2) I'm convinced the best thing I can do to interest you in him as a person is to do what he himself did—get out of the way of big ideas about God. Perhaps like you, I came to his book with little interest in him as a person, and my interest in his story developed *as a result* of his answer to my question.

I will spare you a lot of details on my strategy for reworking his original text, but as a general rule, the ideas and analogies are

his, and the style and tone are mine. For serious fans of Edwards, I have added an appendix which explains my approach in greater depth and highlights the few cases in which I have updated or added an analogy to flesh out his point. Lastly, I have included his original first chapter in an appendix for A/B comparison so that you can get a feel for his style and tone as well.

The vision of God which Edwards communicates in this book makes it a masterpiece, and I think it ought to be read and cherished by anyone who calls himself a Christian. I offer it in this new edition in the hopes that it might kindle the love of God, and of His mind-boggling glory, in your heart as it has in mine.

PART I: **LOGIC**



CHAPTER ONE

Motives: A Few Helpful Distinctions

Without a motivation rooted in His nature—not because of some circumstance or consequence of creation—nothing would have moved Him to take on the task of creation.

Why did God create the world? In this book we will handle that question from two angles. In part 1, we will look at what logic can tell us, and in part 2 we will look at what Scripture has to say. I know that many people will be worried by the idea of trying to determine things about God using logic and might find such a philosophical approach suspicious. So let me explain my strategy.

Disagreements come up when discussing an important question like this one, and most often those disagreements revolve around a logical inference. We read a text which seems clear, but because we don't understand the logic of the text, we conclude, "No, this interpretation can't be right." Reason alone can't help us decide why God created the world, but because that's where disagreements tend to start, I would rather tackle it first. This will be easier than backtracking once we are knee-deep in Scripture, and such logical work helps us see Scripture's straightforward answer in a new light anyway.

We need to begin by thinking logically about God's possible motives for creating the world, and motives can be hard to quantify. This chapter, therefore, will give us some vocabulary for the discussion. I want to explain the three most important layers of a person's motives: (1) underlying intentions, (2) highest priorities, and (3) personal desires. I confess that this chapter will require more logical heavy lifting than most other chapters, but it's worth the work. By the end of this first chapter, we will have already learned things that change the way we think about why God created the world. Let's dive in.

Underlying Intentions

To understand people's underlying intentions, you have to consider their goals, their objectives. And in any goal, there are means and ends. I describe that difference by talking about *preliminary goals* vs. *pure goals*. A pure goal is an end, something you want for its own sake. Preliminary goals, on the other hand, are means, things you do just to get to a pure goal.

If you have ever been sick, you know all about this. Your pure goal will always be getting well, but in order to reach that pure goal, you inevitably set dozens of preliminary goals: make it to the doctor on time; get the right medicine; don't over-exert yourself. Each of these becomes your goal, but they aren't things you want for their own sake. You do them to get something else, your pure goal: restored health.

There are a few advanced ways this distinction can play out. Sometimes a task takes such a long time that there are other preliminary goals in front of a single preliminary goal, and you may spend a long time checking boxes, completing other preliminary goals, before you ever get to a pure goal. For example, a man

may sell some of his belongings to buy start-up equipment for a new company. He may hire staff and employ an ad agency to help him get the word out about the product. But in all that he does in selling belongings, launching a company, and sending thank-you notes to initial customers, getting enough money to take care of his family may be the unseen but always-present pure goal.

On the other hand, sometimes there are no preliminary goals. If you're standing by the pool on a hot day and suddenly sense an urge to go swimming, jumping in could fulfill a pure goal. So you don't have to assume a long chain of activities.

Finally, sometimes the same goal can be preliminary in one sense and pure in another. If you're trying to win someone's respect, you might do so partly for its own sake. After all, it's nice to be respected. But if you think knowing that person would help you accomplish some other goal, it may be a means to an end—a preliminary goal—as well. So, sometimes a single goal can be pure in one sense and preliminary in another.

This distinction applies to God as well. God has lots of goals. Some are pure while others are preliminary. Confusing His pure goals with His preliminary goals would make it hard to know why He created the world, so in anything He does, we have to first stop to ask where His action falls on the spectrum between means and ends, whether it's a step toward a pure goal or the pure goal itself.

Highest Priorities

Highest priorities are a different lens through which to observe a person's goals. Let's say you determine that someone desires a thing for its own sake, making it a pure goal. That doesn't really tell you much about how important that goal is to the person

overall. Jumping into a swimming pool and taking care of one's family may both be pure goals, but we should hope that one is a much higher overall priority in life. So we all have a hierarchy of priorities for our goals, from *highest goals* to *lesser goals*.

Sometimes a preliminary goal from one task can be higher than a pure goal from another task. Let's say a man inherits a huge mansion in his hometown and takes a trip back to sign the papers and close the deal. Several things run through his mind. He's excited about the estate, but not for its own sake. His apartment is already big enough. He's just looking forward to the prestige such a mansion will bring him. In this sense, inheriting the estate is a preliminary goal, but it's preliminary to a high life priority: prestige. On the other hand, he's excited about seeing all his old friends, as a pure goal. But seeing his friends isn't nearly as high of a life priority as prestige is, so he values the inheritance of this mansion—though preliminary to a pure goal—more than the pure, simple pleasure of seeing his friends. All that to say, occasionally a preliminary goal of one project will actually be more important than a pure goal of some other project.

Each of us has major life goals, and each of us has simple pleasures that sweeten daily life. To determine something as complex as why God created the world, we will have to keep our eyes on this distinction as well. Not all pure goals are lifetime objectives, and amidst the thousands of goals which God sets (and successfully accomplishes) in the course of human history, we have to distinguish between the lesser ones and the highest one.

Personal Desires

To complete our understanding of motives and goals, we need to add one important final layer: personality and experiences.

Goals don't get formulated in vacuums. They are developed by people with personal desires. So you should always consider whether a goal stems from something inherent in someone's personality (an absolute goal) or because of an experience that person had in the course of life (a consequential goal).

Take the example of a successful young man who comes from a big family and has plenty of good friends. He always has people to talk to, but he still longs to find a woman to marry. Does that desire come from some prolonged experience of loneliness or because of something inherent about who he is? In most cases we would say it's simply inherent. It's not a response to something. That makes it an absolute goal.

Let's say he finds a wife and they eventually start a family. Over time he may develop ideas of what it means to be a good father and outline an entire philosophy about raising children. It's important to remember, though, that he didn't fall in love with his wife *for his children's sake*. He fell in love with his wife due to an absolute goal. His children's existence and all his goals regarding them are simply consequences of his pursuit of a more inherent, absolute goal. This doesn't mean his children and his hopes for them are any less important. It just reminds us that they are consequential goals and so can't be the explanations for things which he did before they existed.

Conclusion

There are several immediate takeaways from all of these categories. Take this last set, for example. We are a consequence of God's decision to create. Now that we are here, He loves us. He even decided to enter human history to save us. But all of

that comes as a consequence of His initial decision to create something at all. So what motivated that initial decision? What was His absolute goal?

We always start with ourselves. But if we aren't eternal, then something which is eternal, some absolute goal which was important to God before the idea of creation, must be what motivated Him to start the process. Think of it like this. Is it possible that God could have created the world out of pity for us? No. You can't pity something that doesn't exist. Pity assumes the existence of the one to be pitied. The same applies to love. It sounds poetic to say God created the world out of His love for us, but that assumes that we have always been here to love. We weren't. We had to be thought up. So why did God think us up in the first place?

God's love for justice and hatred of injustice explain why He does some things in human history now. They are, without a doubt, part of His consequential goals. But that should not lead us to think that He created the world in order to have the pleasure of settling our disputes. In fact, we have to suppose that something earlier—something more basic and inherent—must have motivated Him to create in the first place.

Without a motivation rooted in *His* nature—not because of some circumstance or consequence of creation—nothing would have moved Him to take on the task of creation. Therefore an original, absolute goal must have led to it. That inherent desire is the fountainhead of all creation and in fact of all other goals.

“So,” you ask, “what *is* that absolute, pure goal?” To answer a question like that, we will simply have to take a closer look at God's personality.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Edwards offers a number of distinctions in this chapter and says they will help us ask the right questions. How would you explain these distinctions in your own words?
2. What are some of your “absolute pure goals”?
3. Describe your feelings as you hear Edwards explain that neither pity nor love for us seems like it could be the reason that first motivated God to create the world.
4. Is the line of thinking that Edwards takes here something that’s completely new to you, relatively familiar to you, or somewhere in between?